

Socialist Realism in Vietnamese Literature:

An Analysis of the Relationship between Literature and Politics

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DECLARATION

I, Tuấn Ngọc Nguyễn, declare that the thesis entitled *Socialist Realism in Vietnamese Literature: an Analysis of the Relationship between Literature and Politics* is no more than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of references. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Tuấn Ngọc Nguyễn
2004

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I argue that socialist realism is by nature more political than literary; in the domain of politics, it is more nationalistic than socialistic; and in the domain of literature, it is more neo-classical or romantic than realist. Over many decades, writers were advised to represent reality as it ought to be; and in many cases, in so doing, they had to sacrifice not only the truth but also their intellectual and artistic status: their writing did not reflect what they really believed, felt or thought. As a result, ideologically, socialist realism became doctrinaire-ism, and artistically, it became an illustration of the Communist Party's policies.

While other 'isms' in Western literature such as realism, romanticism and symbolism took at least half a century to take hold in Vietnam, socialist realism did so with record speed - in just one year. Promulgated at the first Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1934, the doctrine of socialist realism was appearing in Vietnamese newspapers just one year later. However, it had been imported by revolutionaries whose interest was mainly political, not literary: in their view, socialist realism was the best way to transform literature into a political weapon. For writers who had not divorced themselves from the Confucian aesthetics, which placed its particular emphasis on the social and educational function of literature, socialist realism became more acceptable because of the development of nationalism, especially during the Second World War, when Vietnam was dominated simultaneously by two empires: France and Japan.

Despite having been imported from France, the socialist realism which was officially adopted in Vietnam was mainly that interpreted by China's Maoists. The profound impact of Mao Zedong's theory of socialist realism in Vietnamese literary thought and activity after the August 1945 Revolution can be explained by several factors, geographical, political and cultural. But it is here argued the most important factor was probably the war. Over three decades, from 1945 to 1975, Vietnam was continually at war, first with the French and later with the Americans. It can be argued

that it is the very culture of war that helped to create the type of intellectual and emotional environment necessary for the easy reception of Maoism, an ideology which was originally born in wartime and aimed to serve the war. It can also be argued that, together with Maoism, the war culture itself became one of the crucial factors in shaping socialist realism in the anti-French resistance areas during 1945-54 and in North Vietnam during 1954-1975.

The dominance of Maoism and the culture of war transformed socialist realism into something like a para-religion in which the leaders of the Party all became theorists of literature. These people had neither the time nor the knowledge to discuss issues of literature in depth; and consequently, the so-called canonical texts of Vietnamese socialist realism consisted only of several simple pronouncements on literature by the leaders in various forms, including letters, speeches and resolutions. As a result, Vietnamese socialist realism became a dogmatism and, in Vietnamese writers' words, a "doctrinaire realism".

This "doctrinaire realism", which was consolidated during the wars against the French and the Americans, was strongly challenged in peacetime - after the 1954 Geneva Agreements and after the 1975 victory by the two best known dissident movements: the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair and the *perestroika*-styled *đổi mới* campaign. Both were finally suppressed by the government; but while the former movement was harshly penalized, the latter is still fortunate to be witnessing the death of socialist realism.

Although Vietnam is still a one-party ruled state, and the Vietnamese government still holds a monopoly on publishing, forbidding independent presses and journals, and trying to keep its strict control over literary life, socialist realism, both as a doctrine and as a movement, has died. This death resulted not from the activities of the dissidents but from two non-literary elements: globalization and the market-oriented economy which has been adopted by the Vietnamese Communist Party and government since the late 1980s. Now that publishers earned money solely from the number of books sold or in circulation and writers lived solely by their royalties,

literary consumers played a decisive role in literary life, and writers were able to make easy contact with the world, the *partiinost* principle became nonsense and as a result socialist realism became a thing of the past.

In short, socialist realism was born of communism, nurtured by nationalism, developed at war, challenged in peacetime, and killed by the force of a free economy and globalization.

A TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS

(until 1990)

- 111 B.C. – Vietnam ruled by China as the Province of Giao Chỉ.
A.D. 939
- 939 Vietnamese overthrow Chinese rule.
- 1854 French conquest begins.
- 1884 Vietnam signs protectorate treaty with France.
- 1930 Indochina Communist Party (VCP) is formed.
- 1932 The New Poetry movement begins.
The Tự Lực literary group launches their first newspaper *Phong Hoá*.
The Soviet Union of Writers is established; the concept of socialist realism is formulated.
- 1934 The first Congress of Soviet Writers is held; and socialist realism is officially adopted.
- 1936-39 The polemics on art for art's sake or art for human life.
The theory of socialist realism is first introduced to Vietnamese readers.
- 1939-45 The Second World War.
- 1940 Japan occupies Indochina but leaves the French officials in charge.
- 1941 Việt Minh is formed and controlled by the Vietnamese Communist Party.
- 1942 Mao Zedong delivers two talks to the Yana'n Forum on Literature and Art.
- 1943 Mao Zedong's "Yana'n Talks on Literature and Art" is published in *Chieh-fang jih-pao*.
The Cultural Association for National Salvation is formed and controlled by Việt Minh.
Việt Minh's *Theses on Culture* is launched.
- 1945 The August 1945 Revolution: Hồ Chí Minh proclaims Vietnam's independence from the French.
- 1946 The anti-French resistance breaks out.
The Hồ Chí Minh government and their supporters move to the countryside

and mountain areas in order to organize the guerrilla war.

- 1948 Trường Chinh, the Secretary General of VCP gives a speech on “Marxism and Vietnamese Culture” at the Second National Conference on Vietnamese Culture.
The Association of Art and Literature is founded, replacing the Cultural Association for National Salvation.
- 1949 People’s Republic of China established.
Mao Zedong's “Yana’n Talks on Literature and Art” is translated and published in Vietnam.
The Conference of Debate in Việt Bắc is held with a slogan “revolutionize ideology and popularize activities”.
- 1951 The campaign of political rectification starts.
- 1953 Stalin dies.
- 1953 - 56 The land reform campaign.
- 1954 French defeat at Điện Biên Phủ leads to cease-fire.
Geneva Agreements divide Vietnam into two parts: the North controlled by the Hồ Chí Minh government; the South by American-sponsored Ngô Đình Diệm government.
- 1955 A group of writers and artists in the army demand creative freedom.
Some remarkable books are published:
Việt Bắc by Tố Hữu
Người Người Lốp Lốp by Trần Dần
Vượt Côn Đảo by Phùng Quán.
The 1954-5 literary prize is announced.

- 1956 Khrushchev delivers a secret report on Stalin.
The campaign of a Hundred Flowers is launched in China.
Giai Phẩm publishes 5 issues:
Giai Phẩm Mùa Xuân (Fine Works of Spring) (is confiscated)
Giai Phẩm Mùa Thu (Fine Works of Autumn) vols. 1, 2 and 3
Giai Phẩm Mùa Đông (Fine Work of Winter).
Nhân Văn (Humanism), 5 issues.
Other magazines relate to *Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm*:
Trăm Hoa (Hundred flowers)
Văn (Literature)
Nói Thật (Speaking openly)
- 1958 The VCP launches a campaign against “saboteurs on the ideological and cultural front”.
A re-education course is organized for nearly 500 writers and artists in Hanoi.
Expelled from Writers' Association: Trương Tửu, Phan Khôi, Thụy An.
Dismissed for three years: Trần Dần, Lê Đạt, Hoàng Cầm, and Phùng Quán.
Writers and artists are sent to factories or to the countryside to reinforce their ideological platform.
- 1960 In a trial held in Hanoi, several *Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm* members are condemned to 15 years (Nguyễn Hữu Đang and Thụy An), 10 years (Minh Đức).
- 1961 Hanoi openly rejects Khrushchev's policy of “peaceful coexistence” with the United States.
- 1962 American advisors begin active role in South Vietnam.
- 1964 Several high-ranking cadres in Hanoi are arrested for being “revisionists”.
- 1965 First American combat units land at Danang (South Vietnam).
- 1966 The Cultural Revolution is launched in China.
- 1969 Hồ Chí Minh dies.
- 1973 Paris peace agreement is signed; and American troops withdraw.
- 1975 North Vietnam conquers Saigon; war ends.

- A massive exodus from Vietnam began with the change in government.
- 1976 South Vietnam and North Vietnam are united in the new Socialist Republic of Viet Nam.
Chinese leader Mao Zedong dies.
- 1979 Vietnam invades Kampuchea, and instals a pro-Vietnam government.
China launches invasion of Vietnam.
- 1985 Gorbachev's policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* are adopted in the Soviet Union.
- 1986 Sixth Congress of the VCP, policy of *đổi mới* (renovation; literally: change for the new) adopted.
Dương Thu Hương's *Beyond Illusion* is published.
- 1987 Secretary General Nguyễn Văn Linh meets Vietnamese writers, artists and intellectuals in Hanoi to launch the policy of *đổi mới* in the field of literature and art.
Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short story "The General Retires" is published in *Văn Nghệ* magazine.
- 1988 Nhân Văn- Giai Phẩm group's membership in the Writers' Association is reinstated.
Phạm Thị Hoài's *The Crystal Messenger* is published.
Trần Độ is forced off the VCP's Central Committee.
Nguyễn Ngọc is dismissed from *Văn Nghệ* magazine and the executive board of the Writers' Association.
Dương Thu Hương's *Paradise of the Blind* is published, and then banned.
- 1989 Communism in Eastern Europe collapses.
Tiananmen massacre occurs in China.
The VCP's Central Committee issues the "three no's" policy:
 - no calling into question the leadership of the communist party;
 - no calling into question the correctness of the one-party state; and
 - no movement towards pluralism or a multi-party democracy.
(Zachary Abuza, 2001: 80)
- 1990 Dương Thu Hương is expelled from the Vietnam Communist Party.
Bảo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* is published.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Vietnamese literature is notable for its fissure along ideological fault lines. From 1945 to 1954 this fissure marked the boundary between the literature of those who participated in the anti-French resistance under the Communist Party's banner and those who did not. From 1954 to 1975 it was the ideological divide between South and Communist North Vietnam; and from 1975 to the present, the divide, both ideological and emotional, between homeland and exile. In this context of Vietnam's history, the relationship between literature and politics is unequivocal. Nowhere is this relationship deeper and clearer than in socialist realist literature, which openly advocates political commitment and has been regarded as the only official literature in the North before 1975 and throughout the country since then.

Despite its significance, the relationship between literature and politics in Vietnam has never been studied in a systematic or comprehensive way. This study addresses that gap.

Literature Review

In Vietnam, literary study and criticism began comparatively recently. In the 1920s, some brief sketches of Vietnamese literary history were written by Georges Cordier ("Essai sur littérature Annamite", 1920), Dương Quảng Hàm ("Hán Việt Văn Biểu" - A Chart of Sino-Vietnamese Literature, 1925) and Lê Dư (*Nữ lưu văn học sử* - History of Women Writers, 1929). All were oversimplified, concentrating only on the issue of periodization and the listing of major figures in each period.

A monograph on Vietnamese literary history with a critical stance close to that employed in the West was not published until 1944, when *Việt Nam văn học sử yếu* (A Brief History of Vietnamese Literature) by Dương Quảng Hàm first appeared and was used as a textbook in high schools. It was also in the 1940s that

first-hand works on literary criticism were published, including *Thi nhân Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Poets, 1942) by Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân, *Nhà văn hiện đại* (Modern Writers, 1944-45) by Vũ Ngọc Phan, and *Văn chương Truyện Kiều* (The Literature of the Tale of Kieu, 1944) by Nguyễn Bách Khoa. These works, along with Dương Quảng Hàm's *Việt Nam văn học sử yếu*, became the sourcebooks of literary precedent that served later critics and historians.

Immediately after this brief blossoming period, the anti-French resistance (1946-54) erupted. In 1954, as a result of the Geneva Agreements, Vietnam was divided in two, South and North, each having a different political regime. This division caused a long-lasting war which ended in 1975 when South Vietnam collapsed.

The Vietnam War created a variety of difficulties for literary activities, the most difficult being in terms of ideology and psychology. In the circumstances of war and under the spell of political forces, writers and critics are often inclined to accept a pragmatic theory of literature which asserts the priority of content over form, stresses the social effect of writing and sees literature as a necessary means of meeting political needs.

The study of socialist realism was even more influenced by war. In South Vietnam during the period of 1954-75, only one anthology written by writers living in the North was published. Entitled *Trăm hoa đua nở trên đất Bắc* (A Hundred Flowers Blossom in the North), it was edited and introduced by Mạc Đình Hoàng Văn Chí (1959), the head of the "Front for Protecting Freedom in the Realm of Culture".¹ All of the authors in this anthology participated in the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair, a movement of intellectual dissidence in the North in the mid-1950s. In the Vietnamese community-in-exile after 1975, the only published anthology of works by writers living in Vietnam under the communist regime was *Trăm hoa vẫn nở trên quê hương* (A Hundred Flowers Are Still Blossoming in Our Country, 1990).² This anthology comprised works written by those regarded as literary

¹ Mạc Đình Hoàng Văn Chí (1959), *Trăm hoa đua nở trên đất Bắc*, Saigon; reprinted by Quê Mẹ in Paris in 1983.

² Published by Lê Trần in San Jose, California in 1990.

dissidents of the *đổi mới* (renovation) movement in Vietnam, formed in 1987. Both the emergence and the similarity in the titles of the two anthologies are significant: in South Vietnam before 1975 and in exile after 1975, Vietnamese literary taste has been predominantly politics-oriented.

In North Vietnam after 1954, and in Vietnam after 1975, the situation has been identical. Apart from several textbooks, no systematic and thorough work on contemporary Vietnamese literature as a whole has been produced. Publications in this field consist of collections of articles written on politically significant occasions such as the fiftieth anniversary of the Vietnamese Communist Party, the fortieth anniversary of the August Revolution, and so forth. This political orientation saw critics performing literary acrobatics in order to earn the commendation for merit of the Party in the realm of literature rather than to interpret or to study literature itself. Professor Trần Văn Giàu, one of the most highly respected historians and a writer of sharp intelligence and quick wit, argues:

How do we assess forty two years of literature of revolutionary resistance and building socialism? There has been a lack of criticism and criticism of criticism... We (and that includes me) assess each other's work in order to motivate one another, to please those above us, to further our personal interests, and often we are dictatorial in our assessment without giving others the right of reply, that is to say we have not had real literary criticism.³

Professor Nguyễn Huệ Chi, the head of the Department of Ancient and Middle Ages Literature in the Institute of Literary Studies, and another researcher, Vũ Tam Giang, had the same opinion as Professor Trần Văn Giàu. Both cited several examples of “the fact of hiding or distorting the truth” in many works of historical and literary scholarship in order to prove that the phenomenon of “haphazardly presenting the history of modern literature” had been popular in Vietnam over the past decades.⁴

³ *Văn Nghệ* (Hanoi), September 19, 1987.

⁴ Nguyễn Huệ Chi, “Đổi mới nhận thức lịch sử trong nghiên cứu khoa học xã hội nói chung, nghiên cứu văn học nói riêng”, *Tạp chí Văn Học* no 6. (1990), pp. 1-9; and Vũ Tam Giang, “Bàn thêm về đổi mới nhận thức lịch sử”, *Tạp chí Văn Học* no. 3 (1991), pp. 1-5.

It may be said that the whole output of literary criticism and scholarship in both South and North Vietnam before and even after 1975 on the topic of socialist realism was very poor and lacked enduring scholarly value. Most, if not all, were ideologically conditioned. They appeared as sub-texts of the political narratives.

Of the Western countries, France has the longest relationship with Vietnam. Much Vietnamese literature, especially classical works, has been translated into French, with several translated more than once, such as *The Tale of Kiều*, *Lục Vân Tiên* and *Chinh Phụ Ngâm*. France has also had many prominent Vietnamese specialists. Henri Maspéro, Leopold Cadière, and André George Haudricourt have contributed major discoveries on the origins and history of the Vietnamese language. Early studies of Vietnamese literature began with Georges Cordier and Maurice Durand. The first is the author of *Essai sur la littérature annamite* (1920), *La littérature annamite* (1931), *Etude sur la littérature annamite*, two volumes (1933 and 1934), and *Poésie nouvelle* (1935). Better-known than Georges Cordier, Maurice Durand was the author of many translations and monographs on Vietnamese literature and culture, the most notable being *Introduction to Vietnamese Literature*, co-authored by Nguyễn Trần Huân.⁵

A special place in the research of modern Vietnamese literature in France is now reserved for Georges Boudarel (1926-2003), the author of several articles, chapters and monographs on this subject. Central to his research is the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair. Boudarel's works include an article entitled "Intellectual dissidence in the 1950s: the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair", published in *The Vietnam Forum*, no. 13 (1990), a booklet entitled *Dissidence intellectuelles au Vietnam*, published by Michel de Maule in Paris in 1989, and *Cent fleurs écloses dans la nuit du Vietnam: communisme et dissidence 1954-1956*, published by Bertoin in 1991. In these, and other writings, Georges Boudarel's concern has always been political life as it is reflected in literature, not literature in itself.

In Russia, although the first publication on Vietnam can be traced to the second half of the nineteenth century, active studies of Vietnam began

⁵ In the first edition of 1969, the book ended at the year 1945; in the revised edition, published after Mr Durand's death, it was expanded to 1975.

comparatively recently, in the early 1950s. As Anatoli Sokolov remarks, “[i]t can be affirmed definitely that history is the strongest part of Soviet research on Vietnam.”⁶ In the sphere of literature, in Russia, the leading figures include M. Tkachev, I. Zimonina, A. Sokolov, S. Toporishchev and N. Nikulin. Apart from hundreds of essays, articles and translations, Nikulin published two monographs on Vietnamese literature. Both focus on the history of Vietnamese literature as a whole: *Vietnam Literature, a Brief Sketch* (1971), and *Vietnamese Literature from the Middle Ages to the Modern Period* (1977). In the modern period, Nikulin has written many essays on well-known authors, but most are only introductions and none has theoretical significance.⁷

In the last few decades, the topic of Vietnam has attracted several scholars in the English-speaking world. Until the mid-1980s, however, interest in the study of Vietnam was largely historical and political. Specialists in the field of literature were rare. Most began to publish after the *đổi mới* policies were adopted by the Vietnamese Communist Party. Of these, the following authors must be mentioned: John K. Whitmore, who has published an essay on the Tao Đàn group;⁸ O.W. Wolters, who mentioned several works of Vietnamese classical literature while discussing culture and literature in Southeast Asia;⁹ John C. Schafer, the author and co-author of several articles on Vietnamese literature at the turn of the century, particularly the formation and growth of modern fiction;¹⁰ J. A. Yeager, who is

⁶ Anatoli Sokolov, “Vietnamese Studies in the Soviet Union”, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, no. 5 (January 1992), p. 7.

⁷ Many of Nikulin's works were translated into Vietnamese and published in Vietnamese magazines. An anthology of his works, *Văn học Việt Nam và giao lưu quốc tế*, edited by Nguyễn Hữu Sơn, was published by Nhà xuất bản Giáo Dục in Hanoi in 2000.

⁸ John K. Whitmore, “The Tao Đàn group: poetry, cosmology, and the State in the Hồng Đức period (1470-1497)”, *Crossroads*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1992), pp. 55-70.

⁹ O.W. Wolters (1999), *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, Ithaca: Cornell University, pp. 68-87.

¹⁰ John C. Schafer, “Phạm Duy Tồn: Journalist, short story writer, collector of humorous stories”, in *The Vietnam Forum* no. 14 (1993), pp. 103-124; “The collective and the individual in two post-war Vietnamese novels”, in *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 14.2 (2000), pp. 13-48; “From Verse Narrative to Novel: the Development of Prose Fiction in Vietnam”, co-authored by Cao Thị Như Quỳnh, *Journal of Asian Studies*, no. 47, 1988; “The novel emerges in Cochinchina”, with Thế Uyên, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 52, no. 4 (November 1993), pp. 854-884.

concerned with the Vietnamese novel in French;¹¹ Neil L. Jamieson on modern literature;¹² Dana Healey on the *đổi mới* movement;¹³ and Keith. W. Taylor,¹⁴ Peter Zinoman¹⁵ and Greg Lockhart¹⁶ on Nguyễn Huy Thiệp.

It is worth noting that, apart from those mentioned above, several Vietnamese scholars now write in English: Công Huyền Tôn Nữ Nha Trang with her Ph.D. dissertation, *The Traditional Roles of Women as Reflected in Oral and Written Vietnamese Literature* (1973), Hoàng Ngọc Thành with his Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Hawaii, *Vietnam's Social and Political Development as Seen through the Modern Novel* (1968);¹⁷ Trần Mỹ Vân with her book *Scholar in Anguish: Nguyễn Khuyến and the Decline of the Confucian Order, 1884–1909*;¹⁸ Huệ-Tâm Hồ Tài with the chapter “Literature for the People: From

¹¹ J. A. Yeager (1987), *The Vietnamese Novel in French: a Literary Response to Colonialism*, Hanover: University of New England.

¹² Neil L. Jamieson (1993), *Understanding Vietnam*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

¹³ Dana Healy, “Literature in transition: an overview of Vietnamese writing of the Renovation Period”, in David Smyth (ed.) (2000), *The Canon in Southeast Asian Literatures*, Richmond: Curzon, pp. 41-50.

¹⁴ Keith W. Taylor, “Locating and translating boundaries in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short stories”, *Vietnam Review* 1 (1998), pp. 439-465. Taylor has also published several essays on classical literature such as “The poems of Đoàn Văn Khâm”, *Crossroads*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1992), pp. 39-53.

¹⁵ Peter Zinoman, “Declassifying Nguyễn Huy Thiệp”, *Positions* 2:2 (Fall 1994), pp. 294-317; “Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's 'Vàng Lửa' and the nature of intellectual dissent in contemporary Vietnam”, *Viet Nam Generation*, Inc 4:1-2 (Spring 1992), pp. 61-64.

¹⁶ Greg Lockhart, “Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's Writing: Post-Confucian or Post-Modern”, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, no. 6, 1993; “Introduction: Nguyễn Huy Thiệp and the faces of Vietnamese literature”, in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp (1992), *The General Retires and Other Stories*, translated with an introduction by Greg Lockhart, Singapore: Oxford University Press, pp. 1-38; “Tại sao tôi dịch truyện ngắn Nguyễn Huy Thiệp ra tiếng Anh” (Why I am translating Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short stories into English), *Tạp chí Văn Học* (Literary Studies) (Hanoi) no. 4 (1989). Greg Lockhart also translated and wrote introductions to other authors' works in “Broken Journey: Nhật Linh's ‘Going to France’”, *East Asian History*, no. 8 (December 1994), pp. 73-134; (with Monique Lockhart), *The Light of the Capital: Three Modern Vietnamese Classics*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

¹⁷ This dissertation was published in 1991 by Peter Llang (New York). A part of it was translated into Vietnamese by the author and Thân Thị Nhân Đức, entitled *Những phản ánh xã hội và chính trị trong tiểu thuyết miền Bắc, 1950-1967*, published by Quang Trung (San Jose) in 1991.

¹⁸ Published by the National University of Singapore in 1991. Trần Mỹ Vân was also the author of “Eroticism in the poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương in *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, October 2002, pp. 471-494.

Soviet Politics to Vietnamese Polemics” in *Borrowings and Adaptations in Vietnamese Culture*, edited by Trương Bửu Lâm (1987),¹⁹ Huỳnh Sanh Thông with his article “Main Trends of Vietnamese Literature Between the Two World Wars” published in *The Vietnam Forum* no. 3 (1984); and, more recently, Kim N.B. Ninh with her thorough work *A World Transformed*, focusing on the politics of culture in Vietnam between 1945 and 1965.²⁰

Most of the above English works concentrate either on a notable author or on a particular event, and are written primarily from a historical perspective. None have covered socialist realism as a literary theory or a literary movement. Thus, it seems that the only monograph specifically dealing with the topic is my own book, *Văn học Việt Nam dưới chế độ cộng sản, 1945-90* (Vietnamese Literature under Communism), published in California in 1991, and reprinted in 1996.²¹ This publication comprises three parts. Part one examines literary activities under the communist regime, literary organizations, the system of censorship, the College of Creative Writing of Nguyễn Du and the “creative camps”, and the remuneration of Vietnamese writers. Part two examines the history of Vietnamese socialist realism during its three major periods: 1945-54, 1954-75 and 1975-90. Part three gives an overview of the achievements of socialist realist literature in some genres and fields: poetry, fiction, literary criticism and literary scholarship. At a glance, it is clear that this book is a blend of the sociology of literature with literary history and literary criticism. It aims to depict literary background rather than to study literature itself.

In contrast, this thesis examines the relationship between literature and politics rather than merely seeking a reflection of politics in literature. Furthermore, it attempts to explore socialist realism in Vietnamese literature from a cross-cultural perspective, particularly as it relates to Chinese and Soviet Russian literature.

¹⁹ Published by the Centre for Southeast Asia Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa (Honolulu) in 1987.

²⁰ Published by The University of Michigan Press (Ann Harbor) in 2002.

²¹ Published by Văn Nghệ, under the pen name Nguyễn Hưng Quốc.

Aims

In exploring the nexus between literature and politics in Vietnamese socialist realism, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How did the Vietnamese intellectuals of the 1930s come to accept socialist realism as well as the Marxist theory of literature?
2. How did the Vietnamese Communist Party introduce Marxist literary theory into the context of Vietnam?
3. By what means did the Vietnamese Communist Party exercise its leadership role and its control over writers and literary activities?
4. What impact did this leadership style and control have upon literary output?

In respect to literary theory, one of the theoretical outcomes of this study is to determine whether Vietnamese socialist realism has contributed anything to the enrichment of its original theory. Furthermore, as has been shown in literary history in other parts of the world, the relationship between literature and politics is a matter of continuing and constant debate over unresolvable issues. Each author in each period unveils different answers and passes different messages on to younger generations. In view of this relationship, the research aims to discover the lessons that can be learnt from the experience of Vietnam.

In respect to literary history, most historians believe that the modern period in the history of Vietnamese literature commenced in 1932 with the establishment of the Tự Lực văn đoàn (Self-Reliant Literary Group) and the birth of the New Poetry Movement. After fifty years, socialist realism is certainly the most durable trend of this period. Consequently, one cannot fully understand modern Vietnamese literature without a careful and thorough study of the socialist realist era.

In relation to the socio-political life of Vietnam, an American belonging to a generation deeply involved in the Vietnam War, Neil L. Jamieson, the author of *Understanding Vietnam*, asserts that “[t]o better understand ourselves, we must understand the Vietnam War. To understand the war, we must understand the

Vietnamese.”²² The study of literature is one of the most effective ways to understand a national psychology and identity. This study offers (i) an understanding of literary organizations, particularly as they manifested the mode of thinking of the communist elite in Vietnam; and (ii) an understanding of the impact of the communist ideology on writers and their literary activities.

Theoretical Framework

The relationship between literature and politics is an age-old issue in the history of world literature. It was one of the main concerns of the first theorists in our civilization, including Confucius (551-479 B.C.) in China and Plato (circa 428 – c.347 B.C.) in Greece; both of whom have had a profound and decisive influence on Western and Eastern cultures, including literature. Although primarily philosophers, each was interested in literature, holding a shared view in two areas. First, both paid particular attention to the relationship between literature and politics; and second, in this relationship, both placed their main emphasis on the influence of literature on politics rather than the reverse. Faced with this kind of influence, Plato and Confucius had different responses. While Plato thought that poetry was far removed from truth, Confucius saw poetry as a source of knowledge, advising his son that “[i]f you do not study Poetry, you will not be able to speak [properly]”.²³ Plato believed that literature had a negative impact on politics because it nourished passions which ought to be controlled and disciplined, while Confucius believed it to be good and necessary. Plato sought to exclude poets from his ideal Republic after giving him/her a laurel wreath,²⁴ while Confucius tried to use literature as an educational tool and also as a political one:

Young men, why do you not study Poetry? It can be used to inspire, to

²² Neil L. Jamieson (1993), op. cit., p. x.

²³ Quoted in James J.Y. Liu (1975), *Chinese Theories of Literature*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p. 109.

²⁴ Plato’s view of literature can be found in his works, *Ion*, and *Republic*. About his review, see, for example, David Daiches (1967), *Critical Approaches to Literature*, London: Longmans, pp.1-22; William K. Wimsatt Jr. and Cleanth Brooks (1957), *Literary Criticism, a Short History*, volume 1, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 3-20.

observe, to make you fit for company, to express grievances; near at hand [it will teach you how] to serve your father, and, [looking] further, [how] to serve your sovereign; it also enables you to learn the names of many birds, beasts, plants, and trees.²⁵

Later, Plato's view of literature was adjusted and developed by Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), who regarded literature as representing the universal through the particular, and, therefore, more philosophical than historical; and as a “catharsis” which not only provided “an outlet for pity and fear, but [also] to provide for them a distinctively aesthetic satisfaction, to purify and clarify them by passing them through the medium of art.”²⁶ The legacies of Confucius' and Aristotle's thoughts are similar: literature was taken seriously; the educational, and therefore, moral and political functions of literature were highly regarded; literature was used as a means of maintaining order in a society in which traditions, canons, norms and the previous generations were all respected and protected.

Although the relationship between literature and politics can be traced back to the time of Confucius and Plato, a clear idea of literature as a political force and the writer as the unacknowledged legislator of their age appeared only toward the end of the eighteenth century.²⁷ This idea originated in the French Revolution, when men of letters became the leaders of public opinion, who shaped the national temperament and outlook on life. According to Walter Laqueur, “1848 was the revolution of the intellectuals *par excellence*. This involvement did not proceed everywhere in equal measure, and it was not to everyone’s liking.”²⁸ However, since the early nineteenth century, with the rise of the Art for the Art’s Sake Movement which put forward one of the strongest defenses of literature's autonomy from politics, the literature - politics pendulum seems to have swung away from the political. Almost contemporaneous with the deinstrumentalization of literature by

²⁵ Quoted in James J.Y. Liu (1975), *op. cit.*, p. 109.

²⁶ S.H. Butcher (1951), *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (with a critical text and translation of *The Poetics*), fourth edition, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., p. 255.

²⁷ Walter Laqueur, “Literature and the historian”, in Walter Laqueur and George L. Mosse (eds.) (1967), *Literature and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Harper Torchbooks, p. 11.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

art for art's sake was the Marxist repoliticization of literature.²⁹ Since then, Marxism has been the most politically engaged school of thought.

As widely acknowledged by Marxist as well as non-Marxist scholars, neither Karl Marx nor Friedrich Engels produced a complete study of the problems of literature. Their pronouncements on literature occur in various works but only sparsely, mainly in the form of letters or “forewords”. However, they put forward some points of view from which their followers have established a Marxist system of aesthetics. Of these, the most important contend that a) literature as part of the superstructure is ultimately determined by economic fundamentals; and b) an “advanced literature, by a careful selection of truthful representation, has a positive effect on the development of society.”³⁰ Taking these views as a strategic base, all Marxist theorists and critics have focused their attention on literature as well as its relation to politics, and have advocated the thesis that literature is an instrument of political battle. As a result, in the field of literature, no school of thought can be compared with Marxism in dealing with the relationship between literature and politics. Even the existentialist philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, who has fervidly advocated the theory of “engaged literature”, limits his theory to prose, not poetry, because, as he argues, the prose writer is always looking toward the world beyond words while the poet considers them primarily as object. According to Sartre, “[f]or the former, they are useful conventions, tools which gradually wear out and which one throws away when they are no longer serviceable; for the latter, they are natural things which sprout naturally upon the earth like grass and trees.”³¹ Marxism is different. All Marxist theorists, regardless of their differences, agree that literature, including prose and poetry, is by nature historical and political.

Of all Marxist movements of literature, socialist realism is certainly a movement deeply involved in politics. At its core, socialist realism was not born

²⁹ Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell (eds.) (2000), *Politics and Aesthetics in the Arts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 228-230.

³⁰ Douwe Fokkema, “Strength and weakness of the Marxist theory of literature with reference to Marxist criticism in the People's Republic of China”, in John J. Deeney (1980), *Chinese – Western Comparative Literature Theory and Strategy*, Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, p. 119.

³¹ Jean-Paul Sartre (1988), *“What is Literature?” and Other Essays*, Cambridge: Harvard

from an aesthetic and artistic drive as a reaction to some preceding literary movements or as a response to some changes in the cultural world such as realism, romanticism, symbolism, surrealism, dadaism or futurism. The emergence of socialist realism, on the contrary, coincided with the establishment of the Soviet Union of Writers 1932-34, a highly bureaucratized, or in Ronald Hingley's words, "militarized"³² organization, which was formed to control all writers and their activities, even their non-creative activities. According to Irina Gutkin, "[t]he purpose of the First Writers' Congress and the socialist realist aesthetic was to define the artist's relationship to the general project: Writers became engineers of human souls in the sense that they created models of the new men for imitation by the masses."³³ With these goals, socialist realism was based on three tenets: party-mindedness, class-mindedness and popular-mindedness, of which party-mindedness is the most important. It is obvious that socialist realism is more political than literary. As a result, as Abram Tertz points out,

Most subjects of Soviet literature have in common a remarkable purposefulness. They all develop in one direction, and a direction well known in advance. This direction may exhibit variations in accordance with time, place, conditions, etc., but it is invariable in its course and its destiny: to remind the reader once more of the triumph of Communism.³⁴

From the Soviet Union, socialist realism expanded to other countries, even some non-communist countries, resulting in phenomena labelled by J.E. Flower as "socialist realism without socialist realist revolution."³⁵ However, each country, which has had a different culture, received and interpreted socialist realism differently. In several countries such as the former German Democratic Republic, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and in all Western countries, which had

University Press, p. 29.

³² Ronald Hingley (1979), *Russian Writers and Soviet Society 1917-1978*, New York: Random House, p. 197.

³³ Irina Gutkin (1999), *The Cultural Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic 1890-1934*, Evanston (Illinois): Northwestern University Press, p. 57.

³⁴ Abram Tertz (1960), *On Socialist Realism*, New York: Pantheon Books, p. 43.

³⁵ J.E. Flower, "Socialist realism without a socialist revolution: the French experience", in Michael Scriven and Dennis Tate (eds.) (1988), *European Socialist Realism*, Oxford: Berg, pp. 99-110.

“experienced the Renaissance, albeit in various forms and to differing extents, and had thrown aside medieval dogma in favor of the freedom of the individual centuries before Russian literature came of age”,³⁶ socialist realism is less doctrinal. In this regard, China and Vietnam are different. In the 1930s and 1940s, both countries were still agricultural, semi-feudal, and strongly influenced by Confucianism, which considers obedience, subordination and loyalty the highest virtues: socialist realism became something of a para-religion.

Compared to China, Vietnam had several striking differences. First, while China was partly and temporarily occupied by foreigners, especially the Japanese during the Second World War, Vietnam was invaded and dominated by the French for nearly a century (1862-1954) and by the Japanese for a number of years (1940-45). The Vietnamese experience of colonialism was, therefore, felt more deeply and bitterly than by its neighbour. Secondly, while the Chinese began their process of literary modernization in the second half of the nineteenth century and had quite a long and strong tradition of aestheticism, Vietnam began just a few years before the importation of socialist realism and was unfamiliar with any literary trend other than perspectives which regarded literature as a vehicle for the Dao and as a weapon for fighting enemies. As a result, the para-religiousness seems to have been more evident in the Vietnamese, rather than in the Chinese, acceptance of socialist realism.

While socialist realism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries was mainly associated with socialism, it can be said that in China, and particularly in Vietnam, it was mainly associated with anti-colonial nationalism, and after 1975 with postcolonial nationalism. This is one of the primary reasons why nationalism can be taken as a theoretical framework for this thesis. In other words, socialist realism can be seen above all as a part of the nationalist project and as a reflection of both anti-colonial and postcolonial nationalism.

Although the doctrine of nationalism, which was formed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, did not become a subject of academic investigation until

³⁶ Robert Porter, “Soviet Perspectives on Socialist Realism” in Michael Scriven and Dennis Tate (eds.) (1988), *op. cit.*, p. 54.

the first half of the twentieth century, as Umut Ozkirimli observes;³⁷ and “has never produced its own grand thinkers”, as Benedict Anderson comments,³⁸ according to several scholars, it has been more important in shaping the history of Europe and the world than any other political ideas, including democracy and communism.³⁹ However, even in the twenty-first century, nationalism remains a confusing historical phenomenon. Like most historians, Charles Taylor agrees that nationalism is considered modern because it is a response to a modern predicament and usually arises among “modernizing” elites.⁴⁰ Robert McKim and Jeff McMahan, however, still believe that “nationalism is partly the expression of a tribalism entrenched in our psychology”;⁴¹ while primordialist theorists view nationalism as a “natural” part of human beings.⁴² If nationalism is a modern phenomenon as most historians agree, according to John McLaren, there is another problem: “[M]odernism, a product of the Enlightenment, is oriented to a future controlled by reason, whereas nationalism appeals to an emotional attachment to tradition.”⁴³ Edward W. Said insists that “[i]t is historical fact that nationalism – restoration of community, assertion of identity, emergence of new cultural practices – as a mobilized political force instigated and then advanced the struggle against Western domination everywhere in the non-European world.”⁴⁴ Many others, however, place their emphasis on the negative aspects of nationalism: Benedict Anderson points out that national consciousness inevitably produces historical amnesia, while Eric Hobsbawm remarks that “no serious historian of nations and

³⁷ Umut Ozkirimli (2000), *Theories of Nationalism, a Critical Introduction*, Hampshire and London: Macmillan, p. 12.

³⁸ Benedict Anderson (1991), *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, p. 5.

³⁹ Peter Alter (1994), *Nationalism*, second edition, London: Edward Arnold, p. 1.

⁴⁰ Charles Taylor, “Nationalism and Modernity”, in Robert McKim and Jeff McMahan (eds.) (1997), *The Morality of Nationalism*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 45.

⁴¹ Robert McKim and Jeff McMahan (1997), op. cit., p. 25.

⁴² On Primordialism, see Umut Ozkirimli (2000), op. cit., pp. 64-84.; and Anthony D. Smith (2001), *Nationalism*, Cambridge: Polity, pp. 51-7.

⁴³ John McLaren (2001), *States of Imagination, Nationalism and Multiculturalism in Australian and Southern Asian Literature*, New Delhi: Prestige Books, p.17.

⁴⁴ Edward W. Said, (1993), *Culture and Imperialism*, London: Vintage, p. 263.

nationalism can be a committed political nationalist”.⁴⁵ Not surprisingly, Umut Ozkirimli confesses that his *Theories of Nationalism, a Critical Introduction* was written on a basis of several propositions, the first being that “[t]here can be no 'general' theory of nationalism”, followed by the second that “[t]here is no 'one' nationalism; not only are there different types of nationalism, but different members of the national or ethnic collectivities promote different constructions of nationhood.”⁴⁶

From this plethora of theories, Benedict Anderson's theory of nationalism and Edward W. Said's theory of postcolonialism will be used as a framework for this thesis, as they best explain the formation and development of socialist realism in Vietnam.

The central theme of Anderson's theory of nationalism, which has been highly influential in the study of nationalism in various disciplines, is the thesis that nation is primarily a cultural artefact distinguished by the style of its imagining and mode of representation. Accordingly, he maintains that nation is an “imagined political community”. It is imagined because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the images of their communion.”⁴⁷ Anderson goes further in exploring the conditions which give rise to such imagined communities. For him, these communities were formed mainly from the emergence of linear conceptions of time, and especially of “print-capitalism”. It was the invention of printing and the arrival of mass-produced vernacular books that made it possible to imagine the communities we call “nations”. Unquestionably, Anderson places a particular emphasis on the paramount importance of literature which is considered one of the major factors in shaping a common imagination on which the conception of “nation” is created. It is here that Anderson's theory of nationalism is common to theories of postcolonialism which agree that Western colonialists not only invaded non-European countries militarily, but they also

⁴⁵ Quoted in John McLaren (2001), op. cit., p. 82.

⁴⁶ Umut Ozkirimli (2000), op. cit., p. 10.

⁴⁷ Benedict Anderson (1991), op. cit., p. 6.

practiced cultural and ideological invasions through their colonial modes of discourse. If nations are narrations, as one critic suggested,⁴⁸ Western colonists usually seized the power to narrate and create grand narratives of civilization and history by, in Abdul R. JanMohamed's view, dehistoricizing and desocializing the conquered world in order to present it as a metaphysical "fact of life"⁴⁹ or as an "Otherness". According to Edward W. Said, one of the variations of this "Otherness" is the notion of Orientalism which is defined as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and (most of the time) the Occident."⁵⁰ This dichotomy between the Occident and the Orient was also the dichotomy between civilization and barbarism, centre and periphery, strength and weakness, winners and losers. Frantz Fanon argues that, in response to this cultural and ideological invasion, colonized people tried to find a voice, and in finding a voice, they had to claim their own past and, in doing so, eroded the colonialist ideology by which that past had been devalued.⁵¹ Following this thesis of Frantz Fanon, Edward W. Said, in his essay on the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, maintains that one of Yeats' most ardent desires was to regain contact with an earlier, mythical and nationalistic Ireland. He argues that it is also a common desire of postcolonial writers.⁵² In the preface to his book *Culture and Imperialism*, Said concludes that

Along with armed resistance in places as diverse as nineteenth-century Algeria, Ireland, and Indonesia, there also went considerable efforts in cultural resistance almost everywhere, the assertions of nationalist identities, and, in the political realm, the creation of associations and parties whose common goal was self-determination and national independence. Never was it the case that the imperial encounter pitted an active Western intruder against a supine

⁴⁸ Homi K. Bhabha (ed.) (1990), *Nation and Narration*, London: Routledge.

⁴⁹ Abdul R. JanMohamed, "The Economy of Manichean Allegory", in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds.) (1997), *The Post-colonial Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, p. 22.

⁵⁰ Edward Said, "Orientalism", in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds.) (1997), op. cit., p. 88.

⁵¹ Frantz Fanon (1968), *The Wretched of the Earth*, translated by Charles Lam Markmann, New York: Grove.

⁵² This essay is reprinted in Edward W. Said (1993), op. cit., pp. 265-288.

or inert non-Western native; there was *always* some form of active resistance and, in the overwhelming majority of cases, the resistance finally won out.⁵³

Such a cultural resistance occurred in Vietnam in the twentieth century. Since the early 1940s, ten years after its establishment, the Vietnamese Communist Party confirmed that culture, including literature, was one of the three most important fronts, other two being the military and the economy. Writers were labelled as cultural soldiers. On the literary front, as Hồ Chí Minh espoused, “poems should be tempered steel / And poets too should join the fight”,⁵⁴ or as Sóng Hồng urged, poets should “seize the pen to cast down the world's tyrants / Make rhymes into bombs and from verse make grenades.”⁵⁵ Writers and poets, however, went further. They not only used their pen as a weapon to fight against enemies, they also used literature to construct their own national discourse, which was separate from that of colonialism. Along with music and traditional theatre, literature existed as “codes” and “symbols” to support the idea of a uniform national culture. This is one of the reasons why Xuân Diệu, who graduated from the French education system and had been deeply influenced by French romanticism, sternly criticized modern French literature, claiming that it belonged to the petit bourgeois and the decadent shortly after the August 1945 Revolution.⁵⁶ This may be one of the reasons why Tố Hữu, who was regarded as the leading figure in Vietnamese revolutionary poetry, motioned to the East as a country of revolution: “Come back to the East; and along with the West, we raise the red flag.”⁵⁷ This may also be one of the reasons why Vietnamese communists, on the one hand, advocated the new – a new regime, new era, new “human being”, and so forth; yet, on the other, advocated the restoration of most traditional forms of literature and art.

⁵³ Edward Said (1993), *op. cit.*, p. xii.

⁵⁴ Nguyễn Khắc Viện and Hữu Ngọc (eds.) (n.d.), *Vietnamese Literature*, Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, p. 506.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 570.

⁵⁶ See Lại Nguyên Ân, “Về đời sống văn nghệ năm Cộng Hoà thứ nhất”, *Văn Nghệ* magazine, no. 2 (September 1985), p. 15.

⁵⁷ “Về phương Đông, ta về phương Đông / Cùng phương Tây giương ngọn cờ hồng”, in the poem “Theo chân Bác” (Following Uncle Ho Chi Minh), in Tố Hữu (1994), *Thơ*, Hanoi: Nxb Giáo Dục, p. 454.

This demonstrates that, at least during the wars against the French and Americans, Vietnamese communists functioned as nationalists rather than communists. Is there any contradiction here? The answer is: “yes”, and “no”.

Yes, because as most historians agree, Marxism, whose roots were in Enlightenment rationalism, is basically internationalism. For Karl Marx, the attribute of all social systems from ancient Greece to present times, was “class struggle” in which socio-economic conditions are crucial and the mode and relations of production are decisive. Furthermore, both Marx and Engels predicted that under socialism, national boundaries would be replaced by solidarity across the nation of working people. In this context, as Guibernau writes, nationalism was a marginal phenomenon: “Marx’s emphasis upon the political sphere as ‘superstructure’ led him to downplay both the nation-state and nationalism as major influences upon historical change.”⁵⁸ In *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, which was first published in 1990, Eric Hobsbawm still supported the classic Marxist view of nationalism as “false consciousness” and a “bourgeois” construction which would be extinguished along with that class.⁵⁹

On the other hand, there was no contradiction, because in practice, politicians are more realistic than theorists. In the early nineteenth century, when nationalism appeared to be a stronger political force than socialism in defeating the Russian Empire, Lenin advocated the doctrine of nationalism. In the early 1920s, in order to develop Soviet influence on the Third World, he reaffirmed the right of subject peoples to self-determination and independent statehood.⁶⁰ Since then, as Robert J. C. Young points out, “[t]he alliance between Marxism and nationalism in the anti-colonial struggles has typically been regarded more as a form of nationalism than of Marxism; Marxism is considered to have deviated into a form of nationalism.”⁶¹ In the case of Vietnam, in Huệ-Tâm Hồ Tài’s observation, “[t]he

⁵⁸ Quoted in Umut Ozkirimli (2000), *op. cit.*, p. 26.

⁵⁹ Eric Hobsbawm (1992), *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, (second edition), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁶⁰ Ralph Milliban (1977), *Marxism and Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 102-3.

⁶¹ Robert J.C. Young (2001), *Postcolonialism, An Historical Introduction*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, p. 169.

spread of Marxist theory among Vietnamese émigrés in France and China coincided with a shift in Comintern policy toward anticolonial movements in general and Indochina more specifically.”⁶² Among these “émigrés” was Hồ Chí Minh (1890-1969), who, as historians have shown, first came into contact with communism via Leninism. It is widely reported that it was Lenin’s famous “Theses on National and Colonial Questions” which was presented to the Second Comintern Congress in the summer of 1920, that, in William J. Duiker’s words, “set Nguyễn Ái Quốc⁶³ on the course that transformed him from a single patriot with socialist leanings into a Marxist revolutionary.”⁶⁴ As Hồ Chí Minh revealed in an article published in 1960 by the periodical *L’Echo du Vietnam* on his seventieth birthday:

A comrade gave me some essays of Lenin to read; they concerned the problem of nationalities and colonial peoples and were published by *L’Humanité*. Some political terms in them puzzled me. But by reading and re-reading the pamphlets many times, I finally grasped the essential. And I was filled with a great enthusiasm and a great faith that helped me to see the problems clearly. I was so happy over this that I sometimes wept. Alone in my room I exclaimed aloud, as if addressing a mass meeting: “Dear oppressed and unhappy compatriots!” I cried, “Here is the road to your liberation!”⁶⁵

Jean Sainteny, a Free French Intelligence officer, who worked in Vietnam for many years and had a very close relationship with Hồ Chí Minh, writes:

I have been asked countless times, “Was Hồ Chí Minh primarily a Nationalist or a Communist?” My reply is always the same: Hồ Chí Minh was both. For him nationalism and communism were, respectively, goal and the means to attain that goal. The two complemented each other, merged.⁶⁶

Most of the first generation of Vietnamese communists who became involved in politics before 1945 were similar to Hồ Chí Minh. They were originally

⁶² Huệ-Tâm Hồ Tài (1992), *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 227.

⁶³ One of the names Hồ Chí Minh used in the 1920s and 1930s.

⁶⁴ William J. Duiker (2000), *Ho Chi Minh*, New York: Hyperion, p. 64.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Jean Sainteny (1972), *Hồ Chí Minh and his Vietnam, a Personal Memory*, Chicago: Cowles, p. 19.

⁶⁶ Jean Sainteny (1972), *op. cit.*, p. 20.

nationalists, who, in the aftermath of the First World War, were fascinated with the success of the Russian Revolution, and turned to Marxism as a means of liberating their homeland from colonial rule. In SarDesai's view, most of these people, "like Hò Chí Minh, remained nationalist first and Communist second."⁶⁷ After several decades of revolution, did these people become communists first and nationalists second? For Benedict Anderson, the answer seems to be "no". He points to the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia in December 1978 and January 1979, and China's assault on Vietnam in February 1979 as evidence. These wars, he writes,

serve to underline the fact that since World War 2 every successful revolution has defined itself in national terms - the People's Republic of China, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and so forth - and, in so doing, has grounded itself firmly in a territorial and social space inherited from the pre-revolutionary past.⁶⁸

Studying the communist movements in Asia, two French historians, Jean-Louis Margolin and Pierre Rigoulot, reach the same conclusion:

Communism in Asia has in general been a national affair, with national defense always the top priority (except in Laos), even though at times Chinese or Soviet aid proved essential. Asia after all has seen intense wars between Communist states, at the end of the 1970s between Vietnam and Cambodia, and then between Vietnam and China. Where education, propaganda, and historiography are concerned, it is hard to find more chauvinistic countries anywhere else, perhaps partly because all these countries came into being as the result of a struggle against foreign imperialism. That experience at least gives them something in common. The problem is that the resulting nationalism has often been turned against their neighbors.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ D.R. SarDesai (1992), *Vietnam, The Struggle for National Identity*, Boulder: Westview Press, p. 50.

⁶⁸ Benedict Anderson (1991), *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁶⁹ Jean-Louis Margolin and Pierre Rigoulot, "Communism in Asia: between re-education and massacre" in Stéphane Courtois et al. (1991), *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, translated by Jonathan Murphy and Mark Kramer, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 637.

Focusing mainly on the politics of culture in Vietnam during the period between 1945 and 1965, in *A World Transformed*, Kim N.B. Ninh reaches a similar conclusion:

In comparison with the tremendous upheavals in the Chinese case, the Vietnamese revolution certainly seemed much more centered in and comfortably connected to the nation's history and cultural achievements. In the works of such communist intellectuals as Nguyễn Khắc Viện, which became well known in the West, ideology seemed much less of a concern than the ultimate goal of national independence. The image of the communists as the rightful inheritors of the nationalist tradition and the most credible guardians of the country's history and culture came to coincide with later communist efforts to ensconce the achievements of the anticolonial struggle and the revolution within the state's socialist narrative.⁷⁰

Thus, in terms of theoretical or historical accounts, there is no contradiction in declaring that socialist realism in Vietnam was closely associated with nationalism. It was nationalism which took a crucial part in receiving and shaping socialist realism as a theory and as a movement.

Argument and Structure of the Thesis

In conclusion, the main contention of this thesis can be summarized as follows: As a part of the nationalist project during the wars against the French and Americans, socialist realism was politically constructed and functioned as a tool in the political struggle against enemies. It not only emerged from a political imperative to gather forces and place them under communist control but was also determined by politics during its entire course of development.

The first part of this thesis contends that Marxist literary theory was introduced to Vietnam relatively early when most intellectuals had not freed themselves from the traditional literary frameworks of Vietnam. Theoretically, Vietnamese traditional and Marxist literary perspectives have much in common, such as the concept of the functions of literature and the writer's role in society. It

⁷⁰ Kim N.B. Ninh (2002), op. cit., p. 239.

may be said that, for writers of the 1930-45 period, Marxism provided the same psychological satisfactions as Confucianism did for their ancestors: a love of the holistic cosmological view, a sense of possessing the truth, and the conception of literature as a weapon. Politically speaking, with the limited importation of French books and other cultural materials into Vietnam during the Second World War (1939-45), the main sources of literary knowledge in Vietnam came from China. This helped the Chinese to maintain their predominant role in Vietnam. The Marxist literary theory which was introduced into Vietnam in this period was the theory that had been interpreted by the Chinese Communist Party.

This part of the thesis will include three chapters: a) Western influences on modern Vietnamese literature; b) The polemics of “art for art’s sake” or “art for life’s sake” during the period 1935-39; and c) the two first Marxist theorists in Vietnam: Nguyễn Bách Khoa, who approaches Marxism from Taine's sociology and Freud's psychoanalysis; and Đặng Thai Mai, who was educated in the French education system but believed that the “light coming from the North” (China), with his *Văn học khái luận* (Outline of Literary Theory) (1944), to be the first work of literary theory in Vietnam.

The second part of the thesis attempts to analyze the process of change by Vietnamese writers and artists from patriotism to Marxism and then Maoism, using it as a means of explaining the dominant position of Maoist-style socialist realism in Vietnam. This part will point out that

- (i) in 1945, when the war between France and Vietnam broke out, most Vietnamese artists and writers participated in the resistance, and accepted the leadership of the Viet Minh, a communist-led front, because of their shared patriotism rather than the Marxist “enlightenment”;
- (ii) in seeking a new writing method in a war situation, Vietnamese writers encountered socialist realism which was officially endorsed by the Communist Party;
- (iii) socialist realism came directly from China, as shown by Mao Zedong at the Yan'n Forum on Literature and Art in 1942; and finally,

(iv) it was the very war culture which nurtured the Maoist-style socialist realism, at least until 1975, when the Vietnamese war ended.

This part will include several chapters, focusing on three periods: the August 1945 Revolution, the French War and the American War. During these periods, the most influential factors affecting literary thinking were Maoism and the culture of war. One of the most striking characteristics of these periods was the lack of professional theorists. The top leaders of the Vietnamese Communist Party were the chief proponents of literary discourse, issuing guidelines for discussion of all literary problems. The canonical texts of literary theory underpinned the leaders' pronouncements in conferences and meetings along with letters sent to writers and artists. Of these leaders, there were two authoritative figures: Trường Chinh (1907-88) and Tố Hữu (1920-2002).

The third part of the thesis examines the crisis and subsequent bankruptcy of socialist realism in Vietnam. This part includes two chapters: the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair in the mid-1950s and the *đổi mới* movement in the mid-1980s which have much in common: both emerged during peacetime; both called for greater intellectual freedom and artistic expression and license; both were constituted by the most fervent and gifted writers and artists of the age; both paralleled the democratization movements in the socialist world; and finally, both were criticized and restricted by the government. However, while the dissidents in the first affair ended up in court and re-education camps, those in the *đổi mới* movement have continued to write and witness the death of socialist realism.

Socialist realism as a theory and as a creative method was at an end not because of the dissidents' criticism or any more persuasive theory but mainly because of the market economy which was adopted by the Vietnamese Communist Party in its *đổi mới* policies in the mid-1980s. It can be said that the enemy of socialist realism is peace. The market economy is its real mortal enemy.

Terminology

There are several terms used in this thesis which should be explained.

First, the names of the Vietnamese Communist Party. During more than sixty years, the Vietnamese Communist Party changed its name twice. It was initially known as the Indochinese Communist Party (1930-51), then as the Vietnamese Workers' Party (1951-76), and finally as the Vietnamese Communist Party (from December 1976 to the present). In this thesis, for the sake of brevity and clarity, the party is referred to as Vietnamese Communist Party.

The term “socialist realism” should be distinguished from critical realism, social realism, and realism in general. The key concept of each is realism, which was first used in France in 1826⁷¹ and in England from the 1850s.⁷² Although realism is seen by several theorists as a “notoriously tricky term,”⁷³ and one of those words “whose range of possible meanings runs from the pedantically exact to the cosmically vague”,⁷⁴ it can be defined in two respects. As a philosophical term, realism usually means “a belief in the reality of ideas and was contrasted with nominalism, which considered ideas only names or abstractions”.⁷⁵ As a literary term, realism is used in two ways: (i) to identify a literary movement of the nineteenth century, especially in prose fiction (beginning with Balzac in France, George Eliot in England, and William Dean Howells in America); and (ii) to indicate a creative method which, based on the assumption that the novel imitates reality, and aims at depicting reality as it is.⁷⁶

⁷¹ F. W. J. Hemmings (ed.) (1974), *The Age of Realism*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 9.

⁷² René Wellek (1963), *Concepts of Criticism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 1.

⁷³ Pam Morris (2003), *Realism*, London: Routledge, p. 9.

⁷⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 2.

⁷⁵ René Wellek (1963), *ibid.*

⁷⁶ For further information on realism, see Pam Morris (2003), *Realism*, London: Routledge; Dario Villanueva (1997), *Theories of Literary Realism*, translated by Mihai I. Spariosu and Santiago Barcia-Castanon, New York: State University of New York Press; J.P. Stern (1973), *On Realism*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. Georg Lukacs (1978), *Studies in European Realism*, translated by Edith Bone, London: The Merlin Press; Nicholas Boyle and Martin Swales (eds.) (1986), *Realism in European Literature. Essays in Honour of J.P. Stern*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and Boris Suchkov (1973), *A History of Realism*, Moscow: Progress Publishers; and Chapter “The concept of realism in literary scholarship”, in René Wellek (1963), *Concepts of Criticism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, pp. 222-255.

Realism includes a variety of modes: psychological realism, magical realism, critical realism, social realism, socialist realism, etc. In contrast to psychological realism, which concentrates on the depth and complexity of human inner life, socialist realism concentrates on the historical development of modern societies. Magical realism focuses on seizing the paradox of the union of opposites: the real and the fantastic, the pre-colonial past and the post-industrial present, the rational view of reality and the acceptance of the supernatural as prosaic reality. Socialist realism, however, focuses on representing the economic and political relationships between classes and the necessity of revolution. In contrast to social realism, which, as C. Vaughan James remarks, “refer[s] to the artist's concern with social themes”, and is “mainly a nineteenth century phenomenon”, socialist realism is a twentieth century development, devoting itself primarily to political dimensions.⁷⁷

Socialist realism is also different from critical realism. It should, however, be noted at the outset that the term ‘critical realism’ is used differently in different disciplines. As a philosophical term, critical realism, which is associated with the British philosopher Roy Bhaskar, was born of a critique of the positivist approach which had dominated many of the social sciences since the 1930s.⁷⁸ It is concerned with the interplay of mental perception and external reality: in the critical realist view, “there exists both an external world independently of human consciousness, and at the same time a dimension which includes our socially determined knowledge about reality.”⁷⁹ However, as José López and Garry Potter emphasize, this philosophical and scientific [critical] realism bears no relation to ‘[critical] realism’ as the term has sometimes been used with respect to literature.⁸⁰ As a literary term, critical realism is often used as a synonym for ‘realism’, the nineteenth century literary movement, including such great writers as Honoré de

⁷⁷ C. Vaughan James (1973), *Soviet Socialist Realism, Origins and Theory*, London: Macmillan, p. 14.

⁷⁸ Berth Danermark et al. (1997), *Explaining Society, Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*, London: Routledge, pp. 4-5.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ José López and Garry Potter (2001), *After Postmodernism, an Introduction to Critical Realism*, London: Athlone Press, p. 181.

Balzac, Gustave Flaubert and Emile Zola in France, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, and George Gissing in England, Ivan Tourgenev and Leo Tolstoy in Russia, and Henry James and Theodore Dreiser in the United States. This critical realism aims only to reflect and criticize reality whereas socialist realism seeks to change reality and glorify every achievement in the process of socialist formation. Georg Lukács recognizes another difference between critical realism and socialist realism: while critical realists attempt to describe socialism from the outside, socialist realists, based on a concrete socialist perspective, describe “the forces working towards socialism from the inside.”⁸¹

In other words, socialist realism is a product of communism, formulated in 1932 and officially adopted in the Soviet Union in 1934, on the promise that a reflection of reality always combines an expression of communist ideals with the struggle for the victory of communism.

Typography

To avoid confusion and possible misunderstandings, all Vietnamese names and words used throughout this thesis have been written with their accents and full typographical marks, as used in Vietnam. For example, without tone-marks, Trường Chinh (the theorist and Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party in the 1940s and 1950s) and Trung Chính (a Marxist scholar) would appear as “Truong Chinh”.

For the sake of consistency, all Chinese names and places are written using the Pinyin romanization system which was officially adopted by the People’s Republic of Chinese government in 1979 and has come to be widely used by the world media and publishers: Dao (instead of Tao), Mao Zedong (instead of Mao Tse-tung), Du Fu (instead of Tu Fu), Li Bai (instead of Li Po), Song dynasty (instead of Sung), and Yan’an (instead of Yenan) and so forth.

⁸¹ Georg Lukács (1963), *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, translated from the German by John and Necke Mander, London: Merlin Press, p. 93.

Titles of Vietnamese and French books are written according to Vietnamese and French conventions: with some exceptions (e.g. proper nouns), only the first letter of the first word is written in capitals. For example, *Văn học Việt Nam dưới chế độ cộng sản* whereas its equivalent English will be *Vietnamese Literature under the Communist Regime*.

PART ONE

The Importation of Socialist Realism into Vietnam

CHAPTER ONE

Western Influence on Modern Vietnamese Literature

The history of relations between Vietnam and Western countries may be traced back to the middle of the sixteenth century, when the first Portuguese merchants arrived in Faifo, now Hội An, a coastal village about thirty kilometers south of Đà Nẵng, where they established a station to trade with Macao. During the following centuries many other Westerners, including Dutch, British, Italian, Spanish and French, frequently visited Vietnam in order to do business or propagate the Christian faith.¹ Most merchants failed to make a profit as they had done in other Asian countries, and so, by the seventeenth century, they closed their offices and moved elsewhere. Only the Christian missionaries remained, disregarding the menacing stance and terrorizing practices of the authorities, who regarded Christianity as paganism and the foreigners' presence as a threat which might portend Western encroachment. But those very missionaries left deep imprints on Vietnamese history and culture, especially through the importation of Christianity and the creation of *quốc ngữ*, the roman transliteration of the Vietnamese spoken language.² However, this contact had no significant impact in the realm of literature, apart from bringing new inspiration to a few poets who had embraced the new faith but unfortunately had no first-rate talent.³

Western influence on Vietnamese literature became noticeable only in the final years of the nineteenth century, when French rule, which had been imposed on the

¹ See Ralph B. Smith (1968), *Vietnam and the West*, London: Heinemann.

² Phan Phát Huồn (1962 and 1965), *Việt Nam giáo sử*, two vols., Saigon: Cứu Thế tùng thư; Trương Bá Cần (1992), *Công giáo Đàng Trong thời Giám mục Pigneau*, Ho Chi Minh City: Tủ sách Đại Đoàn kết; Đỗ Quang Chính (1972), *Lịch sử chữ quốc ngữ 1620-1659*, Saigon: Tủ sách Ra Khơi.

³ See Võ Long Tê (1965), *Lịch sử văn học công giáo Việt Nam*, Saigon: Tư Duy; and N.I. Niculin (2000), *Văn học Việt Nam và giao lưu quốc tế*, Hanoi: Nxb Giáo Dục, pp. 540-559.

country, brought greater changes than any that had taken place during the preceding two thousand years.⁴ Under French pressure, the traditional system of education, based on the old Chinese pattern, was abolished; *quốc ngữ* gradually became dominant;⁵ and a new intelligentsia emerged, replacing the old Confucian scholar-gentry class and assuming the role of intellectual leaders in society. These three factors acted strongly and effectively upon Vietnamese literature and opened it up to new horizons: developments in this period are conventionally credited with taking Vietnamese literature from the Middle Ages to modernity.

Owing to the strong influence of Chinese culture, particularly during the Tang and Song dynasties, the closed-door policy of most feudal states, and the stability of the socio-cultural and economic pattern, pre-colonial Vietnamese literature was almost at a standstill, with no significant development or innovation, so that the problem of periodization has always been a complex challenge. After some trials and failures, most literary historians came to the view that nine whole centuries, from the tenth to the end of the nineteenth, constitute only one period, which they named either “ancient” (cổ), “classical” (cổ điển), “feudal” (phong kiến), “successive dynasties” (lich triều), or more recently, “Middle-Ages” (trung đại).⁶ According to some scholars, Vietnamese Middle-Ages literature can be characterized by one distinct feature:

⁴ Peter A. DeCaro (2003), *Rhetoric of Revolt. Ho Chi Minh's Discourse for Revolution*, Westport: Praeger, p. 1.

⁵ For a detailed description of this, see Hoàng Ngọc Thành, “Quốc ngữ and the Development of the Modern Vietnamese Literature”, in W. F. Vella (ed.) (1973), *Aspects of Vietnamese History*, Honolulu: Asian Studies at Hawaii 8, pp. 191-236; J. DeFrancis (1977), *Colonialism and Language Policy in Vietnam*, The Hague: Mouton Publishers; Nguyễn Văn Trung (1975), *Chữ, văn quốc ngữ thời kỳ đầu Pháp thuộc*, Saigon: Nam Sơn; Nguyễn Phú Phong, “L'avènement de quốc ngữ et l'évolution de la littérature vietnamienne”, *Cahiers d'études vietnamiennes*, no. 9 (1987), pp. 3-18; reprinted in *The Vietnam Forum*, no. 13 (1990), pp. 77-90.

⁶ Several scholars used the term “trung đại” (Middle-Ages) to indicate pre-colonial literature in Vietnam. These include Lê Trí Viễn, “Một đặc trưng của văn học Trung đại Việt Nam: vô ngã”, *Tạp chí Khoa học Xã hội*, no. 9 (1991), pp. 70-76; Đặng Thanh Lê, “Nho giáo và văn học Trung đại Việt Nam” in Vũ Khiêu (ed.) (1990), *Nho giáo xưa và nay*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, pp. 138-146; Trần Thị Băng Thanh, “Thử phân định hai mạch cảm hứng trong dòng văn học Việt Nam mang đậm dấu ấn Phật giáo thời Trung đại”, *Tạp chí Văn Học* (Hanoi), no. 4 (1992), pp. 30-35; and Bùi Duy Tân, “Đặng Thai Mai với nền văn học trung đại Việt Nam”, in Đặng Thanh Lê et al. (eds.), *Đặng Thai Mai và văn học*, Nghệ An: Nxb Nghệ An, 1994, pp. 142-155.

impersonality.⁷ It can be argued, however, that together with that feature, two others must be mentioned: its syncretism and its normativeness.

From the syncretic perspective, literature was not seen as an independent entity, as something to be considered in its own right - subject to its own laws and its own reason for being - and differentiated from historical, philosophical or administrative and regulated examination writings. In this view, aesthetic consciousness was not divorced from moral consciousness; art was not divorced from erudition; literature was not recognized as a pure belle-lettristic type.⁸

Moreover, based on the psychology of the ancestral cult and on the Confucian assumption that all ideal examples belong to the past, Vietnamese writers in the Middle Ages regarded all age-old achievements as standards of perfection, according to which they wrote and as the basis on which they evaluated contemporary talents. These attitudes resulted in normativeness, which had four main manifestations: in the field of literary theory, the dominant view of literature was as a vehicle of the Way (Dao), a product of Song neo-Confucianism; in respect to literary genres, preferential treatment was given to poetry rather than to prose; in prose, preferential treatment was given to functional rather than imaginative writings; and in respect to literary conventions, the traditional, cliché-ridden allusions, motifs, themes, poetic dictions and symmetries of structure were fashionable.

All those norms contributed to limiting the expression of the poet's self. However, impersonality was not only a corollary of normativeness but also a manifestation of traditional oriental ideologies and the product of an enduring feudal system and a backward agricultural economy. The three major philosophical schools which profoundly influenced Vietnamese thinking were Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism: all of which devalue, if not deny, individuality. Buddhism regards the

⁷ Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân (1967), *Thi nhân Việt Nam*, Saigon: Thiều Quang, (originally published in 1942), p. 34; and Lê Trí Viễn, *ibid.*

⁸ For more details, see Trần Đình Hượu, “Thực tại, cái thực và vấn đề chủ nghĩa hiện thực trong văn học Việt Nam” in Phong Lê (ed.) (1990), *Văn học và hiện thực*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, pp. 11-83.

individual as ephemeral, being comprised of a transitory aggregate of the five skandhas (form, sensation, perception, emotional state and consciousness), which are in a constant state of flux. Daoism sees the individual as “a transient creature whose nature is to change, to develop from the Ultimate Source and to return thereto at death”.⁹ Confucianism perceives the individual as part of a social structure: preference is given to the relationship between the individual and others in the community but not to the individual himself or herself, hence it highly values ritual behavior (*lễ* in Vietnamese and *li* in Chinese), which regulates the expression of human feelings, integrates the individual into the social context, and provides a continuous link between the present and the past. “In each of these functions, ritual serves to make human behavior predictable and uniform, more expressive of the common social role than of the temperament and values of any one individual.”¹⁰ The foundation of feudalism was the consciousness of the order of precedence, a morality-centered tendency and a predominance of the common over the particular. A backward agricultural economy on the one hand encouraged and nourished the system of the extended family because the family was the basic economic unit in society, and on the other hand made human beings totally dependent on nature. People feared and hence revered nature, regarding it as the symbol of greatness and sublimity. Both Confucianism and Daoism encouraged people to imitate nature: to Daoists, heroes are those who have become self-contained in the Dao (Way) of their own minds; to Confucians, human society should be structured parallel to the hierarchical order of the cosmos and in order to achieve this goal, everyone must study Nature's virtues. This is why, in respect to social life, the traditional poets usually secluded themselves in nature, and in respect to creative activities, they preferred to write about nature. It may be said that both feudalism and the agricultural economy, in support of the great philosophies, played their part in preventing the development of individual consciousness. As a result, in contrast to the romantic notion of the individual self in nineteenth-century Western literature, which stressed sentimentality and the authenticity of personal feelings,

⁹ Robert E. Hegel, “An Exploration of the Chinese Literary Self”, in R.E. Hegel and R.C. Hessney (eds.) (1985), *Expressions of Self in Chinese Literature*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Vietnamese traditional poets were conditioned to think that poetry was a mere chorus of the cosmos resounding in their souls. Consequently, all poets attempted to maximally objectivize their feelings: there was no 'I', not even an individualized persona in Vietnamese Middle-Ages literature.¹¹

In the second part of the nineteenth century, the awkward, perplexed and sometimes pusillanimous reactions of the Court of Huế to the French invasion made the Confucian literati at first puzzled and later extremely discontented.¹² Traditionally, according to common beliefs, they had considered the nation and the King as identical. Loyalty to the King (trung quân) was synonymous with patriotism (ái quốc). They then faced a terrible dilemma: if they executed the King's order and ceased struggling against French aggression, they would be traitors to their country; if they protested against the King and sought to defend the country's sovereignty, they would be convicted of rebellion. Most literati oscillated between these two political poles. Eventually, many people such as Trương Định (1820-64), Phan Tòng (?-1868), Nguyễn Đình Chiểu (1822-88), and Phan Văn Trị (1830-1910), just to name a few, decided to fight the enemy to the bitter end without regard to the King's desires. For them, it was the first time in Vietnamese history that the concepts of nation and king were consciously and drastically separated from each other. Consequently, the subject status of the people became that of a citizen. While subjects (thần dân) were attached to the King, citizens (công dân) were attached to the nation-state; while subjects were passive people who merely awaited and obeyed the King's orders, citizens were active

¹¹ Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân (1967), *op. cit.*, pp. 52-54.

¹² For historical accounts of the Hue Court's reaction to the French aggression, see Phan Khoang (1971), *Việt Nam Pháp thuộc sử*, Saigon: Phủ Quốc Vụ Khanh đặc trách văn hoá.; David G. Marr (1971), *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925*, Berkeley: University of California, pp. 22-43; M.W. McLeod (1991), *The Vietnamese Response to French Intervention 1862-1874*, particularly Chapter 4, pp. 61-75; Trương Bửu Lâm (1967), *Patterns of Vietnamese Response to Foreign Intervention, 1858-1900*, New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asian Studies; Charles Fourniau (1989), *Annam-Tonkin, 1885-1896: Lettrés et paysans vietnamiens face à la conquête coloniale*, Paris: Editions l'Harmattan; and Yoshiharu Tsuboi (1993), *Nước Đại Nam đối diện với Pháp và Trung Hoa*, translated from the French, *L'Empire Vietnamien face à la France et à la Chine 1847-1885*, by Nguyễn Đình Đầu, Hanoi: Hội Sử Học Việt Nam..

people who were involved in finding the best way to save their country.¹³ As citizens, people had enough self-confidence to lampoon the mandarins' mistakes and even criticize those of the King; and thus, satirical writings appeared. In struggling for independence they had the need to gather force and encourage their comrades and fellow-countrymen; and thus, political literature came into being.

The development of satirical and political trends in Vietnamese literature at the turn of the century, represented by such great poets as Nguyễn Khuyến (1835-1909), Trần Tế Xương (1870-1907), Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, Phan Bội Châu (1867-1940), and Phan Chu Trinh (1872-1926), was a new and very remarkable phenomenon.¹⁴ Both trends could be seen as indirect impacts of the French invasion.

Satirical and political trends, in their turn, deeply affected the development of Vietnamese literature. In order to be effective, political poetry had to concern itself with the issue of persuading the populace, and therefore it adopted vernacular forms of writing, which led to a campaign for the renovation of the literary language in the first two decades of the twentieth century.¹⁵ So too was the concern of satirical poetry: it required currency in subject-matter, concreteness in description, and a close relationship between the author and his/her audience. These led to many important changes in literature. The first was the change in content: the Dao and the static natural landscapes were replaced by realistically observed phenomena. The second was the change in the mode of expression: the classical mode - inclining to generalization, emphasizing the immutable principles of the universe, and the permanent innermost

¹³ Trần Văn Giàu (1983), *Trong dòng chủ lưu của văn học Việt Nam: Tư tưởng yêu nước*, Ho Chi Minh City: Nxb thành phố HCM, pp. 187-230.

¹⁴ Prior to 1862, there were several satirical and political poems but these were too scattered to form a literary trend. More details about the satirical and political literature of this period can be found in Trần Đình Hượu and Lê Chí Dũng (1988), *Văn học Việt Nam giai đoạn giao thời 1900-1930*, Hanoi: Nxb Đại Học và Trung Học Chuyên Nghiệp; and Đặng Thai Mai (1974), *Văn thơ cách mạng Việt Nam đầu thế kỷ 20*, Hanoi: Văn Học.

¹⁵ For example, the Đông Kinh Free School movement between 1907 and 1908. Details of this movement can be found in Nguyễn Hiến Lê (1974), *Đông Kinh nghĩa thực*, Saigon: Lá Bối; Vũ Đức Bằng, "The Dong Kinh Free School Movement 1907-1908", in W. F. Vella (ed.) (1973), op. cit., pp. 30-45; and Nguyễn Văn Xuân (1970), *Phong trào Duy Tân*, Saigon: Lá Bối, pp. 273-291.

feelings of human beings - was replaced by the new mode, which required the ability of observation and imagination as well as the creation of comic characters and situations. The third was the aesthetic criterion: for classical poets, the high artistic quality had been a polished, stylized and allusive-ridden expression; for satirical and political poets, it was a simple, rustic and colloquial one, which was able to elicit an immediate response in the readers' minds. It is not surprising that in Vietnamese literature, realism appeared in the late nineteenth-century satirical poetry before it flowered in the works of modern Western-influenced writers following the decade of the 1930s.¹⁶ This also explains the main renovating role of Trần Tế Xương, one of the last and most unlucky of the Confucian scholars.¹⁷

Apart from the above indirect impacts, there were other more direct and decisive Western influences on Vietnamese literature. First of all, Western thought shifted the writers' attitude from a China-oriented perspective to a West-oriented one. In the traditional era, Vietnamese literati knew almost nothing but Chinese culture, which was regarded as a perfect model. The bitter contact with modern and powerful France made people question all the old idols. Early in 1905, when attempting to go abroad in order to seek outside support for his revolutionary activities, Phan Bội Châu, an outstanding Confucian scholar and one of the most eminent revolutionaries of the following decades, considered his journey primarily as a search for new idols following the “death” of Confucian deities. He wrote in “Xuất dương lưu biệt” (Farewell before Going Overseas): “Hiền thánh lưu nhiên, tụng diệc si” (The sages died long ago; to read their books would cause us to become more and more besotted).¹⁸ Other men of letters in Phan Bội Châu's generation, because of their ignorance of French, continued to read Chinese books, being particularly interested in “New Books” (Tân Thư), a series of works that introduced Western currents of

¹⁶ Đỗ Đức Dục (1989), *Về chủ nghĩa hiện thực thời đại Nguyễn Du*, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 165; and Trần Đình Hượu in Phong Lê (ed.) (1990), *op. cit.*, pp. 72 and 78.

¹⁷ See Thanh Tâm Tuyền, “Xuân nhớ Tú Xương”, *Thời Tập*, số xuân Giáp Dần (1974); and Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, “120 năm sinh Tú Xương”, *Văn* (California), no. 93 (March 1990), pp. 37-42.

¹⁸ Quoted in Nguyễn Huệ Chi (1983), *Mấy vẻ mặt thi ca Việt Nam*, Hanoi: Tác Phẩm Mới, p. 241.

thought. They preferred Kang Youwei (1858-1927) and Liang Qichao (1873-1929) because, apart from their exquisite literary talents, these two writers helped them understand some of the great Western thinkers such as Charles-Louis de Montesquieu, Voltaire (pseudonym of Francois-Marie Arouet) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.¹⁹ It was these very Confucian scholars who initiated and led the “European Rain and American Wind” (Mưa Âu gió Mỹ) movement in the first decades of the twentieth century.²⁰ Huỳnh Thúc Kháng (1876-1947) revealed in his *Phan Châu Trinh niên biểu đồ* (Phan Châu Trinh's Chronology) that, owing to the “New Books”, Phan Châu Trinh, who knew no French, was able to deeply understand Western thought as early as 1903, when he was serving in the imperial Ministry of Rites in Huế.²¹ After coming home from France (1925), Phan Châu Trinh's admiration for French eighteenth-century philosophers became more profound. In Trần Huy Liệu's reminiscence, when first meeting someone, Phan Châu Trinh always asked the question: “Have you read Rousseau's *Contrat Social* or Montesquieu's *Esprit des Lois*?”²²

Western-educated intellectuals were more enthusiastic about reading and translating Western and especially French books into Vietnamese. It may be said that, along with the appearance and development of satirical and political writings, translation was a striking phenomenon in the period between 1862 and 1932. During the previous nine centuries, only a few dozen works had been translated and most were short poems. Translations of works in prose were very rare, and of these, Nguyễn Thế Nghi's sixteenth-century translation of Nguyễn Dữ's *Truyện kỳ mạn lục* (Vast Record of Strange Tales) was the earliest preserved. In both verse and prose, these works were translations from the original Chinese.²³ There were perhaps only two translations from

¹⁹ Trương Chính (1997), *Tuyển tập*, vol. 1, Hanoi: Văn Học, pp. 135-170.

²⁰ Trần Huy Liệu (1991), *Hồi ký*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, p. 29.

²¹ Quoted in Nguyễn Q. Thắng (1992), *Phan Châu Trinh, cuộc đời và tác phẩm*, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 41.

²² Trần Huy Liệu (1991), *op. cit.*, p. 453.

²³ Viện Nghiên cứu Hán Nôm (1982), *Dịch từ Hán sang Việt, một khoa học, một nghệ thuật*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội; particularly the chapter “Một vấn đề về lịch sử và lý thuyết dịch của việc dịch Hán – Việt” by Mai Quốc Liên, pp. 46-55.

a Western language: one was *Phép giảng tám ngày cho kẻ muốn chịu phép rửa tội mà beà đạo thánh Đức Chúa Trời* (Catechismus) by Alexandre de Rhodes, published in Rome in the seventeenth century;²⁴ and the other was a versified translation of an episode in the *Bible* by Trịnh Tráng's sister, which, according to historian E. O. Berzin, though as yet unpublished, was sung by many believers in the streets.²⁵ From the end of the nineteenth century and particularly from the beginning of the twentieth century, the number of translations from both Chinese and French increased considerably. Several people became famous as professional translators.²⁶ The nation's two most noted scholars were also committed and productive translators: Phạm Quỳnh (1892-1945) and Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh (1892-1936). While Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh mainly translated romantic novels such as Alexandre Dumas' *Les trois mousquetaires*, Abbé Prévost's *Manon Lescaut*, J. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (through the French-translation, *Les voyages de Gulliver*) or Molière's comedies, Phạm Quỳnh concentrated on translating and introducing philosophical works such as Descartes' *Discours de la méthode*, Paul Gardon's *La vie sage*, Pascal's *Les pensées*, etc. In general, while Confucian scholars, through Chinese translations, devoted themselves to adopting new social and political theories for their revolutionary activities, Western-educated intellectuals seemed to be more interested in Western literary and philosophical values. While the former only sought to understand French eighteenth-century thinkers, the latter, after a short period of acquaintance with seventeenth and eighteenth-century literature, quickly absorbed nineteenth-century writers such as François René de Chateaubriand, Alphonse de Lamartine, Victor Hugo and Honoré de Balzac. The first translations from French were literary, and of these, the earliest and perhaps most favorite was La Fontaine's *Fables*, which had at least five translations prior to 1928.²⁷

²⁴ Nguyễn Khắc Kham (1966), *The Acceptance of Western Cultures in Vietnam*, Saigon: Ministry of Cultural and Social Affairs, p. 32; and Đỗ Quang Chính (1972), op. cit., pp. 87-90.

²⁵ Quoted in Đinh Gia Khánh, Bùi Duy Tân and Mai Cao Chương (1979), *Văn học Việt Nam thế kỷ X - nửa đầu thế kỷ XVIII*, vol. 2, Hanoi: Nxb Đại Học và Trung Học Chuyên Nghiệp, p.39.

²⁶ See Bằng Giang (1992), *Văn học quốc ngữ ở Nam Kỳ 1865-1930*, Ho Chi Minh City: Trẻ, pp. 236-274.

²⁷ These translations are: (i) *Truyện Phan Sa diễn ra quốc ngữ* by Trương Minh Ký (Guilland et

For Vietnamese writers of the first three decades of the twentieth century, translation was the best way of developing their writing skill. In ‘La poésie annamite’ (Vietnamese Poetry) which he wrote in French in 1931, Phạm Quỳnh stated:

At a time when language and human mind keep changing, Vietnamese writers cannot build a career on originality ... What they can do now to be of use is to translate Chinese and French masterpieces in order to enrich their own language and literature.²⁸

The second impact of the West on Vietnamese literature is partly due to the above mentioned translation practices. Indeed, thanks to translation, Vietnamese “will transform itself and become more refined. Harmonious, rhythmical and musical by nature, it will become charming because it will benefit greatly from French prose, whose features are precision, clarity and logical coherence.”²⁹

Until the French conquest, the Vietnamese had extremely few works of vernacular literature in prose.³⁰ The Vietnamese language was mainly used in the writing of poems. Consequently it was soft, subtle and musical, but had many defects. For example, it lacked abstract words, had few prefixes and suffixes in order to produce derivatives except for duplicative patterns. Moreover, it had no passive structure and only occasionally made use of noun and verb phrases because it contained very few classifiers, articles and prepositions; and as a result, its ability to expand sentences was limited. In Vietnamese traditional writings, sentences were often short. The relationship between the main and subordinate clauses was not clear, partly because there was no copulative and partly because writers were not used to using punctuation. Contact with Western literature, particularly through translation tasks,

Martinon, Saigon, 1884) (ii); *Truyện Tây dịch ra tiếng Nôm* by Đỗ Thận (Imprimerie F.H. Schneider, Hanoi, 1906); (iii) *Fables de La Fontaine* by G. Cordier (Imprimerie d'Extrême Orient, Hanoi, 1910); (iv) *Truyện Phan Sa diển ca quốc âm* by Đỗ Quang Đầu (Imprimerie de l'Union Nguyễn Văn Cù, Saigon, 1919); and (v) *Thơ ngụ ngôn của La Fontaine* by Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh (Trung Bắc Tân Văn, Hanoi, 1928).

²⁸ Quoted in Thanh Lăng (1967), *Bảng lược đồ văn học Việt Nam*, vol. 2, Saigon: Trình Bày, p. 202.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 201.

³⁰ Trương Chính (1997), op. cit., pp. 90-112.

helped Vietnamese writers discover many serious shortcomings in their language and hence make an effort to learn from French, not only with respect to vocabulary but also in the domain of syntax.

The quantity of scientific and technological terms increased rapidly from almost none at the turn of the century to about 40,000 words in 1945.³¹ However, the most crucial change was in syntax. After many trials and experiments, the Vietnamese gradually differentiated nouns from adjectives and verbs, graded adjectives by using particles denoting degree (*hơi*: a little, *khá*: fairly, *rất*: very) and words denoting comparison (*bằng*: as... as, *hơn*: more... than, *kém*: less... than, *nhất*: the most...), and built para-predicate structures in order to write complex sentences, sometimes very long but always coherent.³² If the sentences in Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh's writings had been quite jerky and clumsy, those in Phạm Quỳnh's became polished and refined, even though his style was still rather laborious because of a tendency to abuse Sino-Vietnamese terms. From 1932 onwards, thanks to the intelligent and effective reform effort of Tự Lực Văn Đoàn (the Self-Reliant Literary Group), Vietnamese syntax became not only more coherent but also so soft and clear that it could express subtle feelings as well as abstract thoughts.³³ With respect to syntax, the extent of change from *Đông Dương tạp chí* (Indochina Magazine, 1913-19) to *Phong Hoá* (Mores Weekly, 1932-36) was greater than that recorded over the next sixty years.

The third Western impact on Vietnamese literature resulted in the formation and completion of the genre system. Prior to 1862, in Vietnamese literature, poetry was regarded as superior to all other genres. Writings in prose, both in Sino-Vietnamese and the demotic script (chữ Nôm), were very few; if Sino-Vietnamese works are excluded, almost nothing is left. Through translation, writers gradually practiced some new genres and came up with new styles. Short stories in *quốc ngữ* made their

³¹ Nguyễn Khánh Toàn, "The Vietnamese Language", *Vietnam Courier* no. 49 (June 1976), p. 21.

³² For further details, see Phan Ngọc and Phạm Đức Dương (1983), *Tiếp xúc ngôn ngữ ở Đông Nam Á*, Hanoi: Viện Đông Nam Á, particularly pp. 201-350.

³³ Nguyễn Trác and Đái Xuân Ninh (1989), *Về Tự Lực văn đoàn*, Ho Chi Minh City: Nxb thành phố HCM, pp. 143-193.

appearance with Nguyễn Trọng Quản's (1865-1911) *Thầy Larazo Phiền* (Master Lazaro Phiền), which was published in 1887,³⁴ and provided an encouraging model to the brilliant generation of writers that was to follow. In the two hundred and ten issues of *Nam Phong tạp chí* (South Wind Magazine) from 1917 to 1934, there were thirty four short stories by seventeen authors,³⁵ the most prolific and gifted of whom were Phạm Duy Tồn (1883-1924) and Nguyễn Bá Học (1857-1921). The first two novels, *Hoàng Tố Anh hàm oan* (Hoang To Anh Suffers Injustice) by Trần Chánh Chiêu (1867-1919) and *Phan Yên ngoại sử tiết phụ gian truân* (The Miserable Life of a Chaste Widow in Phan Yen) by Trương Duy Toàn (1885-1957), were both published in 1910, although the term roman (novel) first appeared on the cover of *Hà Hương phong nguyệt* (The Love Story of Ha Huong) by Lê Hoàng Mưu (? - 1941?) later in 1915, and the term *kim thời tiểu thuyết* (modern fiction) in *Nghĩa hiệp kỳ duyên* (A Tale of Chivalrous Love) by Nguyễn Chánh Sắt (1869-1947) in 1919.³⁶ Chronicles and essays, nascent in the eighteenth century with *Vũ trung tùy bút* (Notes Written in the Rain) by Phạm Đình Hổ (1768-1839), *Tang thương ngẫu lục* (Record of Vicissitudes) by Phạm Đình Hổ and Nguyễn Án (1770-1815), *Công dư tiếp ký* (Quick Writings in Spare Time) by Vũ Phương Đê (1697- ?), *Thượng kinh ký sự* (Chronicle of a Visit to the Capital) by Lê Hữu Trác (1720-1792), and *Thượng kinh phong vật chí* (Description of the Landscapes and Personalities of the Capital) by an anonymous author at the end of the eighteenth century, developed and flourished after 1862, pioneered by Trương Vĩnh Ký (1837-98) in his *Chuyến đi Bắc kỳ năm Ất Hợi* (Voyage to Tonking in the

³⁴ For critical introductions to this short story, see Thế Uyên, “Truyện ngắn quốc ngữ đầu tiên của Việt Nam: Thầy Lazaro Phiền của Nguyễn Trọng Quản”, *Văn Lang* (California) no. 2 (December 1991), pp. 93-119; Bằng Giang (1992), *Văn học quốc ngữ ở Nam kỳ 1865-1930*, Ho Chi Minh City: Trẻ, pp. 124-128; Bùi Đức Tịnh (1992), *Những bước đầu của báo chí, tiểu thuyết và thơ mới*, Ho Chi Minh City: Nxb thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, pp. 197-207; Nguyễn Văn Trung (1987), *Thầy Phiền*, Ho Chi Minh City: Đại học Sư phạm thành phố Hồ Chí Minh; Nguyễn Q. Thắng (1990), *Tiến trình văn nghệ miền Nam*, An Giang: Nxb Tổng Hợp, pp. 265-268; and Trần Văn Giàu et al. (eds.) (1988), *Địa lý văn hoá thành phố Hồ Chí Minh*, vol. 2, Ho Chi Minh City: Nxb thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, pp. 233-234.

³⁵ Lại Văn Hùng (ed. with an introduction) (1989), *Truyện ngắn Nam Phong*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, p. 20.

³⁶ Trần Văn Giàu et al. (eds.) (1988), op. cit., p. 224.

Year At Hoi), which was published in 1876.³⁷ Modern drama first appeared in Hanoi in 1920 with *Le malade imaginaire* by Molière, translated by Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh and then *Chén thuốc độc* (The Cup of Poison) by Vũ Đình Long (1901-60), performed and published in 1921.

Aside from creative writings, writers gradually learned to pay close attention to literary criticism. In the traditional era, no works of literary criticism, theory or history were written.³⁸ Writers and poets, in some rare cases, expressed their thoughts about literature in general, or certain works of art in particular, in the form of a preface, an epilogue, a poem or a letter sent to a friend: all were brief and oversimplified.³⁹ The term “literary history” first appeared in Lê Du's *Nữ lưu văn học sử*, published in 1929, but this book was only an anthology of women writers with a brief biography of each poet. Pioneering in the study of Vietnamese literary history was Dương Quảng Hàm (1898-1946), who, in the “Chronicle Chart of Sino-Vietnamese Literature” of his *Quốc văn trích diễm* (Excerpts from National Literature), published in 1925, attempted to give an overview of the growth of Vietnamese literature. However, it was only a short chapter in which Dương Quảng Hàm limited his task to periodization and listing typical authors for each period. Based on this sketch, Dương Quảng Hàm continued his research and, sixteen years later, published his major work, *Việt Nam văn học sử yếu* (Outline History of Vietnamese Literature), which was used as a textbook in high schools throughout the forties and fifties and became itself a sourcebook of literary precedent that served later critics and historians down to the present day. During the period between 1925 and 1941, apart from Dương Quảng Hàm, other scholars also concentrated their efforts on studying Vietnamese literary history, mostly focusing on certain classical authors. Here, mention must be made of Nguyễn Hữu Tiến (1874-1941) with his *Giai nhân dị mặc* (An Extraordinary Woman Writer, 1926) and Lê

³⁷ This book was translated into English by P.J. Honey (1982), *Voyage to Tonking in the Year At Hoi* (1876), London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

³⁸ Lại Nguyên Ân (1998), *Đọc lại người trước, đọc lại người xưa*, Hanoi: Nxb Hội Nhà Văn, pp. 304-6.

³⁹ See Nguyễn Minh Tấn et al. (eds.) (1981), *Từ trong di sản*, Hanoi: Tác Phẩm Mới; Đỗ Văn Hỷ (1993), *Người xưa bàn về văn chương*, vol. 1, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội; and Phương Lưu (1985), *Về một quan niệm văn chương cổ Việt Nam*, Hanoi: Giáo Dục.

Thuốc (1890-1975) with his *Sự nghiệp và thơ văn của Uy Viễn tướng công Nguyễn Công Trứ* (Nguyễn Công Trứ, his Career and Literary Works, 1928).

In the field of literary criticism, the first work was published in 1933: *Phê bình cáo luận* (Criticism and Essays) by Thiệu Sơn (1907-77). However, before that date, in *Đông Dương tạp chí*, issues one to fifty, there had been eighteen book reviews by eleven authors.⁴⁰ In *Nam Phong tạp chí*, Phạm Quỳnh wrote critical assessments of Nguyễn Du's *Truyện Kiều*,⁴¹ Đoàn Như Khuê's *Một tấm lòng*,⁴² Nguyễn Khắc Hiếu's *Giấc mộng con*,⁴³ Nguyễn Văn Thành's *Văn tế trận vong tướng sĩ*,⁴⁴ and Phạm Duy Tồn's *Sống chết mặc bay*.⁴⁵ Besides these, some critical articles on the *Tale of Kiều* were also written by Vũ Đình Long,⁴⁶ Nguyễn Tường Tam,⁴⁷ Ngô Đức Kế,⁴⁸ and Huỳnh Thúc Kháng.⁴⁹ None of these articles really constitute literary criticism in the strict sense of the term. All were dogmatic, inclined to criticize the contents of the art works, particularly their moral and ethical significance, rather than to evaluate their aesthetic values. Most of these writers were still heavily influenced by neo-Confucianism.

⁴⁰ Thanh Lăng (1967), op. cit., p. 299.

⁴¹ Phạm Quỳnh, “Truyện Kiều”, *Nam Phong* 1919; reprinted in *Thượng Chi văn tập*, vol. 3, Hanoi: Éditions Alexandre de Rhodes, 1943, pp. 91-149.

⁴² “Phê bình thơ văn mới: Một tấm lòng của Đoàn Như Khuê”, *Nam Phong* 1918; reprinted in *Thượng Chi văn tập*, vol. 2, Hanoi: Éditions Alexandre de Rhodes, 1943, pp. 65-71.

⁴³ “Phê bình Giấc mộng con của Tân Đà”, *Nam Phong* no. 7 (1917).

⁴⁴ “Tựa bài Tế tướng sĩ văn”, *Nam Phong* 1918, reprinted in *Thượng Chi văn tập*, vol. 2, pp. 61-63.

⁴⁵ “Phê bình truyện Sống chết mặc bay”, *Nam Phong* no. 18 (1918).

⁴⁶ Vũ Đình Long, “Nhân vật Truyện Kiều”, *Nam Phong* nos. 68, 69 and 70 (1923); “Triết lý và luân lý Truyện Kiều”, *Nam Phong*, no. 71 (1923), and “Văn chương Truyện Kiều”, nos. 81, 83, 85 and 87 (1924).

⁴⁷ “Mấy lời bình luận về văn chương Truyện Kiều”, *Nam Phong*, no. 79 (January 1924), pp. 30-37.

⁴⁸ “Chánh học cùng tà thuyết”, *Hữu Thanh*, no. 21 (September 1, 1924).

⁴⁹ “Chánh học cùng tà thuyết có phải là vấn đề chung không?”, *Tiếng Dân*, no. 317 (1930), reprinted in Nguyễn Văn Trung (n.d.), *Vụ án Truyện Kiều*, Los Alamitos: Xuân Thu, pp. 57-62; “Lại vấn đề chánh học cùng tà thuyết”, *Tiếng Dân*, nos. 326, 327 and 328 (1930).

The fourth Western factor impacting strongly on Vietnamese literature was the advent of writing as a profession. Although the Vietnamese have traditionally been proud of their so-called “land of poesy” (nước thơ), where almost everyone enjoyed writing and reading poetry, no one was able to live by his/her pen in the pre-colonial period. Literature was attached to education and regarded as a traditional route into the bureaucracy. People attended school, practiced their literary skills in order to pass the civil service examinations, received their bachelor's or doctor's degrees, and then became imperial officials; and commonly known as mandarins, they would live a prosperous life thanks to the salary and perquisites (bổng lộc) given them by the Court. That is why, upon failing his examination, Trần Tế Xương (1870-1907), a great poet at the turn of the century, moaned in grief:

Một việc văn chương thôi cũng nhảm

Trăm năm thân thể có ra gì.⁵⁰

(The literary path becomes a cul-de-sac

My life has not been worth much!)

Beyond the triennial examination, literature was merely a kind of gentle entertainment or, as some believed, a way of “carrying” the Dao in order to educate people and “leave a good name for thousands of generations” (Lưu danh thiên cổ). It did not matter whether writers received any recognition from society. If there was any, it was very rare. In some lucky cases, they would get a reward of a few bars of ten liang of silver and one or two rolls of silk from the king, as in the cases of Lê Quý Đôn (1726-84) under King Lê Hiến Tông, Phan Huy Chú (1782-1840) under Emperor Minh Mạng and Lê Ngô Cát (1827-75) under Emperor Tự Đức.⁵¹ But the reward was so pitiful that Lê Ngô Cát, after receiving it, allegedly felt depressed and wrote:

Vua khen thặng Cát có tài

Ban cho cái khổ với hai đồng tiền.⁵²

⁵⁰ Tú Xương (1987), *Tác phẩm và giai thoại*, Hà Nam Ninh: Hội văn nghệ Hà Nam Ninh, p. 91.

⁵¹ Nguyễn Hiến Lê (1986), *Mười câu chuyện văn chương*, California: Văn Nghệ, p. 115.

⁵² Hoàng Ngọc Phách and Kiều Thu Hoạch (1988), *Giai thoại văn học Việt Nam*, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 215.

(In praising Cat as a talented poet
The King bestowed on him a loin-cloth and two piastres.)

After 1862, some printers were brought from France to Vietnam.⁵³ In addition, *quốc ngữ* was relatively easy to learn, and a new middle-class emerged in the cities and townships. These were favorable conditions that pushed forward press and publishing operations,⁵⁴ and together with these, writers' professionalism in literary activity. The number of writers living by their pens gradually increased. Tấn Đà (pen name of Nguyễn Khắc Hiếu, 1889-1939) was a typical case. After failing his examination, instead of returning to his native place and earning his living by teaching, he went to Hanoi and Saigon to work as a journalist and writer. In his *Đề khởi tình con thứ nhất* (Prologue to My Small Love, Volume 1), published in 1919, he wrote:

*Chữ nghĩa Tây Tàu trót dở dang
Nôm na phá nghiệp kiếm ăn xoàng
[...]
Còn non còn nước còn trăng gió
Còn có thơ ca bán phố phường.⁵⁵*
(Having a half-baked learning of Chinese and French
I only hope to earn a meagre living by writing in the vernacular .
[...]
As long as the mountain, the river, the moon and the wind still are
I still have poems to sell in the street.)

In his *Giấc mộng con* (Small Dream, Volume 2), Tấn Đà presented himself as a bread-winner through his writing.⁵⁶ At that time, of course, this occupation was not very lucrative. In a colony where writers were hampered by censure and repression,

⁵³ Huỳnh Văn Tông (2000), *Báo chí Việt Nam, từ khởi thủy đến 1945*, Ho Chi Minh City: Nxb thành phố HCM, p. 55; and Đỗ Quang Hưng (2001), *Lịch sử báo chí Việt Nam, 1865 - 1945*, Hanoi: Nxb Đại Học Quốc Gia Hà Nội, pp. 14-16.

⁵⁴ For further details on Vietnamese journalism and publishing operations, see Huỳnh Văn Tông (2000), op. cit.; Bùi Đức Tịnh (1992), op. cit.; Trần Văn Giáp, Nguyễn Tường Phượng, Nguyễn Văn Phú and Tạ Phong Châu (1972), *Lược truyện các tác gia Việt Nam*, vol. 2, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, pp. 21-63.

⁵⁵ Tấn Đà (1986), *Tuyển tập*, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 73.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Văn Tâm (1991), *Góp lời thiên cổ sự*, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 47.

where illiteracy was very high, with only ten percent of school-aged children attending school,⁵⁷ and where the circulation figure of books was very low, averaging 1,000 to 3,000 copies per edition,⁵⁸ writers generally eked out a meagre existence. Nevertheless, this new occupation was quite attractive because it brought freedom, a good reputation and respect from the readers. By the beginning of the 1940s the number of writers and journalists as well living completely by their pens rose to approximately 1,000.⁵⁹

Literary activities, once they became professional, not only contributed to an increase in book production but also brought some changes in the artists' viewpoints and techniques. Writers were now influenced by a new factor: their readers. As a result of the implicit pressure of readers, writers had, on the one hand, to make their works attractive by considering their topics, subjects and stories; and on the other hand, they were forced to find their own style. In the past, the ideal was that they should try to achieve artistic perfection, but now they also aimed at achieving variety and richness. Tấn Đà mentioned this when he evaluated his own career as follows: "My literary works are not only many in quantity but also varied in style."⁶⁰

All the four factors mentioned above played an important role in pushing Vietnamese literature away from the orbit of the Middle-Ages culture. However, for many reasons, the literary period between 1862 and 1932 was only a transitional phase. Firstly, the time in which the Vietnamese elite had been in contact with the West was so short that they could hardly be expected to change their old ways of thinking and feeling. Most of them were undecided: on the one hand, they longed for the new; on the other hand, they regretted losing the old. Before 1932, most wanted to reconcile the

⁵⁷ Huệ-Tâm Hồ Tài (1992), *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 35.

⁵⁸ For more details, see David G. Marr (1981), *Vietnamese on Trial, 1920-1945*, Berkeley: University of California, pp. 46-52.

⁵⁹ Phan Cự Đệ, Hà Văn Đức and Nguyễn Hoàn Khung (1988), *Văn học Việt Nam 1930-1945*, vol.1, Hanoi: Nxb Đại Học và Trung Học Chuyên Nghiệp, p. 71.

⁶⁰ Nguyễn Khắc Xương (ed.) (1986), *Tuyển tập Tấn Đà*, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 153.

old with the new, Eastern tradition with Western civilization.⁶¹ Accordingly, their renovation efforts were on a middle path, as expressed in the slogan: “The guideline for contemporary poets is to use old forms to express new ideas.”⁶² Secondly, writers had many things to concern themselves with other than the issue of “pure” literature: patriotic literati were busy with ideological problems and Western-educated intellectuals concerned themselves with the matter of how to cope with the huge amount of knowledge represented by Western culture. Thirdly, Western culture was spread rather unequally. Writers were divided into two large groups: the scholar-gentry, who mostly lived in the countryside, continued to read Chinese books and write in the Sino-Vietnamese or demotic script; Western-educated intellectuals, who lived in the cities, read French books and wrote in *quốc ngữ*. This characteristic was embodied in *Nam Phong Tạp chí*: about one hundred pages thick, this magazine consisted of three parts, each written in a different language: French, Chinese and *quốc ngữ*.

Because of this transitional character, the majority of literary achievements in this period seem to have been left unfinished. The novels of Trần Chánh Chiếu, Nguyễn Chánh Sắt, Hồ Biểu Chánh (1865-1958), and even those of Hoàng Ngọc Phách (1896-1973), who was praised for being in the avant-garde and pioneering new genres, while containing some elements borrowed from French literature, retained to a certain extent such traditional characteristics as verbal parallelism, episodic plot, conventionality in presentation, and singsong rhythm, or a mixture of some or all of these four characteristics which hark back to traditional Chinese models. Also, the framework for literary criticism at this time was not really solid: critics paid more attention to writers than to their works; in the work of art, the content was given more attention than the form; in the content, the ethical aspect was given more attention than reflected reality, and in that realistic aspect, truthfulness was given more attention than creativeness. No one lifted literary criticism from the level of the particular observation to the level of general aesthetic consideration. Poetry, because of its burdens of a long

⁶¹ See Huệ-Tâm Hồ Tài (1992), op. cit., pp. 46-52.

⁶² Chát Hằng, “Thơ Mới”, *Văn Học tạp chí*, no. 22 (August 1, 1933), quoted in Thanh Lăng (1972), *Phê bình văn học thế hệ 1932*, vol. 1, Saigon: Phong trào văn hoá, p. 339.

tradition, changed very slowly and with great difficulty. Trần Tế Xương's renovative efforts at the turn of the century were left unfinished. Apart from Tản Đà, most poets were still immersed in obsolete topics, feelings, forms and language. Since the end of the 1910s, some scholars, including Phạm Quỳnh, who had discovered the narrowness and unnaturalness of traditional poetic conventions, advised poets to imitate the French model. But, like the vast majority of poets and writers of that time, he was unable to visualize what should be learned from it.⁶³ The prolonged torment experienced with renovation made some poets, like Phan Khôi (1887-1960), feel an impasse, so that they could not write anything for a long time.⁶⁴ Vietnamese poetry did not really reach a new stage until 1932, when Phan Khôi's "Tình già" (Old Love) was published in *Phụ nữ tân văn* (Women News), Number 122 of 10th March.

From the 1930s onwards, barring the four influences mentioned above, there appeared two new factors influencing Vietnamese writers: individualism and rationalism. Both of these had long traditions in the West. Being nascent in ancient Greek philosophy and Christianity, they were resuscitated in the Renaissance, developed strongly in the eighteenth century, and became popular from the nineteenth century onwards.⁶⁵ However, both were quite novel in the eyes of Vietnamese imbued with traditional culture, which emphasized commonality rather than individuality, interpersonal relationships rather than the division between the ego and the non-ego, righteousness (nghĩa) rather than benefits (lợi), and which always encouraged obedience: within the nation, one had to be loyal to the king; within society, young people had to respect the authority of their elders; within a family, the children had to obey their parents, and the wife her husband.⁶⁶

⁶³ Phạm Quỳnh, "Bàn về thơ Nôm", *Nam Phong*, no. 5 (November 1917).

⁶⁴ Phan Khôi, "Một lối thơ mới trình chánh giữa làng thơ", *Phụ nữ tân văn*, no. 122 (March 10, 1932).

⁶⁵ See Richard Tarnes (1991), *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped our World View*, New York: Ballantine Books.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Phan Ngọc (1994), *Văn hoá Việt nam và cách tiếp cận mới*, Hanoi: Nxb Văn Hoá Thông Tin; Vũ Khiêu (ed.) (1994), *Nho giáo xưa và nay*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội; and Trần Quốc Vượng (1993), *Trong cõi*, Garden Grove: Trầm Hoa.

Being trained in French schools⁶⁷ and in direct and regular contact with French literature, the generation of writers who started their career after 1932 were able to free themselves from the shackles of their traditional culture. They were no longer content with the middle-of-the-road attitude of their predecessors and totally embraced the new approach. “Follow the new means to Westernize.”⁶⁸ And to Westernize, according to them, primarily meant “to choose the essentials of Western culture in order to apply them to our lives.”⁶⁹ Among what was called these “essentials”, the most important was rationalism. “In the past, we did not live according to reason but according to prejudices and the undebatable orders of our ancestors”,⁷⁰ now, on the way to being Westernized, “before doing anything, we have to deliberate in order to act as a modern person. After having acted that way, we must consider whether in that procedure the dregs of conservative-mindedness still remain so that we can exclude them immediately.”⁷¹

With respect to literature, one of the main principles that the Tự Lực Group, when first established, put forward was: “Apply Western methods to Vietnamese literature.”⁷² In the preface of *Hồn bướm mơ tiên* (Butterfly Heart Dreaming of a Fairy), Khái Hưng's first work and also the Tự Lực Group's first publication, Nhất Linh pointed out two characteristics he regarded as being intelligent applications of Western methods to fiction writing: firstly, nature was only carefully chosen to be depicted in accordance with the mood of the characters; secondly, the author described subtle developments in his characters' psychological lives by using appropriate details instead of prolix analysis.⁷³

⁶⁷ The French system of education completely replaced the old Chinese-based system in 1918.

⁶⁸ Hoàng Đạo (1989), *Mười điều tâm niệm*, Los Alamitos: Xuân Thu. (Originally published about 1938).

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Hoàng Đạo, “Theo mới”, *Ngày Nay*, no. 33 (November 8, 1936).

⁷¹ Hoàng Đạo (1989), op. cit., p. 22.

⁷² Quoted in Nhật Thịnh (n.d.), *Chân dung Nhất Linh*, Glendale: Đại Nam, p. 131.

⁷³ Khái Hưng (1970), *Hồn bướm mơ tiên*, Saigon: Đời Nay. (Originally published in 1933), pp. 5-6.

Rationalism also affected poetry: the cohesion requirement led to the adoption of enjambment, a great reliance on words rarely used in traditional poetry such as conjunctions and articles, and the imitation of certain French sentence structures.⁷⁴

Furthermore, rationalism resulted in a flourish of literary criticism in the period between 1932 and 1945. All of the first critical works came into being in this period and among these, *Thi nhân Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Poets) by Hoài Thanh (real name Nguyễn Đức Nguyên, 1909-82) and Hoài Chân (real name Nguyễn Đức Phiên, the younger brother of Hoài Thanh) and *Nhà văn hiện đại* (Modern Writers) by Vũ Ngọc Phan (1902-87) have been hailed as the two most significant.

The second requirement of Westernization was “how to reconcile individualism with socialism, and how to act in order to help the individual develop his/her knowledge, values, and characteristics in society.”⁷⁵

Critics are virtually unanimous in acclaiming individualism as the essential characteristic of Vietnamese literature in the period between 1932 and 1945. According to Hoài Thanh, “in general, the entire spirit of ancient times - or the old poetry - and the present time - or the new poetry - may be summed up in two words: ‘I’ and ‘We’.

The past is the time of the ‘We’ and the present is that of the ‘I’.”⁷⁶ Nguyễn Văn Trung considers the Tự Lực Group's works as typical of the ‘conscience de soi’ period in the history of Vietnamese literature. “Self-consciousness is the starting point of awakening, of becoming aware of oneself as a person.”⁷⁷ It can be argued that not only this period, but also Vietnamese modern literature as a whole, is a continuing process of development of individualism with some variations. In the period between 1932 and

⁷⁴ See Nam Chi, “Những đóng góp của Thế Lữ vào trong thơ Mới”, *Đoàn Kết* (Paris), no. 420 (January 1990), pp. 25-29, reprinted in Hoài Việt (ed.) (1991), *Thế Lữ, cuộc đời trong nghệ thuật*, Hanoi: Nxb Hội Nhà Văn, pp. 22-40; and also Đặng Anh Đào, “Văn học Pháp và sự gặp gỡ với văn học Việt Nam, 1930-45”, *Tạp chí Văn Học* (Hanoi) no. 7 (1994), pp. 1-5.

⁷⁵ Hoàng Đạo, “Theo mới”, *Ngày Nay*, no. 33 (November 8, 1936).

⁷⁶ Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân (1967), *Thi nhân Việt Nam*, op. cit., p. 52.

⁷⁷ Nguyễn Văn Trung (n.d.), *Xây dựng tác phẩm tiểu thuyết*, Los Alamitos: Xuân Thu, pp. 75-76. (Originally published in 1962).

1945, the ‘I’ was exploited essentially in its emotional aspect, in relation to nature and one’s fellow man. In the period between 1945 and 1954, that is, throughout the anti-French resistance war, it was essentially exploited in its political aspect, in relation to the nation and the writers’ comrades-in-arms. In the period between 1954 and 1975, particularly in Southern Vietnam, it was exploited from the epistemological viewpoint, in its relation to history and human destiny. From 1975 onwards, in overseas Vietnamese literature, it was exploited as a common destiny associated with drastic historical changes.⁷⁸

All major manifestations of individualism in the 1932-45 period reflected aspirations for sincerity and freedom, and as a result, most Vietnamese writers became distinctive individuals both in their writings and in their lives. Dropping all reserve, they began to express deep-felt thoughts and emotions.

Poets not only appeared in their writings as subjects and individuals but also asserted their ‘ego’ as something quite personal and unique. Thế Lữ (1907-89) was a passionate lover, Xuân Diệu (1917-85), “the bird from a strange fountain”, Huy Cận (born 1919) “a tiny soul with immense, age-old sadness”, Vũ Hoàng Chương (1916-76) an inebriate, Lưu Trọng Lư (1911-91) an adventurer, Trần Huyền Trân (1913-88) a lonely traveller, and so on.⁷⁹ Each had his own countenance, his own style. Never before had Vietnamese poetry flourished as it did.

More positive than poets, prose writers not only expressed their ego in their writings but they also explicitly called for a struggle for individual liberation. This was first limited to the domain of culture: it aimed at freeing individuals from the strict ties of the extended family system and obsolete Confucian ethics; it required that young people should be free to choose their lovers and marriage partners, that women could

⁷⁸ For more details, see Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, “15 năm văn học lưu vong, bản chất và đặc điểm”, *Văn Học* (California), nos. 47-48 (January 1990), pp. 9-26; translated into English by Hoài An and published in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, no. 5 (under the title ‘The Vietnamese Literature in Exile’, pp. 24-34); and also in Nguyễn Xuân Thu (ed.) (1994), *Vietnamese Studies in a Multicultural World*, Melbourne: Vietnamese Language and Cultural Publications, pp. 144-157.

⁷⁹ These poets’ works and the comments on them can be found in Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân (1967), *op. cit.*

remarry after their husband's death, and that everyone should have the freedom to pursue their ideals. After a while, owing to the influence of the Popular Front in France (1936-39), many writers went further by extending the struggle to the social domain: they advocated liberating individuals from outdated customs, backward organizations and social injustice, oppression and exploitation by landlords as well as by village tyrants.

It may be said that Western influence on Vietnamese literature reached its peak in the period between 1932 and 1945. It was so strong that in *Thi nhân Việt Nam*, when writing about the New Poetry movement, Hoài Thanh sometimes felt an unbearable burden: "It seems that each Vietnamese poet carries five or seven French poets in his/her head."⁸⁰ Thế Lữ was influenced by Alphonse de Lamartine; Huy Thông (1916-88) by Victor Hugo; Huy Cận by Paul Verlaine; Xuân Diệu by Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine and de Noailles; Hàn Mặc Tử (1912-40) and Bích Khê (1915-46) by Charles Baudelaire and through Baudelaire, by Edgar Poe and later by Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Valéry. Some poets at times did not hesitate to "borrow" ideas or images or adopt some poetic expressions from their French idols.⁸¹ In the realm of fiction, the situation was the same. The Tự Lực Group's works were first influenced by Lamartine, Chateaubriand and later, André Gide, Anatole France and Marcel Proust. Writers who were later labelled realists, such as Nguyễn Công Hoan (1903-77) and Vũ Trọng Phụng (1911-39), were influenced by Honoré de Balzac, Stendhal (pseudonym of Henri Beyle), Emile Zola, and so on.⁸² Tô Hoài (born 1920)

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 34.

⁸¹ See Xuân Diệu, "Apport de la poésie française dans la poésie vietnamienne moderne", *The Vietnam Forum*, no. 5 (Winter - Spring 1985), pp. 146-163; and Nguyễn Vỹ (1994), *Văn thi sĩ tiền chiến*, Hanoi: Nxb Hội Nhà Văn, pp. 115-118.

⁸² For a brief discussion of French influence on Vietnamese writers of this period, see Phan Ngọc (1993), "Ảnh hưởng của văn học Pháp tới văn học Việt Nam trong giai đoạn 1932-40", *Tạp chí Văn Học* (Hanoi), no. 4 (1993), pp. 25-27; Công Huyền Tôn Nữ Nha Trang, "The Role of French Romanticism in the New Poetry Movement in Vietnam", in Trương Bửu Lâm (ed.) (1987), *Borrowings and Adaptions in Vietnamese Culture*, Honolulu: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa, pp. 52-62; Bùi Xuân Bào (1972), *Le roman vietnamien contemporain*, Saigon: Tủ sách Nhân văn Xã hội; and Phan Cự Đệ (ed.) (1970), *Tự Lực văn đoàn, con người và văn chương*, Hanoi: Văn Học, pp. 37-43.

was influenced by Guy de Maupassant, Alphonse Daudet and Maurice Maeterlinck. As Tô Hoài himself admitted, his *Dé mèn phiêu lưu ký*, published in 1941, was influenced by *Don Quixote*, *Gulliver's Travels* and *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, which he had read in translations in the “Âu Tây tư tưởng” series, edited and published by Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh.⁸³

Generally speaking, in the literary period between 1932 and 1945, Baudelaire and Gide were the two most admired French figures. It may be said that most Vietnamese poets were to some extent, in Hoài Thanh's words, “obsessed by Baudelaire”,⁸⁴ whereas most writers were more or less influenced by André Gide, mainly through his “acte gratuit” (free act) concept, his quest for happiness and for liberation from the dead weight of his upbringing and heredity, and his taste for spiritual restlessness for its own sake. Gide's stamp was more or less visible in the works of Nhất Linh (1905-63), Khái Hưng (1896-47) and Nguyễn Tuân (1910-87).⁸⁵

The process of Westernization of literature had great significance. Firstly, it helped Vietnamese literature blossom and led to changes in all aspects, from language to genre, and from aesthetical thought to artistic style. Secondly, it contributed to speeding up the process of integration of Vietnamese literature into world literature. According to a number of critics, in nearly fifteen years - between 1932 and 1945 - Vietnamese poets and writers reflected most of the literary tendencies which had come into being and developed in France during the nineteenth century: romanticism, Parnassianism and symbolism in poetry, and romanticism, realism and naturalism in prose.⁸⁶

⁸³ Tô Hoài, “Những quãng đường”, *Tác Phẩm Mới*, no. 16 (November and December 1971), p. 7.

⁸⁴ Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân (1967), op. cit., p. 34.

⁸⁵ See Phan Ngọc (1993), *ibid.*; and Đặng Tiễn, “Hạnh phúc trong tác phẩm Nhất Linh”, *Văn* (Saigon), no. 37 (1 July 1965).

⁸⁶ See, for instance, Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân (1967), op. cit., pp. 33-34; and Phan Cự Đệ, Hà Văn Đứơc and Nguyễn Hoàng Khung (1988), op. cit., p. 66.

However, even in its heyday, Western influence on the literature of Vietnam, compared with other Asian countries, was very limited. Indeed, while at the turn of the century, Chinese poets and writers could fully appreciate modern trends in the literature of France, Germany, England, America, Russia, Poland, Greece and Japan,⁸⁷ Vietnamese literati, up to the 1930s, apart from the Chinese classics, knew only French literature. Non-Chinese and non-French authors whose works were translated into Vietnamese or even read in Vietnam were very few: Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Swift, Stevenson and Walter Scott. Moreover, the vast majority of Vietnamese poets and writers only had a limited knowledge of French literature through the educational system, mainly in high schools, where curricula centered on classical literature. French books and literary journals were rarely imported and people generally could not afford them. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that Vietnamese writers' knowledge about French or world literature in general was limited and not updated. While their Chinese colleagues understood profoundly American and British imagism, German impressionism, French dadaism and many other avant-garde movements,⁸⁸ Phạm Quỳnh, who was regarded as the most erudite scholar of the 1920s, seems to have been only well acquainted with French seventeenth-century literature. In his fifty-page treatise on French literary history, the second half of the nineteenth century was presented in just one sentence: "Following realism, there were many other schools such as symbolism, Parnassianism etc. in which flags were many but good generals (trống giõi) were very few."⁸⁹

In the following decades, Vietnamese writers' knowledge of French literature was becoming more up-to-date partly because the number of students being educated in France increased greatly, and partly because in the Popular Front period, the cultural

⁸⁷ See B.S. McDougall (1981), *The Introduction of Western Literary Theories into Modern China*, Tokyo: The Centre for East Asian Cultural Studies; Marián Gálik (1980), *The Genesis of Modern Chinese Literary Criticism (1917-1930)*, London: Curzon Press; and Merle Goldman (ed.) (1974), *Modern Chinese Literature in the May Fourth Era*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Phạm Quỳnh (1943), *Thượng Chi văn tập*, vol. 5, Hanoi: Edition Alexandre de Rhodes, p. 130.

closed-door policy of the colonial authorities was becoming less strict.⁹⁰ Anyhow, Đặng Thai Mai (1902-84), who was largely regarded as a highly qualified expert in modern Chinese literature and who first translated Lu Xun into Vietnamese, only heard of Lu after Lu's death in 1936 and read his works three years later.⁹¹ Nearly a century after its blossoming in France, realism and romanticism appeared in Vietnam; nearly half a century after its birth, symbolism was only weakly nascent in the works of a few Vietnamese poets, including Bích Khê, Xuân Sanh (born 1920), Xuân Diệu, Hàn Mặc Tử and Chế Lan Viên.

The artists and writers' late and limited exposure to Western literature resulted in the unsettled nature of Vietnamese literature, even at its acme. Creative writing developed rapidly, whereas literary thought still marked time. Until the end of the nineteen-thirties, no work of literary theory had been published. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, most writers pursued their creative careers while slighting literature. For Nguyễn Bá Học (1857-1921), “only novels, reports, essays and public speeches are useful literature, while poetry and folk song are not worth a cent in spite of their beautiful forms.”⁹² Echoing him, Phạm Quỳnh considered that apart from essays and public speeches, all literary genres, from fiction to poetry and drama, were “recreational literature” (văn chương chơi), useless for disseminating knowledge.⁹³ Such attitudes were indeed understandable, however. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, along with the discovery that underdevelopment would lead to loss of national independence, Vietnamese literati understood that the cause of that underdevelopment lay in the cult of the “empty” belletrism (hư văn) which had remained in vogue in literary circles for a thousand years: instead of studying the sciences in order to advance technology, develop the economy and enrich the country, all of the most intelligent young people were completely wrapped up in the learning of

⁹⁰ Trương Chính, “Nhìn lại văn học Ngũ tứ của Trung Quốc”, *Tạp chí Văn Học* (Hanoi), no. 3 (1989), p. 54.

⁹¹ Đặng Thai Mai (1969), *Trên đường học tập và nghiên cứu*, vol. 2, Hanoi: Văn Học, pp. 199-201.

⁹² Quoted in Thanh Lãng (1973), *op. cit.*, p. 80; and *ibid.*, p. 81.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Chinese classics and then engrossed in writing poems. When the country faced the threat of foreign aggression, nobody knew what to do and finally everyone resigned themselves to servitude. This is one reason why the modernization campaign was carried out simultaneously with the campaign against belletrism. Phan Châu Trinh began to win nation-wide fame with his poem “Chí thành thông thánh”, in which there is a doleful couplet: “Vạn dân nô lệ cường quyền hạ / Bát cổ văn chương tuý mộng trung” (While tens of thousands of our countrymen are exploited by cruel powers, intellectuals are still dead drunk in the “eight-legged” essay).⁹⁴ This psychological profile was visible for decades, making the prevailing literary thought seriously pragmatic. Among the nine guiding principles of the Tự Lực Literary Group, only two were about literature: (i) adopting Western creative methods and (ii) using a simple style with few Sino-Vietnamese words. The rest of these principles aimed at reforming Vietnamese culture and society.⁹⁵ In Hoàng Đạo's *Mười điều tâm niệm* (Ten Commandments), which is conventionally regarded as the Tự Lực Literary Group's theoretical platform, none had anything to do with literature. A number of writers and poets created some manifesto-like writings, such as Thế Lữ in “Cây đàn muôn điệu” (The Lyre of Myriad Tunes), Xuân Diệu in “Cảm xúc” (Feelings and Emotions) and “Lời vào tập Gửi hương” (Prologue to *Gửi hương cho gió*), Nam Cao (1917-51) in his short story “Trăng sáng” (Bright Moonlight); but all were mere perceptions through feelings. Only the Xuân Thu Nhã Tập Group had its own manifesto, but regrettably none of its members were gifted poets or clear-thinking theorists. It appeared that in their reading of French literature, Vietnamese writers and poets only concerned themselves with imaginative writings without delving into the theoretical foundations of each author and each school. The result of this weakness was instability in their own creations.

Some time ago, Vietnamese scholars, particularly those in the North, had the habit of dividing the literature of the 1932-1945 period into three categories: romantic, realistic and revolutionary. But recently they have come to realize that this division is

⁹⁴ Huỳnh Lý (ed.) (1983), *Thơ văn Phan Châu Trinh*, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 58.

⁹⁵ *Phong Hoá*, no. 87 (March 2, 1934); reprinted in Nhật Thịnh (n.d.), op. cit., p. 131.

quite inappropriate.⁹⁶ Indeed, theoretically the boundaries between the above trends were not as clear-cut as they had thought, and practically speaking, no Vietnamese writer or poet was really unmixed in his/her style. Most had been both romantic and realistic, or romantic in one work but realistic in another. Members of the Tự Lực Literary Group are considered to be romantic whilst Thạch Lam's *Gió đầu mùa* (First Seasonal Wind) and Khải Hưng's *Thoát ly* (Escape) and *Thừa tự* (Inheritance) are realistic. In contrast, Nguyễn Công Hoan and Vũ Trọng Phụng, who are considered to be masters of Vietnamese realism, wrote some romantic novels such as *Tắt lửa lòng* (End of Passion) and *Dứt tình* (Divorce).

With such a poor and unstable theoretical heritage, Vietnamese writers and poets in 1935 started a “pen-war” over the matter of “art for art's sake” or “art for human life's sake”⁹⁷ and through this process became familiar with Marxist literary thinking, which was to become a dominant factor in the shaping of current Vietnamese literature.

⁹⁶ See Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh, “Hiện thực và lãng mạn”, *Văn Nghệ*, no. 31 (August 1, 1992), p. 7; and Phan Cự Đệ, Hà Văn Đức and Nguyễn Hoàn Khung (1988), op. cit., p. 66.

⁹⁷ See Huệ-Tâm Hồ Tài, “Literature for the People: from Soviet Policies to Vietnamese Polemics”, in Trương Bửu Lâm (ed.) (1987), op. cit., pp. 63-83.

CHAPTER TWO

The Pen-War over the Matter of Art for Art's Sake versus Art for Human Life's Sake

The polemic between proponents of art for art's sake and art for human life's sake first broke out early in 1935 between Thiệu Sơn (1907-78), and then Hoài Thanh (1909-82) on the one side, and Hải Triều (1908-54) on the other. From the beginning of 1936 to the middle of 1939, the defenders of each side became more and more numerous: on the "pure art" side, Lưu Trọng Lư, Lê Trảng Kiều and Lan Khai replaced Hoài Thanh, who dropped out early; the art for human life's sake side was more crowded and noisy: its advocates formed what they called 'a united front' consisting of, apart from Hải Triều, many minor and almost unknown journalists such as Hồ Xanh, Hải Thanh, Hải Khách (pen name of Trần Huy Liệu), Hải Âu, Sơn Trà, Thạch Động, Hoa Sơn, Lâm Mộng Quang, Hoàng Tân Dân, Phan Văn Hùm, Bùi Công Trùng, Cao Văn Chánh and Khương Hữu Tài.

Two points should be mentioned here. First, the polemic in fact did not last continuously from 1935 to 1939 as Huệ Tâm Hồ Tài asserted: "... begun in 1935, it was waged fitfully over the next ten years, and might have gone longer had not war intervened."¹ In 1937 and 1938, surprisingly and almost without reason, the voices on both sides fell silent. The debate, therefore, actually lasted only two and a half years. However, it was certainly one of the most protracted and heated polemics in Vietnamese literary history. Second, it mobilized a large number of participants, most

¹ Huệ-Tâm Hồ Tài (1987), "Literature for the People: From Soviet Policies to Vietnamese Polemics", in Trương Bửu Lâm (ed.), *Borrowings and Adaptions in Vietnamese Culture*, Honolulu: Center for Southeast Asia Studies, University of Hawaii at Manoa, pp. 63-82.

of whom, especially on the side of art for human life's sake, were not professional writers and poets but political agitators, either Trotskyists or Vietnamese Communist Party members, who saw their involvement in the debate as a chance to propagate their party's policies, and as an exercise in revolutionary activity. Behaving like contenders in a civil war, their manner of speech was political rather than literary. Aesthetic culture was either ignored or viewed as a battleground secondary to the class struggle. This explains some odd, and sometimes paradoxical, phenomena with which, until now, few historians have concerned themselves. For example, during and after the polemic, all defenders of art for art's sake always refused the label applied to them. Hoài Thanh declared several times that he had no theory,² and that his view as well as his friends' "are not similar to that of advocates of the pure art view in French literary history."³ This was true. As Frances FitzGerald rightly notes, "[a]s Confucians, the Vietnamese had never been interested in diversity or originality for its own sake. From their intellectuals they required only what was 'morally enlightening', or in Communist language 'socially useful'."⁴ Under such an influence, which is by nature a practical and pragmatic philosophy, emphasizing responsibility and sacrifice, asserting the priority of content over form, the Vietnamese found it hard to accept the purely artistic view of French nineteenth-century writers.

This "pure art" viewpoint, which first came into being in Kant's and Schiller's aesthetics, was imported into France in the early nineteenth century through Benjamin Constant's *Diary* in 1804 and Mme de Stael's *De l'Allemagne* in 1813, more particularly through Victor Cousin's lectures at the Sorbonne from 1816 to 1818 and Théodore Jouffroy's course on aesthetics in 1828. It was finally formalized into a doctrine by Théophile Gautier (1811-72) in the 1830s.⁵

² Hoài Thanh (1999), *Toàn tập*, vol. 1, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 43.

³ Hoài Thanh (1960), "Nhìn lại cuộc tranh luận về văn nghệ hồi 1935-1936", *Tạp chí Văn Học* (Hanoi), no. 1 (1960), reprinted in Hoài Thanh (1982), *Tuyển tập*, vol. 2, Hanoi: Văn Học, pp. 257-293.

⁴ Frances FitzGerald (1972), *Fire in the Lake, the Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*, New York: Vintage, p. 272.

⁵ See René Wellek (1965), *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950*, vol. 3: 'The Age of Transition',

Identifying the beautiful with the good, placing it on an equal footing with God, Gautier expressed his cult of beauty sporadically in many different works, particularly in the prefaces to *Poésie* (1830), his first collection of poems, and *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1834), a novel of erotic passion and pagan beauty. Differently from the realists, Gautier claimed that the goal of art was not to mirror some external reality or truth but to present a microcosm of the artist's soul. He wrote in 1841: "When M. Delacroix paints a picture, he looks within himself rather than looking out of the window."⁶ Unlike the romantic artists, who emphasized sincerity and spontaneity of emotion over formal writing technique, Gautier asserted that for poets, "[t]he words should have, in themselves and beyond the meaning they denote, a proper beauty and value."⁷ And unlike the neo-classical writers, who overemphasized the didactic function of literature, Gautier insisted that literature was not a means but an end in itself, and that "any artist who aims to anything other than the beautiful is not an artist in our view."⁸ As a would-be painter, Gautier wanted to transpose beauty into words or, in another words, to make poetry - and literature in general - a plastic art. As an extreme aesthete, Gautier thought that literature should not be expected to be useful. He writes in the preface to his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin*:

Nothing is really beautiful unless it is useless; everything useful is ugly, for it expresses a need, and the needs of man are ignoble and disgusting, like his poor weak nature. The most useful place in a house is the latrine. For myself... I am among those to whom the superfluous is necessary... I prefer to a certain useful pot a Chinese pot which is sprinkled with mandarins and dragons.⁹

Although Théophile Gautier was not recognized as a great theorist or critic, his doctrine had a paramountly important impact in Western literary thought. It directly

London: Jonathan Cape, pp. 29-33; and W. K. Wimsatt and C. Brooks (1957), *Literary Criticism, a Short History*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 475-498.

⁶ Quoted in R. B. Grant (1975), *Theophile Gautier*, Boston: Twayne Publishers, p. 46.

⁷ Quoted in P. E. Tennant (1975), *Theophile Gautier*, London: The Athlone Press, p. 27.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁹ Theophile Gautier (1981), *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, translated by Joanna Richardson, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p. 39.

encouraged the cult of artistic perfection and the emphasis on plastic beauty in Parnassianism. Traces of it can be seen in French dadaism in the late 1910s, Russian formalism in the 1920s, and structuralism in the 1960s. However, in Vietnam, its influence was very weak. In the polemic of 1935-39, no defenders of the pure art side were to adapt Gautier's stand completely. In fact, it is not sure that they had the opportunity of reading and understanding very much of Gautier's aesthetic doctrine. More than twenty years after the debate, in 1960, in his article “Nhìn lại cuộc tranh luận về nghệ thuật hồi 1935-1936” (Looking back on the debate about art in 1935 and 1936), Hoài Thanh still asserted that he himself and his friends:

are different from Theophile Gautier, who brought forward the art for art's sake doctrine in French literary history, and who maintained that poets should be impassive to nature and look for visual art-like beauty.¹⁰

Hoài Thanh was mistaken because the above two characteristics in fact belonged to the Parnassians. Although the Parnassian poets were quite deeply influenced by Gautier, their viewpoints showed some differences: According to René Wellek, Gautier “did not share their [the Parnassians'] objectivity and never felt impassibilité himself.”¹¹

Both Thiều Sơn and Hoài Thanh were self-taught intellectuals. In the mid-1930s, after finishing high school, Hoài Thanh worked in a printing house and taught at a local school in Huế,¹² whereas Thiều Sơn was a staff member at the Gia Định Post Office.¹³ They were never trained in theory, and in fact they were not interested in theory. As Hoài Thanh confessed: “I am scared of theory.”¹⁴ Owing to their haphazard contact with different Western movements, and to their weakness in theoretical

¹⁰ Hoài Thanh (1982), *Tuyển tập*, vol. 2, Hanoi: Văn Học, pp. 261-262.

¹¹ René Wellek (1965), op. cit., p. 32. See further P. E. Tennant (1975), op. cit., p. 126.

¹² Từ Sơn and Phan Hồng Giang (eds.) (2000), *Hoài Thanh với khát vọng Chân - Thiện - Mỹ*, Hanoi: Nxb Hội Nhà Văn, pp.31-2.

¹³ Thiều Sơn (1993), *Những văn nhân chính khách một thời*, Hanoi: Lao Động, p. 287.

¹⁴ Hoài Thanh (1999), op. cit., p. 42.

knowledge, Thiều Sơn, Hoài Thanh and other writers on the pure art side developed a literary standpoint consisting of one common characteristic: eclecticism. In their thoughts, there was at the same time a little of everything - neo-classicism, realism, romanticism, aestheticism and a little modernism, mainly under the influence of André Gide - not to mention that they were also influenced by Chinese and Vietnamese traditional literary theories, which were not easy for them to ignore.

The polemic came to light when Thiều Sơn's articles entitled "Two Views on Literature" and "Art and Life" were published in *Tiểu Thuyết Thứ Bảy* (Saturday Fiction) no. 38, February 1, 1935 and no. 41, March 9, 1935. In his first article, after criticizing what he claimed to be the narrow and erroneous concepts of Nguyễn Bá Học (1857-1921) and Phạm Quỳnh (1892-1945) as well as of most Confucian scholars who regarded literature as a means to achieve educational, ethical or scientific goals, Thiều Sơn declared that "literature has to set art or beauty as its main goal".¹⁵ In his second article, after commending French writers' objective attitudes towards literature and art evaluation, he wrote:

... literature only needs one ism, which is looking for and describing the beauty of things... Those who want to live with literature first have to liberate their hearts from all moral, social, political and religious prejudices, and then concern themselves with nothing but art.¹⁶

Basing their criticism mainly on these two pronouncements, Hải Triều, and later a large number of Marxist writers, claimed that Thiều Sơn was an advocate of the pure art doctrine. In fact, that was not the case. In his two articles, Thiều Sơn had aimed at (i) differentiating belles-lettres from academic writings; (ii) praising the former for its great creative value and (iii) insisting that belles-lettres should be artful and first evaluated from aesthetic standards rather than from moral principles and party or class interests.

¹⁵ Thiều Sơn, "Hai cái quan niệm về văn học", *Tiểu thuyết Thứ Bảy*, no. 37 (1935), reprinted in Thanh Lăng (1973), *Phê bình văn học thế hệ 1932*, Saigon: Phong trào văn hoá, p. 81.

¹⁶ Thiều Sơn, "Nghệ thuật với đời người", *Tiểu thuyết Thứ Bảy*, no. 41 (1935), reprinted in Thanh Lăng (1973), op. cit., p. 86.

Thiếu Sơn's view was fairly novel. At that time, apart from him, Võ Liêm Sơn (1888-1949), in his article "Văn học với xã hội" (Literature and Society) written in 1927 and published in 1934, expressed the same view, stating that only belles-lettres were in the realm of art, whereas technical writings belonged to the field of science.¹⁷ It may be said that in the domain of creation, syncreticism as one of the characteristics of Vietnamese classical literature was abolished quite early, at the beginning of the twentieth century; and in the field of theory, it was completely abandoned in the early 1930s with Thiếu Sơn's and Võ Liêm Sơn's articles.

However, it is hard to say that Thiếu Sơn was a theorist, for he merely chose a quite popular viewpoint in French literature as an assumption from which to draw some applications to the creation, appreciation and evaluation of literature, but he did not delve into any specific issue. In his own works, he never expressed his view on what might constitute Beauty. Certainly, it was not formal beauty. Reading Nguyễn Công Hoan's *Kép Tư Bền* (Actor Tư Bền), he discovered that:

Hoan's outstanding characteristic is that he can purposefully observe everything around him, find out funny details, depict his characters in his extraordinarily quaint ways, ask and answer in an interesting tone and structure his stories into tragi-comedies.¹⁸

Finally, he concluded:

All short stories in this book are interesting movies, but each has its own distinctiveness because their author's art changes and varies according to life.¹⁹

It appears that, with respect to aesthetics, Thiếu Sơn was very close to the realists: for him, an interesting work was a work reflecting life as lively and varied as life itself; one of the most important writing requisites was the ability to observe and choose details in order to represent reality through words. From this view, Thiếu Sơn

¹⁷ Võ Liêm Sơn, "Văn học với xã hội", reprinted in Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh (ed.) (1987), *Hợp tuyển thơ văn Việt Nam*, tome 5, vol. 1, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 398. Originally published in 1934.

¹⁸ Thiếu Sơn, "Phê bình Kép Tư Bền của Nguyễn Công Hoan", *Tiểu thuyết Thứ Bảy*, 27 July 1935, reprinted in Thanh Lăng (1973), op. cit., pp. 115-6.

¹⁹ Ibid.

once defined novelists as “those who are in life to talk about the life stories to people”.²⁰ He always paid attention to the topic because he emphasized the role of ‘stories of life’ - or reality. In his opinion, any society was divided into two classes: the upper class and the lower class. If “writers only mention the first and ignore the second, literature will have many deficiencies for it cannot picture all forms of human lives.”²¹ He then concluded that once “the masses have a place in literature, literature will become complete and perfect as it will portray all kinds of people and be a mirror reflecting totally the true nature of society.”²²

Hoài Thanh is undoubtedly more talented and clever than Thiếu Sơn. While Thiếu Sơn was a journalist who engaged at times in general reflection on literature and commenting in a leisurely way, Hoài Thanh was a professional critic of considerable reputation and influence, who, about seven years after the polemic, published his major critical collection, co-authored by Hoài Chân, *Thi nhân Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Poets) (1942), which has been widely seen as one of the finest production, or even the finest, of Vietnamese literary criticism in the twentieth century. However, like Thiếu Sơn, Hoài Thanh was a self-taught scholar. His view of literature was entangled in contradictions. Like Thiếu Sơn, he insisted that “One can have any kind of literature one likes but first it must be literature.”²³ ‘It must be literature’ means that it must be aesthetic. But what needs to be aesthetic? The object depicted or the way of depicting it? It is not certain whether it was unintentional or deliberate that Hoài Thanh always stressed the first factor:

The landscape and human heart are similar to a thick forest covered with fragrant and oddly colored flowers which, when visiting them, people generally fail to notice, thereby missing a lot of picturesque sights and phenomena because they

²⁰ Thiếu Sơn, “Nhà viết tiểu thuyết”, *Tiểu thuyết Thứ Bảy*, no. 73 (19 October 1935), reprinted in Thanh Lãng (1973), *ibid.*, 125.

²¹ Thiếu Sơn, “Văn học bình dân”, *Tiểu thuyết Thứ Bảy*, no. 43 (23 March 1935), reprinted in Thanh Lãng (1973), *ibid.*, p. 92.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 92.

²³ Hoài Thanh, “Văn chương là văn chương”, *Tràng An*, 15 August 1935; reprinted in Thanh Lãng (1974), *op. cit.*, p. 119.

are too busy plucking bamboo shoots and digging up tubers. Physical activities are like a black curtain separating our perception from the profound truth. The responsibility of art as well as of literature is to draw up that curtain - to find out what is interesting, beautiful and extraordinary in nature and in the human soul, and then use words or a stone, or a painting in order to share feelings.²⁴

Thus, according to Hoài Thanh, writers and poets had a simple task: that of discovering the beauty of life; and in order to achieve this task, the most important requirement was to be sensitive and know how to throb naturally with emotions.²⁵ That is why Hoài Thanh required that writers and poets should be sincere and freed not only from political despotism but also from the restraints of society, public opinion and narrow and rigid literary conventions, which were regarded as ideals of beauty.²⁶ Unlike Thiều Sơn, Hoài Thanh usually emphasized the “human heart” factor, or the emotion factor in literature. He considered “the source of literature as feelings and philanthropy.”²⁷ And the functions of literature, if there were any, were also limited to the emotional aspect: "Literature brings us feelings that we have not had and those we have experienced. Thanks to it, our cramped and superficial lives become much deeper and broader."²⁸

The special point of Hoài Thanh's view on literature is that he - perhaps the first in Vietnam - discovered the relative autonomy of literature: the world in a literary work was independent from the real world. “A thief who is brought into a work of art is no longer a thief. He is a person, and his miseries as a Person (Person with a capital letter) have an eternal quality.”²⁹ Taking this standpoint, Hoài Thanh overcame the tendency of identifying authors and their works, a popular practice often found in Vietnamese

²⁴ Hoài Thanh, “Ý nghĩa và công dụng của văn chương”, *Tao Đàn*, no. 7 (1 June 1939); quoted in Hoài Thanh (1982), op. cit., p. 261; excerpted in Thanh Lăng (1974), op. cit., p. 187.

²⁵ Quoted in Thanh Lăng (1973), op. cit., pp. 108-9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 182-6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

traditional literary views. In this, Hoài Thanh had come round to a position similar to that of W.K. Wimsatt, the author of “The Intentional Fallacy”,³⁰ who believed that the writer's intention did not have any effect on his work once it was already accomplished, and that therefore we should not use it to evaluate any work.

The Italian writer, Dante Alighieri, published his *Divine Comedy* with the intention of attacking his enemies. But reading it nowadays, we no longer take any interest in that attack. A large number of people who do not have a passion for Christianity like to read Chateaubriand's *Atala and René*. We do not care about the theme and are merely interested in literature.³¹

However, within and forevermore after the debate, Hoài Thanh did not become a romanticist or a formalist. The sense of responsibility for the community and society which he had received in the Vietnamese cultural and educational environment held him back. It was not without reason that he chose the pen name "Hoài Thanh": he aimed to remember (hoài) the name of his teacher and comrade (Thanh), who had guided him to an anti-French Revolutionary stand.³² It is understandable why, although he did not highly value Tam Lang's report *Tôi kéo xe* (I Drive a Rickshaw), he introduced it with alacrity and commended it favorably in his newspaper as "a deed of great moral and social value" with the hope that

... if among people who read that report, there were a person who is concerned with the gloomy world of a rickshaw driver, is moved to pity by his sufferings and is lenient when riding on a rickshaw, Tam Lang's task would have become very useful.³³

The altercation between the sense of responsibility and the formalist aesthetic viewpoint resulted in many contradictions in Hoài Thanh's article. On the one hand, he

³⁰ W.K. Wimsatt (1946), ‘The Intentional Fallacy’, reprinted in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, London: Methuen, pp. 3-18.

³¹ Quoted in Thanh Lãng (1973), op. cit., p. 181.

³² Hoài Chân, “Kỷ niệm về anh Hoài Thanh và *Thi nhân Việt Nam*” in Từ Sơn (ed.) (1993), *Hoài Thanh, di bút và di cao*, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 179.

³³ Quoted in Thanh Lãng (1973), op. cit., p. 126.

compared "literary production with a flower",³⁴ on the other, he declared that "literature - I do not mean writers - has no right to stand in the high clouds, watching indifferently the violent vicissitudes of life".³⁵ On the one hand, Hoài Thanh now encouraged writers "to develop their identities",³⁶ on the other, he complained about Vietnamese writers' nonchalance in describing the miserable life and obsolete customs of the peasants.³⁷ On the one hand, he praised Gide's view - "an aesthetic work is useful for readers"³⁸ - and demanded that "art must help people to react against natural situations and their nature", for only by doing so does art fulfill the requirements of present-day living,³⁹ on the other, he wrote:

A writer is a person who lives within a society. Of course he should fulfill his social duty as best as he can. I want to insist that a writer sometimes has to defend the weak by opposing the rich and powerful, but at that juncture he no longer creates but merely does his duty as a writer.⁴⁰

Thus neither Thiều Sơn nor Hoài Thanh really advocated art for art's sake. Furthermore, they asserted that "in the final analysis, any art is for human life's sake, be it in the material or the spiritual realm".⁴¹ It is hard to say that these were just empty words. It should be mentioned that *Văn chương và hành động* (Literature and Action), a collection of Hoài Thanh's articles on literature in the debating period, was confiscated by the Secret Police Bureau before it was distributed in 1936, and at the

³⁴ Ibid., p. 120.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 110.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 130.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 132-133.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 121.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 110.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 120.

⁴¹ Quoted in Hoài Thanh (1982), op. cit., p. 261.

same time Hoài Thanh himself was forbidden to write in the *Tràng An* newspaper because of his anti-French writings.⁴²

A question must be asked: Why were Thiều Sơn and Hoài Thanh labelled defenders of pure art and attacked by Marxist writers when they did not advocate this view?

There are probably many reasons. Firstly, Marxist writers at that time perhaps did not have a clear view of what was art for art's sake and what was art for human life's sake. According to Hải Triều, all those who did not regard literature as a weapon for social struggle were supporters of pure art.⁴³ Even Hoài Thanh, twenty years later, upon becoming a Marxist critic and a high-ranking cadre in the Communist Party's domain of literature and art, changed his way of thinking and asserted that any writer who divorced himself/herself from politics and had no consideration for it was for pure art.⁴⁴ While their understanding of the 'pure art' concept was too broad, their understanding of art for human life's sake was too limited: in Hải Triều's vocabulary throughout the debate, the term 'art for human life's sake' is synonymous with 'art for the sake of the common people's life'. Although Hải Triều later rectified this mistake and insisted that it should be 'art for human life's sake',⁴⁵ Hoài Thanh proved that the term "art for the sake of the common people's life" expressed correctly the ideas of Hải Triều as well as those of the Marxist writers, because for them "art must help the common people in their daily life activities". By the expression "the common people's life" he probably meant plebeian activity as we usually understand it, whereas "human

⁴² Ibid., p. 259.

⁴³ Hải Triều, "Sự tiến hoá của văn học và sự tiến hoá của nhân sinh", *Đông Phương*, no. 872 (12 August 1933) and no. 873 (19 August 1933); "Nghệ thuật vị nghệ thuật hay nghệ thuật vị nhân sinh", *Đời Mới*, March 1935 and 7 April 1935. Both articles were reprinted in Hải Triều (1969), *Về văn học nghệ thuật*, Hanoi: Văn Học, pp. 10-28.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 261.

⁴⁵ Hải Triều, "Nghệ thuật và sinh hoạt xã hội", *Tin Văn* in 1935, reprinted in Trần Thanh Đạm and Hoàng Nhân (eds.) (1991), *Tuyển tập thơ văn Huế Bình Trị Thiên*, Ho Chi Minh City: Nxb Thành phố HCM, pp. 229-240.

life" had a broader meaning".⁴⁶ Secondly, it seems that the real target of Marxist writers was the whole romantic literature of that time. In the communists' eyes, this very soft and poetic literature was a source of great dangers as it lulled the masses into a dream and hampered their process of growing aware of revolutionary ideals. However, Marxist writers had more than enough cleverness not to directly face the Tự Lực Group, which was very famous and influential: indeed this group owned a publishing company (*Đời Nay*) and two magazines (*Phong Hoá* and *Ngày Nay*) with the highest circulation of that time.⁴⁷ Therefore, possibly because of one simple and tactical reason, Thiều Sơn was chosen as a target: he was a young writer who as yet did not have a wide reputation and more particularly did not have any means to defend himself. As Trần Huy Liệu later wrote in his posthumous *Hồi ký* (Autobiography), published in 1991, for Marxist writers in the period of 1930-45, when Vietnam was under French colonialism, the last factor was extremely important because they understood the weakness of their position: most newspapers they contributed to were in a precarious financial situation and could be easily shut down, and their circulation was usually limited to one region.⁴⁸

Thus both Hoài Thanh and Thiều Sơn constituted only a pretext for Marxist writers to launch a pen-war by which they introduced and propagandized their party's views on art and literature as well as those on political and social issues. This resulted in the second characteristic of the debate: it was a series of monologues rather than a debate. The so-called polemical writings were seldom related to one another. Writers rarely analyzed and criticized the arguments of their rivals. Their articles generally concentrated on three issues: (i) to continue to develop the Marxist view of art and

⁴⁶ Quoted in Nguyễn Phúc, "Nhìn lại cái gọi là thuyết vị nghệ thuật của Hoài Thanh", *Tạp chí Văn Học* (Hanoi), no. 2 (1993), p. 29.

⁴⁷ For more details on the Tự Lực Literary Group, see Phạm Thế Ngũ (n.d.), *Việt Nam văn học sử giản ước tân biên*, vol. 3, Glendale (California): Đại Nam, pp. 430-500; Tú Mỡ (1996), *Toàn tập*, vol. 1, Hanoi: Văn Học, pp. 561-601; Nhật Thịnh (n.d.), *Chân dung Nhất Linh*, Glendale: Đại Nam; Lại Nguyên Ân (1998), *Đọc lại người trước, đọc lại người xưa*, Hanoi: Nxb Hội Nhà Văn, pp. 211-224; Phan Cự Đệ (ed.) (1990), *Tự Lực văn đoàn, con người và văn chương*, Hanoi: Văn Học; and Nguyễn Trác and Đái Xuân Ninh (1989), *Về Tự Lực văn đoàn*, Ho Chi Minh City: Nxb thành phố HCM.

⁴⁸ See Trần Huy Liệu (1991), *Hồi ký*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, pp. 167-217.

literature, which they had just found at random because of their lack of material sources; (ii) to continue to affirm its pre-eminence, with a tendency to develop the new literature which they called popular, progressive or proletarian, and in 1936, social realistic literature; (iii) to continue to condemn, and even smear, not only debaters but also petty bourgeois writers and contemporary romantic literature in general.

Thiếu Sơn almost refused to participate in the debate, probably because he understood quite early the Marxist writers' political device. Hoài Thanh also withdrew rapidly after some altercations. In “Nhà viết tiểu thuyết” (The Novelist) published in *Tiểu thuyết Thứ Bảy* (Saturday Fiction), no. 73, October 19, 1935, Thiếu Sơn declared that he had not read the article entitled “Nghệ thuật vì nghệ thuật hay nghệ thuật vì nhân sinh” (Art for art's sake or art for human life's sake) in which Hải Triều strongly criticized him.⁴⁹ It seems that he did not bother to find that article. Afterwards he wrote an article entitled “Câu chuyện văn chương tả chân chủ nghĩa” (Stories of realist literature) as a general introduction to a literary movement in the West.⁵⁰ Thus it is hard to accept the claim of some researchers that Thiếu Sơn “struggled heatedly and persistently against the art for human life's sake side... and was determined to defend his view in newspapers at that time”, as a critic has remarked.⁵¹ Hoài Thanh first enthusiastically took part in the debate but this did not last long. On 29 October, two months after writing the article “Văn chương là văn chương” (Literature is Literature) - which was published in *Tràng An* on 15 August 1935 - declaring war on Hải Triều and his vulgar literary viewpoint, Hoài Thanh announced that he had brought the battle to an end. Nevertheless, because he was labelled and smeared most rudely, he later wrote another article entitled “Một lời vu cáo đê hèn” (A vicious calumny) in *Tràng An* on 3 December 1935 and then stopped participating in the debate. He then began writing

⁴⁹ Thiếu Sơn, “Nhà viết tiểu thuyết”, *Tiểu thuyết Thứ Bảy*, no. 73 (19 October 1935), p. 417, reprinted in Nguyễn Ngọc Thiện, Nguyễn Thị Kiều Oanh and Phạm Hồng Toàn (eds.) (1997), *Tuyển tập phê bình, nghiên cứu văn học Việt Nam (1900-1945)*, vol. 2, Hanoi: Văn Học, pp. 346-9.

⁵⁰ Thiếu Sơn, “Câu chuyện văn chương tả chân chủ nghĩa”, *Tiểu thuyết Thứ Bảy*, no. 77 (16 November 1935), reprinted in Nguyễn Ngọc Thiện et al. (eds.) (1997), *op. cit.*, pp. 350-2.

⁵¹ Trần Thị Việt Trung, “Thiếu Sơn và công trình phê bình lý luận đầu tiên trong văn học Việt Nam hiện đại: Phê bình và Cáo luận”, *Tạp chí Văn Học* (Hanoi), no. 6 (1992), p. 30.

books in order to be able to express all his ideas and not to be misunderstood.⁵² Thus Hoài Thanh participated in the polemic merely for four months.

Throughout 1936 and the first half of 1939, the debate continued between Luu Trọng Lu, Lê Tràng Kiều and Lan Khai, who were considered as representatives of the pure art side, and Hải Triều together with Marxist and Trotskyist writers. However, the debate gradually inclined towards politics and its literary merits faded away.

There were thus no winners or losers in this monologue of a debate. However, to the extent of what they sought to achieve, the Marxist writers were more or less successful. First of all, they succeeded in stirring public opinion to such an extent that their presence came to be noticed by the general public: many writers made their names because of the fact that they had participated in the polemic and not because of their works. Furthermore, because of the debate, they had a great opportunity to propagate Marxist views on literature as well as Marxism in general.

Of Marxist participants in the debate, Hải Triều, although later seen by his comrades as “not always a profound thinker”,⁵³ or “with respect to theory, ... a writer who still had many shortcomings”,⁵⁴ was anyway one of the most outstanding Marxist literary theorists and critics of the 1930s. He had two marked characteristics: great fondness for argument and great interest in literature. In 1933, he himself started the debate on idealism and materialism in newspapers, mainly with Phan Khôi.⁵⁵ In his

⁵² Hoài Thanh (1982), op. cit., p. 259.

⁵³ Hoàng Trung Thông, “Hải Triều, người đấu tranh cho quan điểm văn nghệ mác xít”, *Sông Hương*, no. 16 (December 1985), p. 62.

⁵⁴ Phong Lê (1980), *Văn xuôi Việt Nam trên con đường hiện thực xã hội chủ nghĩa*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, pp. 17-18.

⁵⁵ See Trần Văn Giàu (1988), *Triết học và tư tưởng*, Ho Chi Minh City: Nxb Thành phố HCM, pp. 431-8; and Thanh Lăng (1973), op. cit., pp. 10-77.

will, written in 1954, he expressed his passion for literature and admitted that all his life he “fought for revolutionary art and literature”.⁵⁶

Before that debate broke out, Hải Triều wrote two articles on art and literature: “Sự tiến hoá của văn học và sự tiến hoá của nhân sinh” (The evolution of literature and human life)⁵⁷ and “Cụ Sào Nam giải thích chữ văn học thế là sai lầm” (Mr Sao Nam's explanation of the word ‘literature’ is very incorrect), which were published in *Đông Phương* in August and November 1933.⁵⁸

In the first article, it was the first time that Hải Triều had used dialectic materialism to explain the relationship between literature and politics. Starting from the assumption that literature belonged to the superstructure and was affected by the base, Hải Triều advocated the view that: (i) literature develops in accordance with the evolutionary trend of society; (ii) each economic system has its own literature, which propagates and defends that system in ideological terms; (iii) the relationship between literature and economics must become the criterion for evaluating literature: literature must be considered as backward and reactionary if it tries to maintain an old and outdated economic system, and, correspondingly, it must be regarded as progressive and revolutionary if it keeps pace with economic changes.

Moreover, Hải Triều believed that romanticism, which came into being as a weapon of the serf and burgher classes to struggle against the aristocracy and the clergy, was valued as positive, rational and free at that juncture.⁵⁹ But in the middle of the nineteenth century, a new social class had emerged: the proletariat. A proletarian literature appeared and developed, replacing romanticism, which then became reactionary because it was determined to defend the decadent existing system.

⁵⁶ Hải Triều (1969), *Về văn học nghệ thuật* (second edition), Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 102.

⁵⁷ Hải Triều (1983), *Về văn học nghệ thuật*, third edition, Hanoi: Văn Học, pp. 40-8.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-54.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

Hải Triều did not say anything more about proletarian literature. He merely focused on criticizing the current romantic literature and its ‘allies’ such as naturalism, symbolism and aestheticism, which he lumped together as frivolous. He especially lashed out at the defenders of pure art, whom he considered to be very popular in Vietnam with their policy of “putting literature out of Man's evolutionary process”.⁶⁰

Hải Triều's second article aimed at discussing the meaning of the word ‘literature’ with Phan Bội Châu. In an article “So sánh văn học Đông Phương với Tây phương” (A comparison between Eastern and Western literatures), based on the traditional Chinese concept of literature (“wen” in Chinese), Phan Bội Châu stated that “wen”, which in Chinese originally meant “criss-cross lines”, and then, “aesthetic pattern”, consisted of three categories: “sky patterns” (thiên văn), “earth patterns” (địa văn) and “human patterns” (nhân văn). Literature (wen) belonged to “human patterns” (“ren wen” in Chinese), and was therefore a part of the orderly cosmos, a realization through which the natural order of things becomes visible and known, so that doing literature meant following the natural cosmos (“sky patterns” and “earth patterns”). According to Hải Triều, Phan Bội Châu's viewpoint was not only idealistic and incorrect but also dangerous. Literature was a reflection of reality, a representation of human life and not a mere imitation of nature. Stating that literature originates from nature meant advocating that literature was divorced from life and should not be held responsible for it. And this was a manifestation of the pure art doctrine.⁶¹

The most oft-quoted author in Hải Triều's two articles was Plekhanov (1857-1918), the first Russian Marxist of any importance, who introduced the term ‘dialectical materialism’. According to Trần Văn Giàu, Plekhanov's work *Art and Social Activities*, in the French translation, was imported and circulated in Vietnam in the early 1930s, especially in the two large cities of Saigon and Hanoi.⁶² However, during that period, Hải Triều's ability to understand literary theory was probably very

⁶⁰ Hải Triều (1969), op. cit., p. 14.

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 48-52.

⁶² Trần Văn Giàu (1988), op. cit., p. 440.

limited. For example, he claimed that Romanticism was the literature of the serf and burgher classes⁶³ and “literature should be deeply and directly affected by social economy”.⁶⁴ Hải Triều’s first mistake was corrected a few months later: “Romanticism is a kind of literature of the capitalist class.”⁶⁵ His second mistake lasted much longer. Two years later, in his article “Nghệ thuật vì nghệ thuật hay nghệ thuật vì nhân sinh” (Art for art's sake or art for human life's sake), Hải Triều became more cautious and tried to correct himself: “economic activities directly or indirectly affect literature”.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, since 1933, Hải Triều had learnt from Plekhanov at least two things: the dialectical materialistic view of literature and resentment towards the pure art doctrine.

Apart from Plekhanov, Hải Triều was later influenced by Guo Moruo (1892-1978) and Chen Duxiu (1879-1942), two Marxist scholars and outstanding writers of the 1919 May Fourth movement in China, by Tolstoy through his book *What Is Art?* and more especially by Bukharin (1888-1938), Romain Rolland (1866-1944) and Maxim Gorky (1868-1936). Moreover, like most members of the Vietnamese intelligentsia at that time, it was hard for Hải Triều not to fall under André Gide's influence, particularly when Gide had not officially raised his voice to criticize communism in his *Retour de l'URSS* (Return from the USSR) (1936). During the first period of the debate, sometimes Hải Triều or a certain writer on his side would write to Gide to ask his opinion, but in his reply Gide tended to incline towards the pure art side.⁶⁷

From the very beginning of the debate, Hải Triều maintained that he took the same standpoint as the materialists.

The materialists base their rationale on the physical activities and economic

⁶³ Hải Triều (1969), op. cit., p. 16.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 13-4.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 50.

⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 23-38.

⁶⁷ Hoài Thanh (1982), op. cit., p. 259.

changes within society to explain past and present art trends, from their causes to their development and destruction. These trends can only be correctly explained from the materialistic standpoint.⁶⁸

Combining Bukharin's and Tolstoy's views, Hải Triều stated that “art socializes human feelings and then transmits those feelings to humanity; therefore its origin is in society and its end is also in society.”⁶⁹ Thus literature and art, from their essence, were the products of society or, in Guo Moruo's words, quoted in Hải Triều, “a mere expression of human nature”.⁷⁰ A genuine literature was always for human life's sake. The writers' task was “systematizing feelings [of society], clearly distinguishing and expressing them in words”.⁷¹ Even when writers only focused on expressing their ego, they also expressed human life because “their ego is only a product of innumerable social egos”.⁷² However, the value of the works which inclined towards the ‘I’ was often not high. “The more an art or aesthetic achievement expresses clearly social characters, the more it is of great value.”⁷³

Nevertheless, as human social history always evolves, “the value of art is relative and limited because a work may be of great value for a certain class, in a certain age or country, but it can be worthless for another class, in an other age or country.”⁷⁴ According to Hải Triều, “the value of an artistic or literary work depends on the needs and fads of each class at each time and place”.⁷⁵ Hải Triều did not explain why he was still very fond of, and sometimes quoted from, Homer's ancient works, and Rousseau's, Diderot's and Montesquieu's eighteenth-century French works. Probably he

⁶⁸ Hải Triều (1969), *op. cit.*, p. 39.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

had not read Marx's introduction in the *Economic Manuscripts of 1857-58* and did not know that the founder of historical and dialectical materialism had a more flexible and accurate view: after thousands of years, Greek art and epics still attracted many admirers as they provided models which were very hard to surpass.

Later, although Hải Triều still used the expression 'for human life's sake', his pro-class stand became clearer. Literature was no more a human life manifestation but rather a class manifestation. "The literature of an era is only a reflection of class struggle. Each trend in literature and art is only an interpretation of feelings and thoughts prevalent in a certain social class."⁷⁶

The term 'socialist realism' appeared for the first time in a speech of 20 May 1932 by Ivan Gronsky, chairperson of the Organizing Committee of the Union of Writers, then in process of formation. Gronsky spoke to leading writers in Moscow: "The basic demand that we make on the writer is: write the truth, portray truthfully our reality that is in itself dialectic. Therefore the basic method of Soviet literature is the method of socialist realism."⁷⁷ This statement was quoted in the Literary Gazette three days later and became well known among Moscow's literary circle. Three months later, this term was used by Stalin at a meeting with several writers in Maxim Gorky's apartment. However, socialist realism as a doctrine was only promulgated at the first Congress of Soviet Writers by Andrei Zhdanov (1888-1948), a member of the Political Bureau of the Party's Central Committee, who was entrusted with leadership of propaganda and agitational work. Zhdanov declared:

Comrade Stalin has called our writers, "engineers of the human soul". What does this mean? What obligations does such an appellation put upon you?

It means, in the first place, that you must know life to be able to depict it truthfully in artistic creations, to depict it neither "scholastically" nor lifelessly, nor simply as "objective reality", but rather as reality in its revolutionary development. The truthfulness and historical exactitude of the artistic image must be linked with the

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 42.

⁷⁷ Herman Ermolaev (1977), *Soviet Literary Theories 1917-1934: The Genesis of Socialist Realism*, New York: Octagon Books, p. 144.

task of ideological transformation, of the education of the working people in the spirit of socialism. This method in fiction and literary criticism is what we call the method of socialist realism.⁷⁸

Attending this Congress, there were a number of “international guests”, including several French communist or leftist writers such as Louis Aragon, Elsa Triolet, Henri Barbusse, Romain Rolland, and André Gide. While Gide, Rolland, Barbusse and others voiced objections to the doctrine of socialist realism, Louis Aragon firmly believed that this doctrine could be imported into France.⁷⁹ Returning to France, Aragon became the most frequent commentator on, and practitioner of, socialist realism. He published accounts of the Moscow Congress and a number of articles on the subject of socialist realism in *Commune* and European journals.⁸⁰ In addition to these, at the end of 1934, he published a novel, *Les Cloches de Bâle*, which was unquestionably inspired by socialist realism. In the following year, he published a collection of lectures, *Pour un réalisme socialiste*, in which he outlined the main principles of socialist realism for a French audience. It can be guessed that some, if not all, of these works, written in French and published in France, were sent to Vietnam. This is a reason why, just one year later, the term “socialist realism” appeared in Hải Triều’s article on *Kép Tư Bền*.⁸¹ In the following year, in his article on Maxim Gorky, Hải Triều gave a definition of socialist realism which was clearly copied from Zhdanov’s statement: “Socialist realism essentially aims to depict honestly and clearly past and present phenomena, so that these descriptions of reality can lead the masses to enlightenment and to the struggle to build socialism.”⁸² He also saw the difference between social realism and nineteenth-century critical realism in Europe: the former was inclined to assertion and positiveness whereas the latter stopped at the level of

⁷⁸ A.A. Zhdanov (1950), *On Literature, Music and Philosophy*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, p. 15.

⁷⁹ Angela Kimyongur (1995), *Socialist Realism in Louis Aragon’s Le Monde Réel*, Elloughton: The University of Hull, p. 5.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Hải Triều (1969), op. cit., p. 56.

⁸² Ibid., p. 77.

accusation and complaint.⁸³ In the social realistic works, a new character was given considerable prominence: the workers. “When the heroes and genuine creators of new life play key roles in literary and artistic works, literature becomes up-to-date.”⁸⁴

It seems that Hải Triều read Marx and Engels' ideas on art and literature quite late. It was not until 1939, in his article “Đi tới chủ nghĩa tả thực trong văn chương: những khuynh hướng trong tiểu thuyết” (To reach realism in literature: trends in novels) that he mentioned ‘tendentiousness’ in literature for the first time. This was understandable. Although both Marx and Engels displayed a great love for literature and made extensive use of the treasures of world literature in their own work, they, in René Wellek's words, “were not literary critics by profession”.⁸⁵ They neither devoted any particular work exclusively to literature and art, nor attempted to build a comprehensive system of literary theory. Their ideas on those issues were scattered in their different writings, especially in letters to friends. What we now call the Marxist literary theory was first formulated by Franz Mehring (1846-1919) and Georgi V. Plekhanov (1856-1918),⁸⁶ and the first brief anthology of Marx's and Engels's casual pronouncements on the subject in German was not published until 1933, edited by M. Lifshitz and F.P. Schiller,⁸⁷ and in French in 1936, edited by Jean Fréville.⁸⁸ According to Vietnamese historians, the work of Jean Fréville was circulated in Vietnam by the end of the 1930s.⁸⁹ Undoubtedly Hải Triều read this book, and as a result of this, his

⁸³ Hải Triều, “Văn học Liên bang Nga Xô Viết”, *Hồn Trẻ*, no. 8 (25 July 1935), quoted in Hồng Chương, “Hải Triều, một nhà lý luận phê bình xuất sắc”, *Thép Mới*, no. 1 (10 October 1949), reprinted in *Văn học Việt Nam sau Cách mạng tháng Tám, Tiểu luận và phê bình*, Văn Học, Hanoi, 1993, p. 64.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁸⁵ René Wellek (1966), *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750 - 1950*, vol. 3 (The Age of Transition), London: Jonathan Cape, p. 233.

⁸⁶ T. Bottomre (ed.) (1991), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, Cambridge: Blackwell, pp. 317-318.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Jean Fréville (ed.) (1936), *Les grands textes du marxisme sur la littérature et l'art*, Paris: Editions sociales internationales.

⁸⁹ See Phan Cự Đệ, “Ảnh hưởng của tư tưởng mác xít và sự phát triển của văn xuôi hiện thực phê phán Việt Nam 1930-1945”, *Tap chí Văn Học* (Hanoi), no. 6 (1982), pp. 61-70; and Hải Triều

view became less rigid. He paid attention not only to the content but also to the artistic aspect of literary works. Echoing Engels, he wrote:

... socialist realism always recognizes that each work has a tendency, but it strives to avoid subjective, arbitrary, mechanistic tendencies, fixed thoughts and immutable creeds that writers awkwardly assemble in their stories... A work is interesting (I use the word 'interesting' in its relative sense) not only because it is to the contemporary taste of readers, but also because the way the author arranges the landscape and feelings is secretive and attractive. His view is expressed by main and minor characters' activities as well as the arrangement and the end of the work and he does not need to declare it.⁹⁰

Also thanks to Engels, Hải Triều's attitude towards Balzac was more generous and reasonable. In 1936, when comparing Balzac and Zola with Gorky, he contended that Balzac's and Zola's works "aim to patch up the ragged coat of the wealthy and save the corrupt capitalist regime".⁹¹ In 1939, Hải Triều realized that, even though writing between the two rays of light of monarchy and religion, in his *Human Comedy*, Balzac "described all the vileness and depravity of the society in which he was living". Therefore, Balzac was hailed as the greatest realist writer of humanity.⁹² Hải Triều here paraphrased what Engels wrote in his famous letter to Miss Harkness in 1888:

Balzac was politically a Legitimist; his great work is a constant elegy on the irretrievable decay of good society, his sympathies are all with the class doomed to extinction. But for all that his satire is never keener, his irony never more bitter, than when he sets in motion the very men and women with whom he sympathizes most deeply - the nobles. [...]. That Balzac thus was compelled to go against his own class sympathies and political prejudices, [...] that I consider the greatest triumphs of Realism and one of the grandest features in old Balzac.⁹³

(1969), op. cit., p. 65.

⁹⁰ Hải Triều (1969), op. cit., p. 65.

⁹¹ Ibid., p.72

⁹² Ibid., p. 66.

⁹³ Marx and Engels (1978), *On Literature and Art*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, pp. 91-92.

In paraphrasing Engels, Hải Triều did not know that Engels himself had reproduced Emile Zola's argument. In his article "Le naturalisme" published in 1882, Zola (1840-1902) wrote that Balzac "could openly profess Catholic and monarchical opinions, while his work is nevertheless scientific and democratic, in the broad sense of the word."⁹⁴ René Wellek believes that "Engels must have known these passages (or some of them) when he wrote his famous letter to Miss Harkness,"⁹⁵ and he comments: "It seems a quirk of history that Zola's idea has become a standard doctrine of Marxist criticism while Zola's naturalism is condemned by authoritative Marxist critics."⁹⁶

As a theorist, Hải Triều was handicapped by the lack of a wide knowledge base, and as a critic, he lacked sensitive perception. This rendered him a polemicist more than a theorist or a critic. Indeed, during the polemic that raged in Vietnam during the nineteen-thirties and forties, his writings displayed a sense of uncertainty and a lack of authority when dealing with any specific literary work. All of what he called 'masterpieces' are now completely forgotten. The two novels which he considered as pioneer works of socialist realist trends in Vietnam, *Kép Tư Bền* and *Làm than*, are indeed 'para-realistic' in the sense that both depicted pauperism in society with a romantic inspiration. This misconception was generally explained by the fact that Hải Triều "does not have the opportunity to be based on the reality of revolutionary literature or use critical realist literature as a basis".⁹⁷

As a polemicist and a pioneer in introducing Marxist literary theory to Vietnam, Hải Triều was a non-Zhdanoized Marxist. Compared with the paucity of the new Soviet material on matters relating to the art and literature which was translated into French after the establishment of the Union of Soviet Writers, the amount Hải Triều

⁹⁴ Quoted in René Wellek (1965), *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750-1950*, vol. 4 (The Late 19th Century), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 18.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Phong Lê (1980), op. cit., p. 17. See further Phan Trọng Thuồng, "Sự phát triển của tư tưởng lý luận văn nghệ mác xít từ thời Mặt trận Dân chủ đến Đề cương văn hoá", *Tạp chí Văn Học* (Hanoi), no. 6 (1993), pp. 3-5.

could have read must have been much smaller. He did not know the basic requirements of socialist realist works such as truthfulness and historical concreteness when depicting reality in its process of revolutionary development. Moreover, he did not grasp extremely important concepts in socialist realism as it developed under Stalin such as party-mindedness (*partiinnost*), mass-mindedness (*narodnost*), and class-mindedness (*klásovost*).⁹⁸ Hải Triều's knowledge of Marxist literary theory was mainly gained from certain works by Plekhanov, Bukharin and Engels. These theories were illustrated by the lives and works of some writers including Maxim Gorky, Romain Rolland and Henri Barbusse (1873-1935), and even André Gide, over a long period of time. Perhaps Hải Triều did not read all the works of these authors. However, the most important thing is that none of these authors, including Engels, was very dogmatic. All advocated that (i) literature and art should be closely connected with social, economic and political conditions; and (ii) literature and art should be a weapon of political struggle; but all agreed that (iii) literature and art had relative characteristics of autonomy. Furthermore, all of Hải Triều's material - wherever they derived from - were French versions. This is very important, because the speeches on literature, art and music by Zhdanov, the Minister of Culture under Stalin and the person notorious for his extremism and ruthlessness, were not translated into French until 1948, when they opened a period of increased dogmatism in the literary thoughts of French Marxist intellectuals.⁹⁹ Because of all these factors, Hải Triều, although mainly a copyist, became much more broad-minded.

The debate about art and literature ended suddenly in the middle of 1939, when the Second World War broke out, and the French colonial authorities tightened up their censorship policy and conducted a campaign to repress Vietnamese revolutionary

⁹⁸ See A. Tertz (1960), *On Socialist Realism*, New York: Pantheon Books; C. V. James (1973), *Soviet Socialist Realism, Origin and Theory*, London: Macmillan; Porter, R. (1988), "Soviet Perspectives on Socialist Realism", in M. Seriven and D. Tate (eds.) (1988), *European Socialist Realism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 49-59.

⁹⁹ J. E. Flower, "Socialist Realism without a Socialist Revolution: the French Experience", in M. Seriven and D. Tate (eds.) (1988), *op. cit.*, pp. 99-110.

parties. As a result, Marxist writers were either arrested or forced to engage in clandestine activities.

Interestingly, the closing article of the debate was an article on Karl Marx written by an unacknowledged foreign writer in which Marx was highly commended for his passion and wide knowledge of literature as well as for his liberal views. He liked reading writers of different trends: from Aeschylus and Cervantes to Shakespeare, Balzac and Walter Scott. The translator of this article was Lư Trọng Lư, a defender of pure art.¹⁰⁰

Certainly, when translating that article, Lư Trọng Lư, by praising Marx, aimed to direct numerous reproaches at banal Marxists in Vietnam, who “hold narrow views on literature.”¹⁰¹

Lư Trọng Lư pointed out that narrow-mindedness was the basic shortcoming of the Marxist writers in Vietnam. It may be said that this was also a common assessment by writers in general at the time: some, implicitly or explicitly, opposed the view that considered literature to be a weapon of class struggle; others disagreed with the way the problem was raised, for the controversy itself was considered to be narrow-minded, and the participants’ ensuing choice of either side or the other was deemed to be even more narrow-minded. The Tự Lực Literary Group's attitude was very typical: they did not participate in the debate from the beginning to the end, sometimes relating sneeringly some events of the debate, always accompanying them with cartoons and captions such as: “We were informed that Hoài Thanh, Hải Triều etc. are falling into a very dangerous ditch, which is the ditch of ‘art for art's sake’ or ‘art for human’s sake’” or “The latest news that we have received is that Hoài Thanh, Hải Triều etc... are bickering in the ditch of ‘art for art's sake’ and cannot climb out.”¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Lư Trọng Lư, “Cái khiêu văn chương của Karl Marx”, *Tao Đàn*, no. 8 (16 June 1939), reprinted in Thanh Lãng (1973), op. cit., pp. 197-199.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Thanh Lãng (1973), *ibid.*, p. 197.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 149-150.

The significance of the debate, therefore, was not great. Phan Cự Đệ's assertion that the debate "initially rolls back the influences of passive, aimless and romantic literature, and encourages critical realistic literature" must be regarded as an exaggeration.¹⁰³ In fact, the literary situation since 1939, the final year of the debate, proved the contrary: critical realistic literature was breathing its dying breath, while romantic literature was not only developing strongly but also tending to choose the pure art path, because the Xuân Thu Nhã Tập Group had come into being, with its poetic style more or less consisting of the symbolic characteristics of Hàn Mặc Tử and Bích Khê or the decadent features of Vũ Hoàng Chương and Đinh Hùng, with a new source of inspiration inclining towards religion or the metaphysical world in Huy Cận's and Chế Lan Viên's poetry. Along with all this there was the fact that Khải Hưng and Nhất Linh abandoned the "roman à thèse" and delved into psychological novels, and the appearance of Nguyễn Tuân, an outstanding but totally self-centered essayist who only liked 'to play his own solo instrument'.¹⁰⁴

It appears that the debate had two remarkable effects. Firstly, it encouraged and incited writers to delve into theoretical issues on literature, which was a new and attractive domain. While in the early 1930s writers and poets merely created spontaneously, without much theoretical awareness, from 1938 onwards they started becoming self-conscious of their writing task. Many manifesto-like poems and short stories in which the authors introduced their aesthetic and social views came into being. Critics did not base their praise and criticism merely on their own feelings, but rather they began to base their stand on certain positions or methods they had learnt from French literature. For example, Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân, in their *Thi nhân Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Poets), published in 1942, used the expressionist approach of Jules Lemaitre (1853-1914), and particularly that of Anatole France (1844-1924), who had followed Renan's skepticism and dilettantism and expressed complete relativism in literary appreciation and interpretation by arguing that aesthetics is delusion, that a

¹⁰³ Phan Cự Đệ, Hà Văn Đức and Nguyễn Hoàng Khung (1988), *Văn học Việt Nam 1930-45*, vol. 1, Hanoi: Nxb Đại Học và Trung Học Chuyên Nghiệp, p. 53.

¹⁰⁴ Nguyễn Tuân (1981), *Tuyển tập*, vol. 1, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 269.

work of art always changes with the eyes that see it, and that “the good critic tells the adventures of his soul among masterpieces”.¹⁰⁵ Dương Quảng Hàm, Trần Thanh Mại, Nguyễn Đông Chi and Lê Thanh adopted ‘la critique de l’université’ of Ferdinand Brunetière (1849-1906) and Gustave Lanson (1857-1934), a method involving a scrupulous and disciplined study of sources, chronology and bibliography. In 1939, Thạch Lam started his series of articles on literature which were later assembled in *Theo dòng*. Trương Tửu was initially a mediocre novelist and a superficial critic in the 1930s, but he became an outstanding and original critic in the 1940s, using his pen name Nguyễn Bách Khoa, since he concentrated on researching Western theories and approaches to criticism.

Marxist writers generally continued to delve into their views, and in 1944 Đặng Thai Mai completed and published the first Vietnamese literary theoretical book entitled *Văn học khái luận* (An Outline of Literature).

The second effect of this debate is that, through it, some basic theoretical points of socialist realism and particularly of Russian and Soviet literatures, were first introduced to Vietnamese readers. This was very important because Vietnamese artists, writers and intellectuals generally knew only Chinese, French and a little of English literature. In the 1930s, as a result of Gide's warm introduction, they became acquainted with two colossi of Russian literature: Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.¹⁰⁶ Of these two writers, Dostoevsky had a great impact on Nhất Linh, Nguyễn Hồng and other Vietnamese writers, and was highly valued by Thạch Lam as “the most worthy novelist of the century”.¹⁰⁷ Soviet literature was gradually noticed because of sporadic quotations from Marxist writings and especially because of Hải Triều’s two articles.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ René Wellek (1965), op. cit., p. 24.

¹⁰⁶ See André Gide (1967), *Dostoevsky* (with an introduction by Arnold Bennett), Harmondsworth: Penguin. (First published in Paris in 1923.)

¹⁰⁷ Thạch Lam (1968), *Theo dòng*, Saigon: Đời Nay, p. 71.

¹⁰⁸ The article “Maxim Gorky, nhà đại văn hào của Liên bang Xô Viết và của thế giới đã qua đời”, published in *Hồn Tré* magazine, no. 5 (4 July 1936), reprinted in Hải Triều (1969), op. cit., pp. 68-78; and the article “Văn học Liên bang Nga Xô Viết” (co-author by Hải Thanh), in *Hồn Tré*

The first Soviet writer whose works were translated into Vietnamese was Maxim Gorky: in 1936, Vũ Ngọc Phan translated a part of the novel *Childhood*, which was published in the *French-Vietnamese* magazine on the day Gorky passed away. In 1938, Nguyễn Thường Khanh (1917-47) finished his translation of the novel *Mother*, which was published in the following year in *Dân Mới* magazine, continuing until this magazine was closed down. The impression of those contacts lingered in Vietnamese hearts. After the 1945 August Revolution, the first books translated into Vietnamese included some Gorky translations: *Cultural Chieftains* (Các ông trùm văn hoá) and *Torments* (Dằn vặt). After 1954, in North Vietnam, the first translation of the Vietnamese Writers Association's Publishing House was also Gorky's work: *Selected Short Stories* (Tuyển tập truyện ngắn) (1957). Gorky's *Mother* (Người mẹ) was translated into Vietnamese by four translators: Nguyễn Thường Khanh, Thiều Phụng, Lê Tam and Phan Thao.

However, the effects of these writers should not be exaggerated. Certainly, only a few people followed the debate. Several years later, in *Văn học khái luận* (An Outline of Literary Theory), Đặng Thai Mai reminisced about the debate as follows: “our people are still very indifferent”.¹⁰⁹ The most important reason was that nearly all newspapers which inserted the polemic articles were minor journals which circulated only in one region and did not have many readers. Six months after Hải Triều had criticized Thiều Sơn bitterly in his article entitled “Art for art sake or art for human life's sake”, published in *Đời Mới* in March 1935, Thiều Sơn did not know anything about it.¹¹⁰ This shows that the circulation of *Đời Mới* was very limited and that this newspaper had no serious repercussions on the inquisitive section of Vietnamese society at that time. Moreover, it was very hard for people who followed the debate to sympathize with Marxist writers, especially because they gave the impression of being too ‘xenophile’ by, on the one hand, extolling foreign writers such as Maxim Gorky, Romain Rolland and Henry Barbusse, and on the other hand, disparaging and slighting,

magazine, no. 8 (25 July 1936).

¹⁰⁹ Đặng Thai Mai (1950), *Văn học khái luận*, Hanoi: Liên Hiệp, p. 34.

¹¹⁰ Thanh Lăng (1973), op. cit., pp. 124-5.

sometimes ruthlessly, Vietnamese writers including Nguyễn Du (1766-1820), the national icon and pride. This was such a serious shortcoming of the Vietnamese Communist Party at that time that in 1939, at a conference of the Communist Party's Central Committee, they realized their mistake and changed their main fighting slogan from class struggle to national liberation.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ See Huỳnh Kim Khánh (1982), *Vietnamese Communism 1925-45*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 251-2, and Tonnesson, S. (1991), *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945*, London: Sage Publications, p. 115.

CHAPTER THREE

The First Marxist Theorists and Critics: Nguyễn Bách Khoa and Đặng Thai Mai

While Hải Triều (1908-54) was the first writer to introduce Marxist literary theory to Vietnam, Nguyễn Bách Khoa (real name Trương Từ, 1908-2002) was the first critic to apply this theory to interpret specific works and evaluate specific authors; and Đặng Thai Mai (1902-84) was the first scholar to develop it, in a monograph which was hailed as the first work of literary theory written in Vietnamese.

Nguyễn Bách Khoa, the First Marxist Critic

Surpassing Hải Triều in knowledge, and Đặng Thai Mai in talent, Nguyễn Bách Khoa was such an original and professional writer that even his opponents admitted: “If literature is only an original thing, Trương Từ is an original writer. He is distinguishable from other writers.”¹ Being the first to free himself from criticism based on feeling and the first to rely on a relatively systematic literary theory, Nguyễn Bách Khoa “opened a new era of criticism in Vietnam”.² Besides, his highly sophisticated style was extraordinarily attractive. Many of his works, “especially since 1947, have become bed-side books for the younger generation. At schools, teachers as well as students echoed Nguyễn Bách Khoa when criticizing. This movement spreads like wildfire”.³ Even now, his works continue to have a strong impact on a wide range

¹ Hoài Thanh (1958), “Thực chất của tư tưởng Trương Từ”, *Văn Nghệ* (Hanoi), no. 11 (April 1958), p. 15.

² Thanh Lăng (1973), *Phê bình văn học thế hệ 1932*, Saigon: Phong trào văn hoá, p. 389.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 395

of people, especially among the old. Since 1975, some of his books have been reprinted many times by Vietnamese refugees living overseas.

However, it should be stressed that Nguyễn Bách Khoa was not recognized as a Marxist by everybody. All literary researchers in South Vietnam prior to 1975 regarded him not only as a Marxist critic but also as one of the most eminent representatives of Marxist trends in Vietnamese literary criticism; in the North, under the communist regime, especially after the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair (1956), he was condemned as a pseudo-Marxist, a mechanical materialist and a vulgar sociologist. This phenomenon may be attributed to two main causes: first, some political issues relating to his life, and second, the complexity of his works.

Prior to the August Revolution of 1945, Nguyễn Bách Khoa had not been involved in any political activities, but his thoughts were tending towards Trotskyism rather than Bolshevism. During the period of 1941 to 1945, he founded both the *Văn Mới* journal and the Hàn Thuyên group, which consisted of many socialist writers, most of whom were Trotskyists. Moreover, he often opposed the Vietnamese Communist Party's cultural policy. While Trường Chinh, the Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party, put forward three principles for the new culture, “national, popular and scientific”, Nguyễn Bách Khoa advocated four other factors: revolution, the masses, socialism and science.⁴ While the Communist Party strove to gather writers into the ranks led by the Party, Nguyễn Bách Khoa kept repeating Gide's statement advising writers to “spread unsubmissive and rebellious enzymes widely into people's minds”.⁵ While the Communist Party tried to propagate their first achievement of revolutionary literature, Nguyễn Bách Khoa assessed straightforwardly: “From the previous autumn to this autumn, the Revolution has reaped good harvests, whereas literature has gathered bad crops.”⁶ His provocative attitude towards the Communist Party only stopped when the anti-French resistance broke out in December 1946.

⁴ Quoted in Hoài Thanh (1958), op. cit., p. 19.

⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

However, after the 1954 Geneva Agreements, in the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair he urged the Communist Party to respect freedom and democracy, to stop regarding arts as the “bond maiden” of politics. As a result of this, together with many other writers, Nguyễn Bách Khoa was stripped by the Party of his right to write.⁷ All his literary achievements were obliterated as he was considered reactionary and a betrayer of the Party. No literary document published after 1957 in North Vietnam mentioned him as a critic or writer.

Moreover, the literary thoughts of Nguyễn Bách Khoa prior to 1945 were quite complex and unstable. They were like a journey full of experiments and adventures. Before becoming a Marxist literary critic, Nguyễn Bách Khoa tried to apply different approaches such as sociology and psychoanalysis to literary study. Focusing merely on his first works, his opponents could pick up innumerable specific items of evidence condemning him as an idealist or a mechanical materialist, or even, according to Lê Đình Ky, an orthodox Marxist critic, as a “vulgar and foolish” sociologist.⁸ However, in so doing, these critics were unfair, for two reasons. Firstly, they attempted to ignore the many research achievements in which Nguyễn Bách Khoa had skillfully applied purely dialectical materialistic viewpoints. Secondly, they denied the fact that even when Nguyễn Bách Khoa mixed Marxism with psychoanalysis or sociology, the Marxist view was still the major point.

Nguyễn Bách Khoa had certain characteristics which brought many political disasters to his life: a fondness for inquiry and a frequently changing mood. Within just a few months his way of evaluating a specific literary event might completely change. He liked venturing into new domains. Under his real name, Trương Tửu, he began participating in literary circles in the 1930s with a series of critical writings published in the *Loa* newspaper, whose editor-in-chief was Lan Khai. He was unsuccessful for a

⁷ The Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm affair will be discussed in Chapter Six of this thesis. For further details of this affair, see Georges Boudarel, “Intellectual dissidence in the 1950s: the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair”, *The Vietnam Forum*, no. 13 (1990), pp. 154-174, and Hoàng Giang, “La révolte des intellectuels au Vietnam en 1956”, *The Vietnam Forum*, no. 13 (1990), pp. 144-153.

⁸ Lê Đình Ky (1987), *Nhìn lại tư tưởng văn nghệ thời Mỹ Ngụy*, Ho Chi Minh City: Nxb thành phố HCM, p. 87.

number of reasons: his literary taste was not refined enough, his critical approach was almost out of date and his style was overstated. In his *Nhà văn hiện đại* (Modern Writers), Vũ Ngọc Phan criticized Trương Tửu without sympathy: “He used big words to comment on tiny matters in a book. It may be said that he used a knife for killing buffaloes when killing chickens.”⁹ Nguyễn Bách Khoa then started writing novels but was again unsuccessful. None of his eight novels published between 1937 and 1941 was really interesting.¹⁰ He was seen as a third- or fourth-class writer. Eventually he decided to return to his critical career. This time his voice was more confident and his standpoint more unequivocal: he became a materialist. As a critic, he focused particularly on the classical authors such as Nguyễn Du (1766-1820) and Nguyễn Công Trứ (1778-1858), whose literary merits are beyond question.

One of Nguyễn Bách Khoa's works which opened this period was *Kinh thi Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Book of Poetry), published in 1940, in which he examined Vietnamese folk poetry from a sociological point of view. He asserted that Vietnamese folk poems had two high values: firstly, they reflected people's thoughts and feelings from previous generations; secondly, they recorded social customs, religious rituals and the ways of living of the ancients. In this sense, folk poems were precious material for sociology: “We can use popular poems to find out the common psychology of the past and activities which may never come back.”¹¹ The *Vietnamese Book of Poetry*, therefore, was a mere work on Vietnamese cultural history rather than on literary criticism: instead of using his sociological knowledge and technique to analyze folk poetry, on the contrary, Nguyễn Bách Khoa chose some appropriate lines in the folk poems to illustrate his theoretical points. According to him, the most salient feature of

⁹ Vũ Ngọc Phan (1960), *Nhà văn hiện đại*, vol. 4, tome 2, Saigon: Thăng Long, pp. 1125-26. (Originally published in 1944.)

¹⁰ These novels are: *Thanh niên S.O.S.* (1937), *Một chiến sĩ* (1939), *Khi chiếc yếm rơi xuống* (1939), *Khi người ta đi* (1940), *Một cổ đôi ba tròng* (1940), *Trái tim nổi loạn* (1940), *Đục nước béo cò* (1940), and *Một kiếp đoạ đầy* (1941).

¹¹ Trương Tửu (1940), *Kinh thi Việt Nam*, Hanoi: Hàn Thuyên; Xuân Thu reprinted in Los Alanitos (U.S.A.) (n.d.).

Vietnamese spiritual life in the past was the struggle against the assimilation conspiracy of the Chinese, at first against Confucianism and later against masculinism:

Vietnamese women do not accept male chauvinism; our hearts do not accept Confucius' and Mencius' rational philosophy; our instincts do not comply with Confucianist ritual-oriented organization: these are three distinct social and psychological characteristics of Vietnam. All of these result from special features of Vietnamese geography and history.¹²

Let us pay attention to the last sentence of the above quotation, particularly the term “geography”, which reminds us of Hippolyte Taine’s thoughts. Taine (1828-93) was mainly a psychologist and historian, but his lasting contribution has been as a literary theorist and critic. He is regarded as the founder of the modern sociology of literature, who, in his *Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (1863), advocated a deterministic theory of literature. According to this theory, all great writers are the result of a variety of causes: firstly, their race; secondly, their environment; and thirdly, the circumstances in which they were placed while their talents were developing. Hence, race, milieu and moment are the most important factors which determine the character of a writer and his/her work, and are the sources of what Taine calls the master faculties, the “soul” of a nation. For Taine, race is the hereditary dispositions that we bring with us into the world; milieu is the physical or social circumstances that influence the shaping of our character; and moment is the accumulation of all past experiences.¹³

Although influenced by Taine, Nguyễn Bách Khoa was not his disciple. Of Taine’s triad, the race and milieu factors were ignored. Furthermore, “milieu”, in Taine's view, included not only the physical environment such as soil and climate, but also political and social conditions.¹⁴ In Nguyễn Bách Khoa's view, it was almost

¹² Ibid., pp. 170-171.

¹³ For a brief introduction to Hippolyte Taine (1828-93), see René Wellek (1965), *A History of Modern Criticism 1750-1950*, vol. 4, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 27-57.

¹⁴ Ibid.

identical to history. On the one hand, being close to the great might of China, the Vietnamese had had to resist violent invasions from the North, and on the other, they had to find ways to fight against the Champa and others in order to expand their territory in the South. Thus, war seemed to be interminable. Most men were sent to war, whereas women assumed the responsibility for agricultural and commercial works to feed their families. As a result, Vietnamese women at that time gained a high position in society, and even if they were not equal to men, at least they were not treated with contempt as were women in China. Nguyễn Bách Khoa's explanation was clearly influenced by Marx. It is not accidental that his book includes a whole chapter (Chapter 11), entitled “Social reality termines consciousness”, in which he declares that “Philosophy or political system are not things that drop from the sky but are inevitable results of the economic conditions of a given country in a given historical period.”¹⁵ However, when using the concept of “social reality” or “economic conditions”, Nguyễn Bách Khoa focuses only on the mode of production but does not mention another important aspect in Marxist thought - the production relationship whose emphasis is on class struggle.

After 1942, Nguyễn Bách Khoa's thoughts changed once more. This time he seemed to be very decisive, abandoning his real name (Trương Tửu) and using a new pen name, Nguyễn Bách Khoa. It may be said that Nguyễn Bách Khoa was a negation of Trương Tửu: in one note in the references in his *Văn chương Truyện Kiều* (The Literature of the Tale of Kieu), when mentioning Trương Tửu, he regarded him as a friend.¹⁶ Of the many differences between Nguyễn Bách Khoa and Trương Tửu, the most important was: while Trương Tửu was merely a person who was in the process of finding a way, Nguyễn Bách Khoa was confident of holding the truth in his hands. Previously, his style had been relatively equitable and modest, showing respect for his predecessors and contemporaries, but later it became more and more confident and sharp. He provoked hostility with everybody and even declared war on the whole tradition of Vietnamese literary criticism. In his *The Literature of the Tale of Kieu*, he

¹⁵ Ibid., 163.

¹⁶ Nguyễn Bách Khoa (1953), *Văn chương Truyện Kiều*, third edition, Hanoi: Thế Giới, p. 151.

stated that “all critiques of *The Tale of Kieu* exposed the critics' subjective mistakes rather than explained the quintessence of the work-work”.¹⁷ He divided these so-called “subjective mistakes” into two kinds: a frivolous critical approach and an idealistic view on arts and artists. He claimed that neither approach could explain the good and the beautiful of literary works because critics were at pains either to analyze every small and petty detail, such as the way of depicting the landscape, feelings, characters, the ways of using words and choosing rhymes, or to resign themselves to a purely agnostic attitude.

His book, *The Literature of the Tale of Kieu*, aimed to “justify those mistakes” and his ambition was “to establish a solid system of principles used as a lodestar of literary criticism rather than to waste time discussing some good details in *The Tale of Kieu*. Based on this system, readers can understand the beauty of *The Tale of Kieu* by themselves.”¹⁸

Nguyễn Bách Khoa was very interested in using the word “system”. According to Nguyễn Văn Trung, “systematicness” is one of the most distinctive features of Nguyễn Bách Khoa.¹⁹ The cult of systematization was in fact a manifestation of the cult of science. This was the second difference between Nguyễn Bách Khoa and Trương Tửu: while Trương Tửu was a mere materialist, Nguyễn Bách Khoa was materialist-cum-scientist. It may be said that nobody in Vietnamese literary history has ever worshipped science as much as Nguyễn Bách Khoa. Affected by late nineteenth-century French positivism and scientism, Nguyễn Bách Khoa believed that there was only one way of knowing, that of science, and there was only one way of living, that of thinking and acting according to science. Based on Auguste Comte's Law of the Three Stages, Nguyễn Bách Khoa asserted that those relying on aesthetic intuition were only

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. vii-ix.

¹⁹ Nguyễn Văn Trung (1990), *Lược khảo văn học*, vol. 3, Xuân Thu reprinted in Los Alanitos, pp. 190-2. (Originally published in Saigon in 1968.)

“backward people who could not break completely with remaining perceptions from ancient times”.²⁰

In his view, science had the “all-purpose” to enlighten and explain everything, including the most vague and abstract issues, such as the concepts of beauty, poetic quality, soul and genius. Furthermore, skepticism about science was a reactionary attitude.²¹

He especially gave the dialectical materialistic method considerable prominence, as it was extremely efficient, and with it, he believed “numerous secrets of the spiritual world” would sooner or later be discovered because the complexity and the evolution of this world have a materialistic root which can be measured, looked at, weighed, calculated and controlled by using scientific instruments.²²

Although having a passion for dialectical materialism, Nguyễn Bách Khoa's knowledge of philosophy in general, as illustrated in his *Nguyễn Du và Truyện Kiều* (Nguyễn Du and the Tale of Kieu) (1942) and *Văn chương Truyện Kiều* (The Literature of the Tale of Kieu) (1945), seems to have been very limited. In these books, he puts forward five basic dialectical principles for the study of humans, as follows:

- (i) “In spite of their mysterious nature, all biographical phenomena lie in the realm of a cause-effect rule” (Claude Bernard).
- (ii) “Thinking is an attribute of a human body” (Feuerbach).
- (iii) “Spiritual life is rooted in physiological factors but is developed in society” (T. Ribot).
- (iv) “The human spirit is the crystallization of social correlation” (K. Marx).
- (v) “The law of all progresses is that qualitative changes are proportionate to changes in quantity” (Hégel).²³

²⁰ Nguyễn Bách Khoa (1953), op. cit., p. 95.

²¹ Ibid., p. 81.

²² Ibid., p. 81.

²³ Ibid., p. 71.

Nguyễn Bách Khoa's way of synthesizing was strange: he did not hesitate to put completely different, or even contradictory, viewpoints side by side. Probably he did not carefully read the works of the writers mentioned above, with the result that he did not know that Hegel was an idealist philosopher, that Claude Bernard, in spite of advocating determinism and experimentalism, was ready to accept the necessity of metaphysics and opposed the application of the methods of natural science to the social sciences,²⁴ that Feuerbach was a sensualist rather than a materialist - or if he *was* a materialist, his materialism was very different from Marx's. The last point was indicated by Marx in his *Theses on Feuerbach* written in 1845 and published in 1888 by Engels.²⁵

In another paragraph in his *The Literature of the Tale of Kieu*, Nguyễn Bách Khoa combines genetics with characteriology, psychoanalysis and Marxism into a general view of studying and criticizing literature:

To understand an artist's character, we should examine the class and the social, historical, geographical, and hereditary traits which take part in forming their psychological structure. We should also study the ability of operation, reaction and suitability of his/her body and nervous system, as well as the reciprocal effect between the individual artist and his environment.

If we know the structure of an artist's body, his heredity, his educational background and his social class in a given historical period, we can predict his ideological system (thoughts and psychology) and his career in the arts.²⁶

²⁴ See W. Simon (1963), *European Positivism in the 19th Century: An Essay in Intellectual History*, Port Washington: Kennikent Press, pp. 115-6.

²⁵ See Marx and Engels (1973), *Feuerbach, Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlooks*, London: Lawrence and Wishart; and Eugen Kameka (1970), *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

²⁶ Nguyễn Bách Khoa (1953), *op. cit.*, p. 74.

In spite of his intention to reconcile discrepant opinions in a unique system, Nguyễn Bách Khoa never raised the following issues: What was the relationship of such factors as physiology, psychology and society in the creation of human personality? Which one was the most important? He attempted to apply Freud's and Marx's views at his convenience in his works. He was not aware of the fact that in the Soviet Union, in order to ensure the unity of Marxism, from the late 1920s to the late 1950s, Freud's psychoanalysis was criticized for being biologicistic, idealist, pessimistic, bourgeois, and inherently tied to the capitalist ideology, which could not have a place in Soviet society. For several decades, it was completely abandoned because one could not, on the one hand, call for social reform which causes human transformation, and on the other, believe that human personality is determined by haphazard factors within the subconscious.²⁷ According to V.N. Volosinov, in his book, *Freudianism: a Marxist Critique*, first published in the Soviet Union in 1927, Freud presented humans in “an inherently false, individualistic, asocial, and ahistorical setting”, and as a result, his ideas were “totally unacceptable from an objective materialistic point of view.”²⁸ It would be wrong to state, like Nguyễn Văn Trung, that Nguyễn Bách Khoa knew how to systematically apply literary theories in criticism and scholarship.²⁹ The reason is that Nguyễn Bách Khoa's knowledge was quite patchy. He frequently contradicted himself: only in his *The Literature of the Tale of Kieu* did he assert that human personality was constituted by physiological and genetic factors;³⁰ later he considered that “all an individual's feelings, thoughts and creative abilities are provided by society and class”,³¹ and after that maintained that “literature is a class instrument, an indirect

²⁷ Martin A. Miller (1998), *Freud and the Bolsheviks: Psychoanalysis in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

²⁸ V.N. Volosinov (1976), *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, translated by I. R. Titunik, New York: Academic Press, pp. vii and 1.

²⁹ Nguyễn Văn Trung (1990), *Lược khảo văn học*, vol. 3, Xuân Thu reprinted in Los Alanitos, pp. 190-192. (Originally published in 1968.)

³⁰ Nguyễn Bách Khoa (1953), op. cit., p. 72.

³¹ Ibid., p. 102.

political means”,³² and finally he pointed out that “each work is a manifestation of an artist's personality” or, in psychological terms, “an expression of repressed passion”.³³

We know that Trotsky was in sympathy with Freud. Opposing Lenin's viewpoint, Trotsky believed that Freud's psychoanalytical approach was materialistic and it was not a mistake when a Marxist acknowledged psychoanalysis as well as Pavlov's theory.³⁴ However, for several reasons, Nguyễn Bách Khoa was probably not influenced by Trotsky. Firstly, despite Nguyễn Bách Khoa's tendency to incline towards a Trotskyist rather than a Bolshevik standpoint, he never mentioned Trotsky in his critical writings. Two points should be mentioned here. Firstly, on the one hand, Nguyễn Bách Khoa was very fond of quoting foreign books, and on the other, Trotsky wrote lots of books and articles on arts and literature issues.³⁵ Secondly, immediately after his *The Literature of the Tale of Kieu* (1945), Nguyễn Bách Khoa abandoned Freud's influence and merely wrote from his Marxist standpoint in *Tâm lý và tư tưởng Nguyễn Công Trứ* (Nguyễn Công Trứ's Psychology and Thoughts), which was published in 1945. This ideological change did not accompany any change in his political attitude. It is believed that it was purely an intellectual change. Nguyễn Bách Khoa probably recognized that he had been contradicting himself and that the marriage he had jokingly forced between Freud and Marx was utopian.

In fact, Nguyễn Bách Khoa first shows himself as a Marxist in his *Nguyễn Công Trứ's Psychology and Thoughts*, a systematic critical work which tries to follow a successfully dialectical materialist approach. In the preface of this book, Nguyễn Bách Khoa criticizes Lê Thước, the author of the first critical work on Nguyễn Công

³² Ibid., p. 22.

³³ Ibid., p. 127.

³⁴ See Leon Trotsky (1973), *Problems of Everyday Life and Other Writings on Culture and Science*, New York: Moned, p. 234.

³⁵ See Leon Trotsky (1968), *Literature and Revolution*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press. The Vietnamese version, *Văn học và cách mạng*, translated by Hoàng Nguyễn (2000), published in Paris by Tủ sách nghiên cứu.

Trú in Vietnam,³⁶ for failing to explain the numerous contradictions in Nguyễn Công Trứ's life and thoughts, for three main reasons: (i) he did not recognize that contradiction is the nature of things, (ii) he held an abstract view on individuals; and (iii) he had a “feudal ideology” of talent. Nguyễn Bách Khoa also criticized Taine, who was his previous idol, for being a vulgar and mechanical materialist. According to Nguyễn Bách Khoa, Taine explained a literary phenomenon through the psychological attributes of the writer but forgot that these attributes themselves need to be explained. Moreover, Taine did not acknowledge any genius, and believed that a genius was a person who thought and felt according to his/her era's inspirations. Finally, Taine's understanding of the cause - effect rule was too rigid while all elements had a dialectical relationship: an element might be at this time and place a cause, but it might be at another place and in another time an effect, and vice versa.³⁷

Based on Marx's definition of human beings as “an outcome of social relationship”, Nguyễn Bách Khoa drew up three principles: (i) human spiritual life is a product of physiological and social life; (ii) human genetic and psychological nature changes in accordance with social changes; (iii) after being determined by society, human beings also affect that society, although this re-effect is then, in turn, determined by social circumstances. From these principles, Nguyễn Bách Khoa concluded that “although a genius, an individual is also a product of his/her society”.³⁸ Thus, to understand an individual, especially a genius, we should study carefully: (i) the social circumstances in which he or she was born and shaped; (ii) the ideology, the psychology and historical role of the class of which he/she is a member; and (iii) the influences of the class struggle on that individual. To sum up, “one must study the whole social system in which that individual, from his/her class standpoint, is affected by and reacts to his/her circumstances.” According to Nguyễn Bách Khoa, this

³⁶ Lê Thuóc (1928), *Sự nghiệp và thi văn của Uy Viễn tướng công Nguyễn Công Trứ*, Hanoi: Ấn quán Lê Văn Tân.

³⁷ Nguyễn Bách Khoa (1951), *Tâm lý và tư tưởng Nguyễn Công Trứ*, second edition, Hanoi: Thế Giới, pp. xii-xiii. (First edition was printed in 1945.)

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

approach is dialectical materialism, “the highest and the most effective method in modern thought”.³⁹

Based on the above principles, Nguyễn Bách Khoa examines the age, class and biography of Nguyễn Công Trứ, one of the greatest poets of the nineteenth century. In his view, Nguyễn Công Trứ was primarily a Confucian scholar. Different from Chinese Confucian literati who emerged from the struggle between the clergy and the landlords in the Spring and Autumn period (770-476 B.C.), the Vietnamese literati were merely a kind of imported product at the time Vietnam was invaded by China. Due to their stock conditions, Vietnamese literati often lacked theoretical ability. They just borrowed available Chinese ideologies and often defended the clergy and the landlords' interests. Nguyễn Công Trứ's era was one of endless wars. This had several consequences: (i) in terms of politics, the nation was unified and its territory was extended, but the masses were at a low ebb and exhausted; (ii) in terms of society, trade developed and led to the creation of wealthy urban merchant classes, whereas the imperial scholars were in difficulty and sinking into decay; (iii) in terms of psychology, all humans aspired to peace, worshiped heroes towering above their contemporaries, and believed in their destiny.

The above characteristics of Nguyễn Công Trứ's class and era had a tremendous impact on his psychology and thoughts. When he was young, Nguyễn Công Trứ was very poor, but instead of “peaceful living in the poor conditions” (an *bần lạc đạo*) like the scholars of the previous centuries, Nguyễn Công Trứ, on the contrary, was indignant in a society where trade economy resulted in great importance being attached to money. On the one hand, he cursed poverty and always dreamt of one day passing examinations and becoming a rich and powerful mandarin; on the other, he was deeply resentful of the supercilious wealthy with little schooling who had emerged. Before the nineteenth century, reacting to their class enemies, Vietnamese literati often haughtily regarded themselves as the representatives of ethics as well as of benevolence and righteousness; they were highly placed in society. However, after that, because of their

³⁹ Ibid., p. xix.

loss of self-confidence, the literati chose hedonism in order to prove their aristocratic style of living. The most typical of this style was the image of an “amorous and talented man” (tài tử), which was clearly depicted in Nguyễn Công Trứ's poetry.

Nguyễn Bách Khoa reached the conclusion that Nguyễn Công Trứ's psychology and thoughts reflected the nature and situation of the Vietnamese Confucian literati of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He labelled Nguyễn Công Trứ as “a witness of his era.”⁴⁰

The *Nguyễn Công Trứ's Psychology and Thoughts* is regarded as an excellent monograph, in which Nguyễn Bách Khoa successfully applied the orthodox Marxist view on literary criticism which was widely accepted in the socialist countries. In criticizing Nguyễn Bách Khoa for being a false Marxist, and a vulgar and mechanical materialist, orthodox Marxist critics intentionally ignored his writing on Nguyễn Công Trứ. Up till now, there has not been any work in Vietnam on Nguyễn Công Trứ which surpasses that of Nguyễn Bách Khoa. Moreover, several of the creative discoveries in Nguyễn Bách Khoa's book on Nguyễn Công Trứ are paraphrased in many later works written by the orthodox Marxist critics. His influence remains strong, even today. For example, the image of the “amorous and talented writers” (tài tử), the attitude of Nguyễn Công Trứ towards poverty, the effects of trade economy and the merchants on Vietnamese culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the hedonistic trend in Vietnamese literature of the nineteenth century, which were first revealed by Nguyễn Bách Khoa, reappear later with more detail and more profound interpretation in Nguyễn Lộc's and Phan Ngọc's works.⁴¹

By 1945, *Nguyễn Công Trứ's Psychology and Thoughts* was the sole work which applied Marxist literary criticism in Vietnam. This work also shows Nguyễn Bách Khoa's strength: his wide knowledge of Vietnamese history and culture, his acute

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 216-217.

⁴¹ See Nguyễn Lộc (1977), *Văn học Việt Nam nửa cuối thế kỷ XVIII - nửa đầu thế kỷ XIX*, vol. 1, Hanoi: Nxb Đại Học và Trung Học Chuyên Nghiệp; and Phan Ngọc (1985), *Tìm hiểu phong cách nghệ thuật của Nguyễn Du trong Truyện Kiều*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội.

arguments, and his attractive style. Thanks to these characteristics, his work was warmly welcomed by readers, especially the youth, who were in an eager bustle for something new and who worshipped science because of their inferiority complex based on living in a poor and backward country. It may be said that while Hải Triều merely gave a sketchy introduction of a Marxist literary viewpoint to a minority of intellectuals, Nguyễn Bách Khoa was the first scholar who practiced the Marxist criticism and won the hearts and minds of dozens of thousands of readers. While Hải Triều was primarily a polemicist, Nguyễn Bách Khoa rightly held the place of originator of practical Marxist criticism in Vietnamese literature.

One point needs to be mentioned here: while Hải Triều's thinking itinerary extended from Plekhanov, Tolstoy and Kuo Mojo to the 1930s socialist realism of the Soviet Union, then went back to Engels, the thinking of Nguyễn Bách Khoa was more complex, stemming from Taine, Freud and Durkheim, and extending to Marx, Engels and Plekhanov. Although they had different itineraries, both were limited to the Marxist literary viewpoint of the turn of the century. Also, because they derived their Marxism from various sources, including some non-Marxist ones, their thoughts were quite eclectic. They were a medley of radical ideology, economic determinism and literary pragmatism.

Đặng Thai Mai and his *Outline of Literary Theory*

While Nguyễn Bách Khoa was attempting to apply Marxist aesthetics to practical criticism, another man, Đặng Thai Mai (1902-1984), was attempting to solve several theoretical issues of literature within a Marxist framework. However, the creative personalities, literary contributions and even destinies of both of them are completely different. Nguyễn Bách Khoa was changeable, slightly eccentric and a fearless thinker who was greatly interested in originality, loved to experiment in theories and words, and with all the idealism of a non-communist left intellectual, could not accept deposition and pretence. As a result of this, Nguyễn Bách Khoa was eventually condemned to silence. From 1957 onwards, not a single one of his books

was printed in North Vietnam, and only one of his articles made a brief appearance in an anthology published in 1994, as an outcome of the *đổi mới* (Renovation) Movement.⁴² In contrast, Đặng Thai Mai always remained loyal to Marxism and the Communist Party. For this reason, he was always well-treated by the Communist Party: in 1939 he was nominated as a candidate to the Chamber of People's Deputies of Central Vietnam; after the August 1945 Revolution, he was appointed as Minister of Education (1945-46); and in the anti-French resistance, he became the chairperson of the Resistant Administrative Committee of Thanh Hoá province (1947-48), the president of the Cultural Association for National Salvation (1948-49), and the director of the Faculty of Arts in the Fifth Inter-zones (Liên khu 5). His success continued, and following the 1954 Geneva Agreements, he was appointed rector of the Hanoi School of Education (1956-59), and later held three important positions almost at the same time: President of the Vietnamese Union of Writers and Artists (1957-84), Head of the Institute of Literature (1959-76) and Publisher of the *Văn Học* journal (1959-76).

Đặng Thai Mai was admired by most Marxist writers for his great talent and erudite scholarship. Huy Cận, a great poet and successor of Đặng Thai Mai in the position of president of the Vietnamese Union of Writers and Artists, considered him as “an encyclopedia of literature, arts, culture, and present and past global civilizations”.⁴³ According to Lữ Huy Nguyên, a poet and director of the Publishing House of the Vietnamese Writers' Association, one might attribute all the honorable titles of the writing profession to Đặng Thai Mai: scholar, literary researcher, theorist, critic and writer.⁴⁴ Nguyễn Huệ Chi, an expert in Vietnamese classical literature, regarded Đặng Thai Mai as a combination of talents: “He does not limit his writings to any special domain. He totally controls his subject with all his available strength of

⁴² The full title of this anthology is *Văn học Việt Nam sau Cách mạng Tháng Tám: Tiểu luận Phê bình*, edited by Nguyễn Ngọc, Hà Minh Đức, Văn Tâm, Lữ Huy Nguyên, Nguyễn Bao and Thuý Toàn, published by Văn Học, Hanoi, 1993. Trương Tửu's article which was chosen for it is “Truyện Thạch Sanh”, pp. 489-501.

⁴³ Quoted in Nguyễn Thạch Giang (1992), “Đặng Thai Mai, bản nhạc không lời về đạo lý làm người”, *Văn Nghệ*, no. 51 (19 December 1992), p. 7.

⁴⁴ Lữ Huy Nguyên (1982), “Tác phẩm của Đặng Thai Mai”, *Nhân Dân*, 19 September 1982, p. 2.

mind, of feeling, great knowledge, practical experience, and sophisticated as well as sharp-witted thoughts.”⁴⁵ However, it seems that Phan Cự Đệ’s appraisal was more accurate and reasonable: in his opinion, Đặng Thai Mai was a literary researcher rather than a theorist or a critic.⁴⁶

Đặng Thai Mai only produced a few critical essays, which, apart from a booklet entitled *Giải văn Chinh phụ ngâm* (Interpreting the Ballad of a Warrior’s Wife), published in 1950, reprinted in 1992, focused on the two most powerful people within the communist regime: Hồ Chí Minh, the President of Vietnam and of the Vietnamese Communist Party, and Tố Hữu, Head of the Department of Propaganda and Ideological Training of the Party’s Central Committee.⁴⁷

It is not without reason to think that Đặng Thai Mai wrote these critical essays with a political rather than a literary motivation. Furthermore, in his writings, Đặng Thai Mai’s first concern was with historical and biographical details and linguistic problems rather than with the aesthetical aspects of the text. He was a researcher who was greatly interested in collecting and explaining material rather than a critic who loved to appreciate, interpret and evaluate works of art. In respect of criticism, it is obvious that Đặng Thai Mai was deeply influenced by the famous French critic Gustave Lanson (1857-1934),⁴⁸ who believed that a scientific approach to literary history must be based on a scrupulous study of sources, chronology and biography. Echoing Lanson, Đặng Thai Mai asserted that “today, in order to fully appreciate our predecessors’ works of literature, we must firstly understand their lives and historical

⁴⁵ Viện Văn Học (ed.) (1986), *Tác gia lý luận phê bình nghiên cứu văn học Việt Nam 1945-1975*, vol. 1, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã hội, pp. 18-9.

⁴⁶ Phan Cự Đệ and Hà Minh Đức (1979), *Nhà văn Việt Nam*, vol. 1, Hanoi: Nxb Đại Học và Trung Học Chuyên Nghiệp, pp. 479-480.

⁴⁷ Most of Đặng Thai Mai’s critical writings were collected in his *Trên đường học tập và nghiên cứu*, 3 vols.: volume 1 (292 pages) and volume 2 (356 pages) were published by Văn Học (Hanoi) in 1969, and volume 3 (214 pages) in 1973.

⁴⁸ Gustave Lanson (1857-1934) was a professor at the Sorbonne, director of the École Normale Supérieure. He is also the author of several reference works such as *Histoire de la littérature française* (1894), and *Manuel bibliographique de la littérature française* (1909), among others, which had a lasting influence on many university scholars.

conditions.”⁴⁹ Therefore, a researcher’s first task is “to collect, arrange and review documents. It is important to research writers’ lives and works as well as the social, political and literary activities of their era, and to have a clear viewpoint on the general development law of world culture and literature. It is also important to have an accurate knowledge of rhetoric, linguistics and phonetics.”⁵⁰ Surprisingly, Đặng Thai Mai rarely provided this kind of stylistic and grammatical analysis and commentary in his writings.

Văn thơ Phan Bội Châu (Phan Boi Chau’s Literature) (1958) and *Văn thơ cách mạng đầu thế kỷ XX* (Revolutionary Literature of the Beginning of the Twentieth Century) (1961) were Đặng Thai Mai’s two most significant achievements, in which he used all his intellectual strengths, wide knowledge, abundant resources, and heartfelt style. He reconstructed the historical and cultural background of the beginning of the twentieth century, highlighting many colourful and interesting details, most of which are anecdotes collected from a lifetime of rich experience and wide reading. Thus, reading his books, we are able to enjoy them as if we were listening to an erudite and charming storyteller. However, because Đặng Thai Mai had an avid interest in anecdotes, his books are at times not well-constructed. It may be said that Đặng Thai Mai wrote his research work as an artist rather than an academic scholar.

This may be a reason why, having been praised and even extolled to the skies, Đặng Thai Mai did not write much and did not produce any outstanding work. He failed both as a critic and as a scholar. He conducted literary criticism as a scholar, but wrote scholarly writing with an artistic inspiration. His personality was greater than his work. He had a wonderful memory. Allegedly he could quote many French classics by

⁴⁹ Đặng Thai Mai (1950), *Văn học khái luận*, Saigon: Liên Hiệp xuất bản cục. (Originally published by Hàn Thuyên, Hanoi in 1944.)

⁵⁰ Đặng Thai Mai (1992), *Giảng văn Chinh phụ ngâm*, Hanoi: Trường Đại học Sư phạm Hà Nội 1, (originally published in 1950), p. 10.

heart.⁵¹ This wonderful memory made him famous as a living encyclopedia; however, it made him merely a gossip in his own writings.

A scholar by education, an artist by instinct, a writer by choice, oddly enough, Đặng Thai Mai devoted himself to the field of literary theory and finally gained a reputation mainly through his achievements in that area. Today, even in Vietnam, when remembering Đặng Thai Mai, people mainly mention his activities of the period of 1943-48, when he played a role as “one of the typical theorists” of the Communist Party⁵² and “one of those who laid the first foundations of Marxist literary theory” in Vietnam.⁵³

It is worth noting that Đặng Thai Mai played the theorist role unexpectedly. Although he had sprung from the stock of Confucian scholars and was fond of literature, he did not think of writing until he was thirty years old. He said that he had even sworn not to become a writer as long as French censorship remained in Vietnam.⁵⁴ However, in the period of the French Popular Front (1936-39), Đặng Thai Mai broke his promise and often published essays and short stories in the Vietnamese and French newspapers controlled by the Vietnamese Communist Party such as *Tin tức* (News), *Le Travail*, *Rassemblement*, *Notre Voix* and *En Avant*. At the end of 1943, thanks to two communist cultural cadres, Học Phi and Trần Quốc Hương, he was allowed to read the then strictly censored *Đề cương văn hoá* (Theses on Culture), which was compiled by Trường Chinh, the prevailing Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party.⁵⁵ According to Đặng Thai Mai, this pamphlet made a tremendous impact on him: “Firstly, there was a great need for a struggle for literary theory; and secondly, literary theory cannot be separated from history, politics, and

⁵¹ See Đặng Thanh Lê et al. (eds.) (1994), *Đặng Thai Mai và văn học*, Nghệ An: Nhà xuất bản Nghệ An; and *Để nhớ Đặng Thai Mai*, edited by Đặng Thai Mai’s children, published by Nhà xuất bản Hội Nhà Văn, Hanoi, 1992.

⁵² Phan Cự Đệ and Hà Minh Đức (1979), *op. cit.*, p. 471.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 470.

⁵⁴ Đặng Thai Mai (1985), *Hồi ký*, Hanoi: Tác Phẩm Mới, p. 341.

society, but needs to be put into the national revolution.”⁵⁶ It may be said that Đặng Thai Mai only began his concentration on literary theory after reading this pamphlet. This explains why he had not become a participant of the polemic on “art for art’s sake” versus “art for human life’s sake” which lasted from 1935 to 1939, and furthermore, was indifferent to it. Thus, in his *An Outline of Literary Theory* (Văn học khái luận), which was published by Hàn Thuyên in 1944, and reprinted by Ngày Nay in 1950, he made some surprising mistakes. He maintained that the polemic broke out “about fifteen years” earlier,⁵⁷ which meant in the years 1929-30. With such a misunderstanding, he then tried to explain readers’ indifferent attitudes to the polemic using two main reasons: firstly, “the economic and political crisis which still haunted people like a ghost”⁵⁸ - he probably meant the Great Depression; and secondly, he asserted that the polemic only lasted a few months,⁵⁹ whereas in fact it lasted a few years. Moreover, he mentioned in his notes on page 167 that he did not have Bùi Công Trùng’s articles, in spite of Bùi Công Trùng being one of his comrades and Trùng’s articles being one of the most crucial contribution to the polemic of 1935-39.

Đặng Thai Mai’s *An Outline of Literary Theory* was widely regarded as “the first work systematically presenting literary theory issues from the Marxist-Leninist viewpoint”⁶⁰ as well as the first work of literary theory in general in Vietnam. Unfortunately, this first theoretical work was written for political motivation, not literary. Like Hải Triều, Đặng Thai Mai wrote his book as a soldier rather than a scholar, although at that time he was merely a party sympathizer and not a party member. However, unlike Hải Triều, Đặng Thai Mai was a highly cultured and widely read intellectual, and therefore able to avoid childish mistakes in knowledge and

⁵⁵ Nguyễn Phúc et al. (eds.) (1985), *Một chặng đường văn hoá*, Hanoi: Tác Phẩm Mới, p. 83.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 52 and 84.

⁵⁷ Đặng Thai Mai (1950), op. cit., p. 34.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Phan Cự Đệ and Hà Minh Đức (1979), op. cit., p. 470.

argument. Đặng Thai Mai possessed that which Hải Triều lacked, immense erudition; he also had that which Nguyễn Bách Khoa completely ignored, intellectual caution.

For political rather than academic reasons, Đặng Thai Mai aimed to propagate revolutionary ideals and gather comrades, neglecting the exploration of the nature of literature itself. Thus he missed many basic and important issues such as that of the origin, characteristics and functions of literature, the development of literary genres, literary and trends, relationships between text and author, text and reality, and differences between literature and non-literature. Nguyễn Huệ Chi tried to explain the choices of Đặng Thai Mai, saying:

Đặng Thai Mai does not need to cover all his bases, because he knows in his heart that his first goal is not to explain basic theory but to use that theory to wage a war of words about the literary path for that period, and to struggle against outdated art viewpoints. Therefore, he chooses issues which are of foremost concern to writers, that is, those which need hard thinking, which should be clearly differentiated in the literary life, or which suggest a new direction to help writers extricate themselves from a fix.⁶¹

If Nguyễn Huệ Chi's explanation was correct, Đặng Thai Mai's choice would be a dangerous adventure, as he accepted the role of "suggesting a new direction" while he did not know where he was. This shortcoming may be seen clearly in Đặng Thai Mai's *An Outline of Literary Theory* as well as in the Vietnamese Marxist literary history, which lasted until half a century later.

In his book, Đặng Thai Mai raised some important issues such as the goal of literary creation, freedom in literature, class consciousness and the inherited-ness (tính kế thừa) of literature, as well as the relationship between content and form, personality and typification, and nationality and internationality.

⁶¹ Viện Văn Học (ed.) (1986), op. cit., p. 32.

First of all, Đặng Thai Mai claims that the term “literature” has two meanings: (i) it is an area in the cultural domain, containing all of the works written in prose and verse; and (ii) it is also a science which studies those works.⁶²

In the second meaning, literature (more correctly, literary studies), which is a science, has two major characteristics: first, it uses objective method and second, it aims to discover general laws; that is, it “is similar to history, philosophy, mathematics, and physics, etc”.⁶³ Đặng Thai Mai emphasizes that this view is a very new one in modern scholarship.⁶⁴

In the first meaning, (creative) literature is “a form of ideology”, which, like politics, religion, laws and morals, is established on the ground of the economic base, directly or indirectly influenced by the economic activities in society.⁶⁵ Đặng Thai Mai distinguished literature from the other ideological forms by claiming that only literature is able to use language as a means of depicting human life, thoughts, feelings and will. Using language as a criterion to separate literature from other forms of discourse, Đặng Thai Mai seemed to be perplexed when he differentiated literature from philosophy, history and other social sciences, as all these disciplines use similar means. He solved that problem by vaguely stating that “the difference between literature and philosophy or science is not in their content, but in the forms and the areas that each subject covers”.⁶⁶ However, Đặng Thai Mai did not provide any further analysis. We can ask: How does the area and form of literature differ from other subjects? How does literary language differ from scientific and everyday language? In another paragraph, Đặng Thai Mai states that the scope of literature is quite broad, and includes not only lyric prose or verse, but also epic, comedy, novel, essay and miscellaneous writings (tạp văn). He reminded us that the authors who were mentioned

⁶² Đặng Thai Mai (1950), op. cit., p. 13.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 12.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 14-5.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 25.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 24.

and criticized in all of the books on French literary history were not only writers and poets, like Ronsard, Lamartine and Victor Hugo, but also several philosophers such as Descartes and Victor Cousin. Similarly, in books on Chinese literary history, along with Du Fu (712-770) and Li Bai (701-762), there were also a great number of pages written on historians, philosophers and orators.⁶⁷ But Đặng Thai Mai never put forward the questions: Why have many famous philosophers, historians and other social scientists not had their names mentioned in books of literary history whereas others have? Why, for example, does nineteenth-century English literature usually include Lamb but not Bentham, Macaulay but not Marx, and Mill but not Darwin or Herbert Spencer? Đặng Thai Mai did not go the whole way into theory to discover - as Terry Eagleton did later in his *Literary Theory, An Introduction*, which was first published in 1983 - that the term “literature” is ambiguous: it usually denotes “belles lettres”, a sort of writing which is generally highly regarded, while the so-called “highly regarded” depends on particular criteria, laid down by certain persons in specific situations and in the light of given purposes; as a result of which, the term is merely an empty concept which does not have an “essence” of its own.⁶⁸

Completely satisfied with his unfinished definition of literature, Đặng Thai Mai tried to look for literature’s goal, by first rejecting the “art for art’s sake” standpoint of “capitalist” writers. He stated that “the art for art’s sake view was impossible because no artist can practice his art just for art’s sake. It is impossible for him not to feel hungry for more when looking at the half loaf of bread that he has made. Similarly, his thirst cannot be satisfied by only reading his work”.⁶⁹ Even when people wrote just for fun, “having fun is not art; it is an aspect of life”.⁷⁰ Surprisingly, it seems that Đặng Thai Mai’s understanding of the concept “art for art’s sake” was quite queer. In spite of advocating that art must have no end but itself, no one on the art for art’s sake side

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 22-3.

⁶⁸ Terry Eagleton (1983), *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p. 9.

⁶⁹ Đặng Thai Mai (1950), op. cit., p. 38.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 39.

would ever want to uproot literature from its essential soil - human life. Aestheticism was first and foremost a reaction against romanticism in order to pursue an impersonal and plastic ideal of beauty.

Đặng Thai Mai's aesthetic view was basically neo-classicist. He conceded that all masterpieces have two paramount features: usefulness and pleasure.⁷¹ This is an echo of the seventeenth-century neo-classicists who held that "the end of literature is to teach and delight; pleasure is the immediate, and instruction the ultimate end",⁷² as John Dennis claimed:

Poetry then is an art by which a poet excites passion (and for that very cause entertains sense) in order to satisfy and improve, to delight and reform the mind, and so to make mankind happier and better: from which it appears that poetry has two ends, a subordinate, and a final one; the subordinate one is pleasure, and the final one is instruction.⁷³

However, Đặng Thai Mai went further into the Marxist vein by stating that these two features have always born the imprint of class consciousness. In feudal society, writers and poets were only jesters or singers dancing around the crowned heads of the aristocracy. In capitalist society, the role of writers was no better: they were only a gang of pen-prostitutes (lũ đĩ bút mực) serving the rich. In this respect, Đặng Thai Mai was more extreme than Karl Marx, his ideological ancestor. While Marx, in his *Economic Manuscripts of 1857-1858*, believed that art and literature were relatively independent and might develop without being in accordance with political or social events,⁷⁴ Đặng Thai Mai contended that "the periods in which a society experiences great change are generally those in which literature is developing rapidly and progressing to a higher level."⁷⁵ Applying this principle to Chinese literary history,

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 31.

⁷² Irene Simon (ed.) (1971), *Neo-Classical Criticism 1660-1800*, London: Edward Arnold, p.40.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 42.

⁷⁴ See Marx and Engels (1978), *On Literature and Art*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, p. 82.

⁷⁵ Đặng Thai Mai (1950), op. cit., p. 58.

he asserted that the whole history of Chinese literature contains two glorious periods: first, that of Zhou (circa 1122-249 B.C.) and Qin (221-207 B.C.), when China adopted feudalism, and second, that of the period following the end of the nineteenth century, when China became a capitalist country. Apart from these two golden periods, during its very long history, Chinese society changed little, and as a result of this, thought and literature remained stagnant. Surprisingly, Đặng Thai Mai did not highly value the poetic achievements of the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) dynasties. Furthermore, he states that the poetry of Li Bai (701-762) and Du Fu (712-770) “have nothing creative in respect of aesthetics, contain no thoughts worth researching, and are not a valid manifestation of human life and society”.⁷⁶ These announcements are very strange. To most literary critics and historians, the Tang and Song dynasties, especially the first, possess a unique aura of splendor in the history of Chinese literature. Tang poetry has almost been identified with the two poets, Li Bai and Du Fu. While the first “would probably be close to the top on almost anyone’s list of the greatest Chinese poets of premodern times”,⁷⁷ the latter is generally recognized as “the greatest Chinese poet”, whose “greatness rests on the consensus of more than a millennium of readers and on the rare coincidence of Chinese and Western literary values”.⁷⁸ Both became the apogee of all Chinese poetry, whom no later poet could entirely ignore.⁷⁹

The above incorrect evaluation resulted from Đặng Thai Mai’s slanted viewpoint on literature in which he identified literature with ideology. Moreover, he believed that the first goal of literature was to participate in the class struggle. Therefore, politics would be the most important criterion for evaluating literature. From this standpoint, Đặng Thai Mai drew a number of corollaries: first, a writer should improve his outlook on life and the world in order to discover the laws of

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 60.

⁷⁷ Burton Watson (trans. and ed.) (1984), *The Columbia Book of Chinese Poetry, from Early Times to the Thirteenth Century*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 205.

⁷⁸ Stephen Owen (1981), *The Great Age of Chinese Poetry: The High Tang*, New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 183.

historical development; second, he must participate actively in the “front line of the era”, “take the pioneer responsibility” and “realize that his mission is to write for a specific class”.⁸⁰

Đặng Thai Mai summed up his views in the following principle:

If a writer’s mind does not have waves of discontent, if his soul does not feel the miseries and deficiencies of human life as well as the eager expectation of the era, if he does not understand an ever-changing world and human life, if he does not have any request or any hope for the present and the future, his cajolery writing will just be plump like a slab of meat and slippery like the bald forehead of a bourgeois, merely a kind of “literature of entertainment” (văn chơi), and not containing any literary significance.⁸¹

The viewpoint that saw literature as a language of human discontent was not novel. The funny thing is, one year later, Trương Tửu, in his *Tương lai văn nghệ Việt Nam* (The Future of Vietnamese Literature and Art), repeated this idea in another form: “Art is nothing but a constant protest against reality and the present time”.⁸² This, however, was strongly criticized by Marxist critics, including Đặng Thai Mai, under the pen name Thanh Bình.⁸³ The simple reason for this puzzling event was that Trương Tửu’s book was published after the August Revolution (although it had been finished long before), when the Communist Party had just seized power. In such a new political situation, calling upon writers to protest was considered reactionary.

⁷⁹ See Paulam Varsano (2003), *Tracking the Banished Immortal*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

⁸⁰ Đặng Thai Mai (1950), op. cit. , p. 65.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 62.

⁸² Trương Tửu (1945), *Tương lai văn nghệ Việt Nam*, Hanoi: Hàn Thuyên, p. 23.

⁸³ Thanh Bình (the pen name of Đặng Thai Mai) (1945 and 1946), “Phê bình Tương lai văn nghệ Việt Nam”, *Tiên Phong*, no. 2 (1 December 1945), no. 3 (16 December 1945) and no. 6 (16 February 1946), reprinted in Nguyễn Phúc et al. (eds.) (1985), op. cit., pp. 197-205.

Đặng Thai Mai advised writers to apply the socialist realist method in order to subvert idealistic, romantic, and mechanical sociological viewpoints in literature.⁸⁴ However, he never clearly defined what he meant by “socialist realist method”. Nguyễn Huệ Chi, in his entry in *Từ điển văn học* (Dictionary of Literature), explained that the cause of this shortcoming was “the strict censorship of the Japanese-French ruling system at that time”.⁸⁵ In fact, this may be far from the truth. In several of Đặng Thai Mai’s sayings quoted above, we can see that he often urged writers to rise up against the French colonial government, calling for equity and democracy. It is unbelievable that while so doing, he was not allowed to analyze such academic concepts as socialist realism. Besides, Đặng Thai Mai himself once revealed that all the paragraphs cut out of his book related to politics, and to the relationship between nationalism and internationalism, but not to academic concepts.⁸⁶ The main reason for this is probably that although Đặng Thai Mai had had the opportunity of reading the Chinese translations of a number of documents of the Russian Communist party after its 1925 Congress, as well as those of the first congress of the Association of Soviet Writers in 1934, he had not fully comprehended the issue of socialist realism. In his chapter on socialist realist literature, he was only able to address the two following questions: Do social characteristics repress personality? and, do realist characteristics kill imagination? To both questions, Đặng Thai Mai’s answer was: No. He did not explain why the social characteristics of socialist realism did not repress personality, but called upon writers to rely on the masses’ opinions and evaluations: “In a society where mass education reaches the writers’ level, writers have no reason to be skeptical. Moreover, this is a necessary social precondition for genius; not to be trampled under the foot of the cruel by the might of money”.⁸⁷ Đặng Thai Mai then elaborated the second question. According to him, there was no contradiction between reality and imagination, because any imagination is based on a certain reality. Socialist realist

⁸⁴ Đặng Thai Mai (1950), op. cit., p. 68.

⁸⁵ Đỗ Đức Hiểu et al. (eds.) (1984), *Từ điển văn học*, vol. 2, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, p. 518.

⁸⁶ Nguyễn Phúc et al. (eds.) (1985), op. cit., p. 84.

⁸⁷ Đặng Thai Mai (1950), op. cit., p. 89.

literature only opposed the abuse of imagination, and “flatly rejected the disheartened and cowardly attitude of weak souls which dared not look at the truth, live with it and vigorously abolish false images used in romantic styles which embellish in order to ignore the true nature of social events.”⁸⁸

It seems that Đặng Thai Mai did not clearly distinguish the difference between critical realism and socialist realism. Sometimes he named the realism of the nineteenth-century French writers as the first-period realism, to distinguish it from the second-period realism, which is officially termed socialist realism. However, in his expression, both trends had the same features, truthfully reflecting reality, and “for the present, they would reveal the true nature of a society and the miseries and the discontent of the era; for the future, they would be a halo projecting the true and subtle aspects of the past to the following generations”.⁸⁹ Đặng Thai Mai did not mention any fundamental characteristic of socialist realism, such as “klassovost” (class-mindedness), “narodnost” (people-mindedness), and more particularly “partiinnost” (party-mindedness), included with requirements of truthful, historically concrete representations of reality in its revolutionary development, etc. It seems that he vaguely realized the last point as he wrote: “Society needs writers who depict daily experiences of different generations. However, what it needs most is that writers, through their imagination, foresee tendencies of social contradictions and depict their present lack, which is in fact the truth of the future.”⁹⁰ This is just his vague recognition, from an orthodox Marxist viewpoint, of the developmental tendency of history as the task of consciousness, not of the imagination.

When analyzing the relationship between content and form in a work of art, Đặng Thai Mai admitted that these two factors were closely connected and sometimes overlapped, but immediately after this pronouncement he stated that he believed that content itself would determine form. Therefore “when striving for self-improvement in

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 95.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 138.

⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 98-9.

literature, living and observing are the first steps and the major issues of literature and art, whereas high techniques are just a minor one.”⁹¹ Furthermore, he indicated that in the history of literature there were some periods in which the content overwhelmed the form, and vice versa. Therefore, the perfect literature was one in which these two factors were unified and harmonious.

It is more surprising that Đặng Thai Mai seemed to ignore Engels’ definition of the concept of realism: “Realism, to my mind, implies, besides truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances”.⁹² On the issue of typification, Đặng Thai Mai merely gave a general comment: “A typical character is a character which represents a whole generation, an association or a social class”.⁹³ He did not mention the concept of “typical circumstances”, which was later emphasized by Marxist literary theorists.

Obviously, although famous for his erudition, Đặng Thai Mai did not keep himself well-informed on the debates of socialist realism and on general Marxist theory as did Hải Triều. He had a wide knowledge of French and Chinese literature, but, because of his feeble theoretical framework, his citations and examples drawn from French and Chinese literature became dispersed and did not prove anything. He rarely scrutinized any issue thoroughly, giving it enough analysis to be convincing. When he needed to persuade readers, he used the emotional style of a missionary to appeal to their responsibility and patriotism.

At heart, Đặng Thai Mai was a Marxist. Although not always successful, he was very conscious of using dialectical and historical materialism as the framework for his thinking. When dealing with any literary phenomenon, he usually tried to explain them through the lens of economic, political and social events. He liked to put concepts into categories in opposition in order to compare, and especially to find out reciprocal

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 106.

⁹² Marx and Engels (1978), op. cit., p. 10.

⁹³ Đặng Thai Mai (1950), op. cit., p. 126.

actions and influences. Discussing the relationship between nationality and internationality, he made a correct but not novel comment: “No work deserves to represent national traits while at the same time it does not consist of the common and deep characteristics of humanity”.⁹⁴ Moreover, he was bold enough to reshape Stalin’s mechanical view on socialist realism as “socialist in content and national in form”: “In order to build a socialist realist literature, we should first of all depict our society through our national language.”⁹⁵ In other words, the so-called “people-mindedness” of socialist realism was not only of form, but also of content. Surprisingly, the cadres of the Vietnamese Communist Party who were specialized in and were responsible for the “cultural front” discovered Đặng Thai Mai’s subtle efforts to reshape Stalin’s view very late. The term of “national form” was not changed into “national traits” in official documents until the third congress of the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1960.

This independent attitude of Đặng Thai Mai can be explained by the fact that he was just a non-communist left intellectual at that time. In his *An Outline of Literary Theory*, there was a deep imprint of André Gide’s thoughts. Đặng Thai Mai quoted Gide frequently and obviously admired him greatly despite the fact that Gide was being condemned and strongly criticized by communist parties everywhere. Đặng Thai Mai regarded Gide as a symbol of the freedom and sincerity of a true artist.⁹⁶ He particularly sympathized with Gide’s ideas on artistic freedom, and on the relationship between literature and life, between originality and popularity. It may be said that Gide’s thoughts on literature inspired Đặng Thai Mai to write Chapter Six on “The issue of freedom on literature and art” in his book, *An Outline of Literary Theory*.

Đặng Thai Mai’s independence of the Soviet formula “people-mindedness” may also be explained by his limited knowledge of the issue. As an immensely erudite scholar, he had a wide acquaintance not only with literature but also with history and

⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 196-197.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 190.

⁹⁶ Đặng Thai Mai (1950), op. cit., pp. 157 and 162.

philosophy. However, in the field of literature, his interests were in classical but not contemporary, French and Chinese - but not Russian and Vietnamese. Like most intellectuals of that age, he was well-informed on sixteenth and seventeenth century French literature. He did not know anything about Chinese modern literature until 1939, when he discovered Lu Xun for the first time by accident. About Vietnamese literature, he once confessed to Thiều Mai:

When I was young, I was very busy and did not have much time to read other writers' works. Therefore, at present, I am not sure if I have a good grasp of Vietnamese modern literature or not. I have not even read all the works of Nguyễn Đình Thi, whom I love very much and have close contact with. I have read other authors even less, including Nguyễn Hồng, Tô Hoài and the younger generation writers such as Nguyễn Khải, Nguyễn Ngọc and Nguyễn Minh Châu.⁹⁷

Moreover, at the time of writing his *An Outline of Literary Theory*, because of a terrible stomach-ache, Đặng Thai Mai went to Thanh Hoá, a small and isolated province in Central Vietnam, to convalesce. The Communist Party decided to limit their contact with him for his own safety.⁹⁸ Thus, it was not surprising that Đặng Thai Mai was sometimes off the Party line, particularly when it concerned concrete issues such as evaluating specific writers and their work.

However, we cannot deny the influence of the Vietnamese Communist Party on Đặng Thai Mai's literary thoughts. Nguyễn Huệ Chi commented that Đặng Thai Mai's *An Outline of Literary Theory* was "the result of his effort to ponder on the party's *Theses on Culture*."⁹⁹ In fact, in *An Outline of Literary Theory*, Đặng Thai Mai discreetly developed and popularized three principles of establishing a new culture in the *Theses on Culture*: literature must be national, popular and scientific.

⁹⁷ Thiều Mai (1992), "Học giả Đặng Thai Mai, đôi nét đời thường", *Văn Nghệ*, no. 51 (19 December 1992), p.7.

⁹⁸ Nguyễn Phúc et al. (eds.), *Một chặng đường văn hoá*, Hanoi: Nxb Tác Phẩm Mới, p. 84.

⁹⁹ Viện Văn Học (ed.) (1986), *op. cit.*, p. 32.

Although at that time Đặng Thai Mai was not a member of the Vietnamese Communist Party, and although his knowledge of socialist realism was not up-to-date and was poorly informed, his *An Outline of Literary Theory* rests ultimately upon the theoretical foundations of Marxism-Leninism, especially of Leninism. He was a Leninist in his hostile attitude to the so-called “capitalist literary trends” such as romanticism and surrealism, and in his view regarding the pen as a weapon in the cultural field, which was termed “the third front line”, along with the political and economic front lines.

Differently from other Marxist contemporaries such as Hải Triều and Nguyễn Bách Khoa, who had learnt Marxism through French materials, Đặng Thai Mai studied Marxism mainly through Chinese materials. This occurred for two reasons: firstly, Đặng Thai Mai started his study of literary theory quite late, during the Second World War years when only a very small number of books and newspapers in French, especially those relating to Marxism and Communism, could be imported to Vietnam. Secondly, during that time, Đặng Thai Mai was keen to read and translate Lu Xun’s works into Vietnamese: most of his understanding of socialist realism came from this Chinese realist writer. In his memoir published in 1967, Đặng Thai Mai wrote:

Many writers of my age learn about Russian literature and art through roads full of twists and turns: Moscow - Paris - Saigon - Hanoi, or Moscow - Shanghai - Hanoi - Saigon. For myself, the light has actually come from the North.¹⁰⁰

The “North”, in this context, means China.

¹⁰⁰ Đặng Thai Mai (1967), “Ánh sáng là từ phương Bắc dội tới”, *Tạp chí Văn Học* (Hanoi), no. 11 (1967), reprinted in Đặng Thai Mai (1985), op. cit., pp. 306-333.

PART TWO

From Patriotism to Maoism

CHAPTER FOUR

Between Nationalism and Socialism

Of the three writers who introduced Marxist literary thought into Vietnam between the two world wars, Hải Triều was the only one who created a little furore in public, especially through the pen-war on the matter of art for art's sake versus art for human life's sake, which lasted from 1935 to 1939, and which received a vast amount of critical attention. Đặng Thai Mai and Nguyễn Bách Khoa, whose talent and knowledge were much better than Hải Triều's, in contrast, did not have any remarkable impact on their contemporaries. Before the August 1945 Revolution, the first was widely regarded as a well-known teacher and a serious translator rather than as a scholar, whereas the latter was primarily regarded as a writer who had a fondness for neologisms and an overblown style, but lacked a highly skilful literary performance. In *Nhà văn hiện đại* (Modern Writers), a much-lauded work of criticism of the period, Vũ Ngọc Phan ranked Nguyễn Bách Khoa as a social novelist, not a critic.¹

This paradoxical phenomenon is not without reason. Hải Triều was a lucky man who appeared in the mid-1930s, a period which has been widely hailed as a great efflorescence in the history of Vietnamese literature, when many Vietnamese were interested in literature and yearned for compositional experimentation and stylistic inventiveness. This enthusiastic mood faded when the Second World War broke out in 1939, starting a crisis which was characterised by the considerable diminution of writers' creative work; the rarity of young and new talent, and more importantly, indifference in literary circles, so that even the appearance of some rare gifted writers and poets such as Nam Cao, Tô Hoài and Đinh Hùng did not receive any warm

¹ Vũ Ngọc Phan (1942), *Nhà văn hiện đại*, vol. 5, Hanoi: Tân Dân; reprinted in the United States by Đại Nam (n.d.), pp. 1123-1136.

attention. In such circumstances, it is not surprising that both Đặng Thai Mai and Nguyễn Bách Khoa were only coolly welcomed by readers and critics, despite their novelty and great learning.

This crisis has often been explained by several Hanoi-based literary researchers as resulting from the strict censorship and political control imposed by the French colonial authorities immediately after the out-break of the Second World War.² The practice of institutional censorship, along with many other measures, aimed to repress and restrain writers and artists. For example, when Ngô Tất Tố's *Tắt đèn* (Out of Light) was published in 1939, it was confiscated forthwith, and his house was ransacked by policemen.³ Tô Hoài was detained for several months, being suspected of participation in the Communist-led Viet Minh Front, and for this reason his works were refused publication by all the publishing houses in Hanoi.⁴ It was also due to the same political suspicion that Nguyễn Công Hoan was banned from writing by the French Secret Police, and was forced to hide his identity by signing his writing with a new name: Ngọc Oanh.⁵

The strong effect of the censorship exercises cannot be denied. One of the most evident proofs was the case of Nguyễn Công Hoan: the amount of his works decreased sharply during the war. From the beginning of 1940 to the middle of 1945, he wrote only three novels and ten short stories, while earlier, as the list of his publications shows, within only three years - from January 1937 to September 1939 - he finished six novels and eighty short stories.⁶

² See Phong Lê (1972), *Mấy vấn đề văn xuôi Việt Nam, 1945-1970*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, p.13.

³ Hoài Việt (ed.) (1993), *Ngô Tất Tố, nhà văn hoá lớn*, Hanoi: Nxb Văn Hoá, p.10; and Mai Hương (ed.) (1993), *Ngô Tất Tố với chúng ta*, Hanoi: Nxb Hội Nhà Văn, p. 12.

⁴ Tô Hoài, "Một quãng đường", *Tác Phẩm Mới*, no. 16 (November and December, 1971), pp. 1-49.

⁵ Tô Hoài (1988), *Những gương mặt*, Hanoi: Nxb Tác Phẩm Mới, p. 75.

⁶ Lê Thị Đức Hạnh (1991), *Nguyễn Công Hoan*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, pp. 70-75.

However, the practice of colonial censorship is not sufficient to explain why Vietnamese literature was in crisis during the World War, because at that time not only social realists but even romanticists, who were only a little affected by the political control, also decreased their creative output. After 1941, both Nhất Linh and Khái Hưng almost ceased their writing in order to engage in political activities. From 1942, Nguyễn Tuân's number of works decreased rapidly. Earlier, Thế Lữ engaged in dramatic activities. The inspiration of Xuân Diệu, Huy Cận and especially Lưu Trọng Lư and Chế Lan Viên almost completely wore out after the first collection of their poems had been published.

The reason for the above crisis lay in the Vietnamese writers' psychology. As a tradition, the Vietnamese writers' view of literature has always been a pragmatic one, stressing the social effects of writing, a view in which literature is recognised as a weapon with which to struggle for a national cause. Being educated in such a literary ethos, Vietnamese writers are often militant, asserting priorities of content over form, and at the same time sensible to social rather than aesthetic matters. This results in two psychological states: firstly, they seldom go the whole way towards any artistic discovery which flashes through their mind by chance or intuition; secondly, social changes easily sway them: in their writings, they try either to reflect reality or to construct society, so that when society vigorously changes, they naturally become bewildered.

With such a pragmatic mind, after a decade pursuing patiently and passionately their dream to become Westernised and making a great number of substantial achievements in all literary genres, most Vietnamese writers at the beginning of the 1940s suddenly feared that there was a danger they may become 'uprooted' (mất gốc). Nearly a decade earlier, many young readers sympathised with the Tự Lực Group's slogan, "Follow the novelty, follow the novelty without hesitation".⁷ After 1940, there was a complete shift of interest away from Western-oriented towards nation-centred attitudes, and from the yearning for freedom in art and life towards moral conservatism

⁷ Hoàng Đạo (1989), *Mười điều tâm niệm*, Los Alamitos: Xuân Thu, p. 17, (originally published in 1939.)

in the Confucian vein. In the 1930s, Vietnamese literature had chosen innovation as the highest ideal; in the 1940s, the ideal was convention. A trend of nostalgic literature came into being and became dominant in the literary scene with the *Tri Tân* magazine, which involved hosts of erudite scholars, of whom the most remarkable was Nguyễn Văn Tố (1889-1947). Along with *Tri Tân* magazine, there were many works of literature and history, containing numerous references to the traditional aspects of Vietnamese culture. All of these attracted huge audiences. In an article published in *Tao Đàn* magazine nos. 34 and 35 (February 18, 1942), Lê Thanh designated 1941 as “the year of history”.⁸ Historical consciousness was clearly embodied in literature at that time. All writers and poets who became well-known since 1939, including Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, Nam Cao, Tô Hoài, Bùi Hiển, Kim Lân, Vũ Hoàng Chương, Trần Huyền Trân, Thâm Tâm and Hoàng Cầm, were more or less conscious of making good use of Eastern and Vietnamese characteristics in their themes and styles. When he stopped writing novels, Ngô Tất Tố started to translate Tang poetry (1941) and other literatures of the Lý and Trần dynasties. He also translated and annotated the *Book of Changes* into Vietnamese. The Xuân Thu Nhã Tập Group, despite being criticised by public opinion for being strongly Westernised, strived to combine French symbolism with traditional aesthetical thought. In their language, Western terms like ‘unconscious’, ‘subconscious’, and ‘pure’ were mixed with Eastern terms like ‘Đạo’ (Dao), ‘âm’ (yin), ‘dương’ (yang), ‘lễ’ (rite), ‘nhạc’ (music). However, they never saw themselves as ‘xenophiles’ but as people who were going back to their origins:

What contemporaries have called imports from the West already existed in Asia because we have intuited them since the beginning [of history] owing to our special languages and antique minds. Seeking for the Eternal Poetry, we have come back to the source: we [ourselves].⁹

⁸ Trịnh Bá Đình and Nguyễn Hữu Sơn (eds.) (1999), *Tạp chí Tri Tân (1941-1945), Phê bình văn học*, Hanoi: Nxb Hội Nhà Văn, p. 37; see also Lại Nguyên Ân (ed.) (2002), *Lê Thanh, nghiên cứu và phê bình văn học*, Hanoi: Nxb Hội Nhà Văn, p. 291.

⁹ Nguyễn Đỗ Cung, Phạm Văn Hạnh, Nguyễn Xuân Sanh, Đoàn Phú Tứ, Nguyễn Lương Ngọc and Nguyễn Xuân Khoát (1942), *Xuân Thu Nhã Tập*, Hanoi: Xuân Thu thư lâu, pp. 16-17. Further information on Xuân Thu Nhã Tập Group can be found in Nohira Munehiro, “Một số đặc trưng về tinh thần tiên phong của nhóm Xuân Thu Nhã Tập”, translated from the Japanese by Lê Tuyết Mai, *Tạp chí Văn Học* (Hanoi), no. 10 (1997), pp. 70-77.

Members of the Xuân Thu Nhã Tập Group exclaimed that they aimed at preventing the “disaster of losing the root” (hoạ mất gốc), through connecting the past with the present.

In the above article, Lê Thanh explained why the “going back to the origin” phenomena appeared:

Changes in the world have resulted in our uncertainty about the future. We do not know where the world will lead us to. We feel desolate and do not know in which direction we can find hope. Therefore, we are forced to look back to the past in order to search and inherit our genuine values, hoping that there we might find good lessons for ourselves.¹⁰

One of the best examples of Lê Thanh’s view may be the case of Lưu Trọng Lư. At the beginning of the 1930s, Lưu Trọng Lư was one of the first advocates of the New Poetry movement;¹¹ a few years later, he was one of the most fervent advocates of the ‘art for art’s sake’ view and a repudiator of the social role of literature. Protesting against the traditional poetry, he contended that “Our poetry today is dying, does not have any vitality... and is interminably in the underworld.”¹² He believed that poetry could not continue the way it was because “our grief, sadness, happiness, love and hatred are not the same as those of our ancestors”.¹³ Each era needed its own poetry: “Vietnamese young people are looking for their own poets, like children looking for their mothers”, said he.¹⁴ However, at the turn of the decade of 1940, he surprisingly became very conservative. He wrote in *Tràng An* magazine, published on 9 July, 1942 as follows:

We might lose everything, except literature.

¹⁰ Quoted in Nguyễn Tấn Long and Phan Canh (1968), *Những khuynh hướng thi ca tiền chiến*, Saigon: Sống Mới, pp. 370-371.

¹¹ See Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân (1967), *Thi nhân Việt Nam*, Saigon: Thiều Quang, pp. 17-18.

¹² Quoted in Lê Đình Kỳ (1989), *Thơ Mới, những bước thăng trầm*, Ho Chi Minh City: Nxb thành phố Hồ Chí Minh, p. 16.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.

And we only lose literature when we want to foreignize it, that means we want to remove its own traits.

With “Westernisation”, I fear that our Vietnamese literature will lose its own distinctive characteristics, and be no longer sincere, eventually becoming uprooted. And uprootedness in the realm of literature is very dangerous.

Literature does not need new adventure to become great. The opposite is much more correct

[...]

Vietnamese literature is valuable only when it remains Vietnamese.

The Vietnamese writers’ task at the moment is very important and clear: we must create a country of Vietnam in our literature. A country of Vietnam which will exist forever in the country girls’ songs. Do not let the mulberry-planting occupation die by adopting heavy industry.¹⁵

Thus, although the Western influence was not yet strong, Vietnamese writers were panic-stricken and wanted to reject it. This is not difficult to understand. Living in a small and weakened country which was always threatened by foreign invasion, and in fact dominated by the Chinese and the French for centuries, it seems that the Vietnamese people often subconsciously feared being assimilated. As a result of this, on the one hand their national spirit has been very high, while on the other, they have been generally conservative.

Because of their high social consciousness and national spirit, the Vietnamese writers were easily swayed by the political circumstances of every period; and that of 1939-45 saw many great and devastating events. At the middle of 1939, the Second World War tore their world apart. In 1942, the Japanese forces landed troops in Vietnam. Thus the Vietnamese people, already dominated by the French, were now also ruled over by another empire, the Japanese. This resulted in innumerable calamities, of which the worst was the 1944-45 famine, causing about one million deaths.¹⁶

¹⁵ Quoted in Nguyễn Tấn Long and Phan Canh (1968), *op. cit.*, pp. 291-292.

¹⁶ The exact number of deaths during this famine is still very uncertain. In all Vietnamese sources, it is

The ‘Book-discarding’ Period: 1944-45

Under such circumstances, literature became merely frivolous. Finishing his *Vũ Như Tô*, Nguyễn Huy Tưởng was not only unhappy, but also continuously grieved: “While seeing that prices are rising considerably and everything is becoming expensive, how can I continue to dream of poetry?”¹⁷ Tô Hoài’s saying is clearer:

The year 1943 was not similar to that of 1938 when people paid attention only to literature and pure ideas in newspapers. Now, everywhere [the political situation] is hot like fire. And the fire is actually blazing. Every person has only one option to choose: die or rise up in revolt. One path.¹⁸

given as two million; in Tonnesson’s calculation, between half a million and one million (S. Tonnesson, (1991), *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945*, London: Sage Publications, p. 293); in David G. Marr’s estimation, one million. In *Vietnam 1945, the Quest for Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), Marr gives several useful details: “No one knows how many people perished in the famine. In late May, the Khâm Sai’s Office in Hanoi requested mortality statistics from all Tonkin provinces for the year so far. Eventually, twenty replies came in, reporting 380,969 deaths from starvation and 20,347 from ‘illness’. However, a number of the replies emphasized the inability of officials to go into the countryside to make careful checks. Also, losses in northern Annam were not included in the compilation. In late 1946, a policy paper prepared for internal use by officials of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam estimated that 1,000,000 people had died in northern Vietnam and 300,000 in central Vietnam. By that time it had become standard practice in public for DRV spokesmen to assert that in early 1945 ‘French colonialists and Japanese fascists’ had been responsible for at least 2,000,000 citizens starving to death, a figure subsequently enshrined in government history books.

One million deaths seems a more credible estimate. The implications are still horrific: about 10 percent of the population of the region affected perished in a five-month period. Certain provinces were far more heavily hit: Nam Định, Thái Bình, Ninh Bình, Hải Dương and Kiến An accounted for 81 percent of deaths reported in the Khâm Sai’s compilation. Nam Định alone was 32 percent. Although some of the victims undoubtedly had drifted in from elsewhere, Khâm Sai’s figures still suggest that these five provinces may have lost between 11 and 20 percent of their populations. Particular districts suffered even worse. Hải Hậu district in Nam Định province, for example, reported 26,080 deaths, whereas nearby districts reported from 4,000 to 6,000. Kiến Xương district in Thái Bình reported 14,920, compared to Quỳnh Côi with 1,532. Particular villages lost half their populations.” (pp. 104-105).

¹⁷ Phong Lê, Mai Hương and Nguyễn Huy Thắng (eds.) (1992), *Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, một sự nghiệp chưa kết thúc*, Hanoi: Viện Văn Học, p. 191.

¹⁸ Tô Hoài (1971), op. cit., p. 20.

In 1941, being a sympathiser of the Viet Minh but preferring art to politics, Văn Cao, one of the best-known composers and the author of the Vietnamese national anthem, did not want to participate fully in that organization, deciding rather to pursue art ideals persistently. In 1944, witnessing many people dying of hunger on the streets, he suddenly realised that “art does not have any narrow and out-of-the-way road to survival”.¹⁹ He then decided to join the Viet Minh and actively participated in the gruesome task of assassinating those who were regarded as traitors to the nation.²⁰ However, at that point, when the Viet Minh asked him to compose a song supporting their movement, he hesitated: “I am preparing for an adventurous and dangerous task but I am not ready to compose songs. It is now very hard to think of art.”²¹

Văn Cao’s above statement may sum up the intellectual and literary atmosphere of the early 1940s. In 1941, the Tự Lực Group, which was the largest and strongest literary organization in the 1930s, existed in name only, but did not conduct any considerable activities in terms of literature. Its leading members started to get involved in political activities: Nhất Linh, who founded the Hưng Việt party, was hunted by the French authorities and had to escape to China; and Khái Hưng and Hoàng Đạo were arrested and confined to the Vụ Bản prison.²² Of the three magazines winning widespread fame, *Thanh Nghị* and *Văn Mới* were clearly inclined toward politics; only *Tri Tân* inclined toward historical and literary research as an effort to preserve Vietnamese cultural traditions, which can be interpreted as political passivity.

“It is now very hard to think of art” was probably a common mood of the period. This mood may be one of the main reasons explaining why Nguyễn Bách Khoa’s and Đặng Thai Mai’s efforts at introducing Marxist thought on literature were

¹⁹ Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường (1993), “Cảm nhận Văn Cao”, *Văn Nghệ*, no. 47 (20 November 1993), p. 7.

²⁰ Phương Thảo (1992), “Văn Cao hiệp sĩ”, *Văn Hoá*, no. 35 (30 August), p. 6.

²¹ Văn Cao (1985), “Tôi viết Tiến quân ca”, in Nguyễn Phúc et al. (eds.) (1985), *Một chặng đường văn hoá*, Hanoi: Tác Phẩm Mới, p. 110.

²² Phan Cự Đệ (ed. with an introduction) (1990), *Tự Lực văn đoàn, con người và văn chương*, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 10.

not warmly received. This was also one of the main reasons for the Vietnamese literary crisis occurring in the first half of the 1940s.

Nevertheless, this very psychology of doubting the value of literature and aspiring to the doing of something concrete for the nation at that time, was a favourable condition for the Communist Party to expand its influence, and through which they propagated Marxist literary thought in Vietnam.

From its establishment in 1930 until the beginning of the 1940s, the Vietnamese Communist Party had no specific policy on art and literature. It made every effort to struggle for its survival and development in very difficult circumstances. The pen-war on the matter of art for art's sake versus art for human life's sake from 1935 to 1939 was launched by a few party members but did not stem from the Party's policy.²³ Only after 1942 did the Vietnamese Communist Party's Committee begin to have the intention of expanding its propaganda to artists. The Secretary General of the Party, Trường Chinh, wrote a letter to selected Vietnamese artists, suggesting the establishment of a joint organization and asking for advice on how to name it.²⁴ In March 1943, the first group of the Cultural Association for National Salvation was founded in Hanoi, consisting of Học Phi, Như Phong, Vũ Quốc Uy and Lê Ngô Động. Of these, the latter two were merely intellectual cadres of the party but not writers. Later, more artists were contacted and became members, including Tô Hoài, Nguyễn Hồng, Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, Nam Cao, Thép Mới, Nguyễn Đình Thi, Trần Huyền Trân and Kim Lân.²⁵

A few months later, after the first small group of the Cultural Association for National Salvation was established, Trường Chinh compiled the *Đề cương văn hoá* (Theses on Culture) as the platform of the association. In fact, as its name suggests, this thesis was merely a document on culture in general, in which literature and art were

²³ Phan Cự Đệ, Hà Minh Đức and Nguyễn Hoàn Khung (1988), *Văn học Việt Nam 1930-1945*, vol. 1, Hanoi: Nxb Đại Học và Trung Học Chuyên Nghiệp, p. 40.

²⁴ Minh An (1991), "Nhà văn Học Phi", *Văn Nghệ*, no. 40 (14 December), p. 6.

²⁵ Học Phi (1993), "Văn hoá nghệ thuật và sự lãnh đạo của Đảng", *Văn Nghệ*, no. 3 (30 January), p. 11.

only mentioned in one sentence: “The struggle for schools of literature (against classicism, romanticism, naturalism, symbolism etc.) will help socialist realism to win.”²⁶

The meaning of the above sentence was quite vague: it did not define what so-called classicism, romanticism, etc. meant, nor how socialist realism might defeat other schools of literature. However, prior to 1945, the Vietnamese writers and poets, including those who participated in the Cultural Association for National Salvation, did not pay attention to theoretical issues. Tô Hoài said that in the meetings of the Cultural Association for National Salvation, he was only dedicated to resistance against the French and Japanese rulers. The forum on the *Theses on Culture*, conducted by Lê Quang Đạo, left no impression on him. He explained that, “probably because I was boiling with the current situation and atmosphere of the preparation for revolution rather than with thoughts and creation.”²⁷

For many people, there was no need to examine the Communist Party’s view on literature before actively participating in a Cultural Association for National Salvation. The main, and perhaps the unique, reason for this was patriotism. Học Phi reminisced: “The only thing in the *Theses on Culture* which struck me strongly was the slogan of ‘to be nationalised’.”²⁸ However, by 1945 only about ten writers actually participated in the Cultural Association for National Salvation.²⁹ This is understandable. Participation in this association was perhaps a highly paid action which was not acceptable to everyone.

The Cultural Association for National Salvation, together with its Marxist view on literature, in fact did not attract a great number of people until the success of the August Revolution. Everyone was filled with elation as Vietnam declared its

²⁶ Reprinted in Nguyễn Phúc et al. (eds.) (1985), op. cit., pp. 15-20.

²⁷ Tô Hoài (1971), op. cit., p. 4.

²⁸ Nguyễn Phúc et al. (eds.) (1985), op. cit., p. 149.

²⁹ Ibid.

independence after eighty years of suffering under French colonialism. In a short period, the people's reserved attitude towards the political outlook seemed to disappear. Bích Khê, who had translated André Gide's *Return from Russia* a few years earlier, suffered severe illness when the Revolution erupted. He asked his family to carry him down to the street so that he could witness the boiling scenery of revolution.³⁰ Vũ Ngọc Phan, who two years earlier refused to join the Cultural Association for National Salvation led by the Viet Minh,³¹ suddenly dropped his prejudice against the Viet Minh and the Communists, and became the chairman of the Resistance Committee of the Đống Đa zone, while his wife, the poetess Hằng Phương, joined the first-aid team of their district.³² Also, Chế Lan Viên, a poet who was engrossed in researching new inspiration in Buddhist philosophy, decided to participate in the revolution. He and his poet friend, Yên Lan, both armed themselves with sticks, crossed the river to hunt down reactionaries: "We felt highly enthusiastic because we were forgetting the poetry."³³

Prior to August 1945, writers could not be prolific because they were tormented by the dreadful plight of their foreign-dominated nation. After the Revolution, they also could not write because they were elated by their sudden independence. In both circumstances, literature was regarded as frivolous and secondary. Xuân Diệu, in the *Cứu Quốc* newspaper published in 1945, called the pre- and post-revolution periods 'the book-discarding period'.³⁴ Reminiscing about it decades later, Tô Hoài commented that "that statement was not completely appropriate. However, the spirit of

³⁰ Lê Thị Ngọc Sương (1988), "Bích Khê, người em", in Chế Lan Viên et al. (eds.), *Thơ Bích Khê*, Nghĩa Bình: Sở Văn hoá - Thông tin Nghĩa Bình, p. 100.

³¹ Vũ Quốc Uy (1985), "Hoạt động dưới ánh sáng của Đề cương văn hoá", in Nguyễn Phúc et al. (eds.) (1985), *op. cit.*, p. 54.

³² Vũ Ngọc Phan (1987), *Những năm tháng ấy*, Hanoi: Văn Học, pp. 367-370.

³³ Chế Lan Viên (1976), "Mất nỗi đau riêng và được cái vui chung", *Văn Nghệ giải phóng*, August 28, reprinted in Chế Lan Viên (1990), *Tuyển tập*, vol. 2, Hanoi: Văn Học, pp. 51-66.

³⁴ Tô Hoài (1971), *op. cit.*, p. 21.

the ‘book-discarding period’ during the process when the Vietnamese writers together with the masses excitedly prepared for the nation-wide insurrection, was true.”³⁵

In different forms and at different levels, the vast majority of artists at that time consented to Chế Lan Viên’s ‘poetry-forgetting’ attitude and Xuân Diệu’s ‘book-discarding’ behaviour. Đoàn Phú Tứ advocated: “Now literature and art should be put aside.”³⁶ Nam Cao’s saying “live first, write later”³⁷ became the catchword of the time. Everyone hurled themselves into political and social activities. Nam Cao became the sub-editor of *Tiền Phong* magazine. Nguyễn Huy Tưởng worked for *Cờ Giải Phóng*, which was the mouthpiece of the Vietnamese Communist Party. Tô Hoài, Nguyễn Hồng and Như Phong worked for *Cứu Quốc*, which was owned by the Central Executive Committee of the Viet Minh. Trần Huyền Trân was in charge of the Censor Service in Hanoi. Huy Cận was a member of the Liberation Committee of the provisional government. Nguyễn Đình Thi was a member of the National Assembly Standing Committee and participated in constitution-making. Nguyễn Công Hoan was the director of the Newspaper Censor Service and the North Propaganda Service. Bùi Hiến was the chairperson of the branch of the Cultural Association for National Salvation in Nghệ An. Thanh Tịnh was the secretary of the branch of the Cultural Association for National Salvation in Huế, and later became a member of the editorial board staff of *Công An Mới* (New Police) in Hanoi. Chế Lan Viên, Nguyễn Đức Nùng and Trần Thanh Địch joined ‘Đoàn xây dựng’ (Group of Socialist Buildings) which was founded by Nguyễn Chí Thanh and Tố Hữu in Huế. Xuân Diệu was a representative of the National Assembly.³⁸

The Cultural Association for National Salvation, which was very weak before 1945, developed rapidly after the August Revolution because of the active attitudes of

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Quoted in Phong Lê (1972), *op.cit.*, p. 29.

³⁷ Nam Cao (1946), “Đường vào Nam”, *Tiền Phong*, no. 10, quoted in Phong Lê (1972), *ibid.*, p. 18.

³⁸ See Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), *Cách mạng kháng chiến và đời sống văn học* (2nd edition.), Hanoi: Văn Học.

artists towards politics and society. Apart from its central office based in Hanoi, the Cultural Association for National Salvation had many local branches. In chronological order, the first was the one in Huế, founded on 19 September 1945, whose chairperson was Trần Hữu Dực and later Hoài Thanh. Following this were associations in Quảng Nam (20 September), Quảng Trị (26 September), Hà Tĩnh (7 October), Nghệ An (7 October), Quảng Bình (11 October), Phú Yên (17 October), Bình Định (19 October), Quảng Ngãi (25 October), and so on. In South Vietnam, there was no branch of this organization, partly because of internal contradictions in the Vietnamese Communist Party, and partly because the anti-French resistance broke out quite early, in October 1945.³⁹

In 1945 the Vietnamese writers were so engrossed in their political activities that they rarely produced works of value. Three favourite genres were: short story, documentary reportage (ký) and poetry. Not only short stories, but poetry also was written in report style because writers usually desired timely reflection on quick changes in life. Neither short stories nor the documentary reports produced any enduring literary achievement. Certain works have sometimes been mentioned later because of their documentary rather than their artistic value. In the domain of poetry, Tố Hữu was the first poet who wrote on the revolution. He joined the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1938, and when the Revolution broke out he became the chairperson of the Insurrection Committee in Huế. His first collection of poems, entitled *Thơ* (Poetry), was first published in 1946. Its second edition in 1959 in Hanoi, which contained some revisions and supplements, was renamed *Từ ấy* (Since Then). In terms of art and aesthetics, *Từ ấy* remained immature. Tố Hữu's talent, merely for propaganda poetry, developed during the resistance.

Of famous poets before 1945, only one, Xuân Diệu, wrote enthusiastically under the new regime. From late 1945 to early 1946, he finished two long poems: “Ngọn quốc kỳ” (The Flag), consisting of 203 lines, and “Hội nghị non sông” (The Homeland Meeting), consisting of 231 lines. Both were insipid and trite, containing

³⁹ See Lại Nguyên Ân, “Về đời sống văn nghệ năm Cộng Hoà thứ nhất”, *Văn Nghệ*, September 2, 1985, p. 15.

numerous slogans and pompous exclamations. Later, Ngô Thảo, a young critic living in Hanoi, regarded both of these works as the way of “speaking maladroitly”, “as if Xuân Diệu forgot all about the art of poetry”.⁴⁰

It seems that Trương Tửu was right when he commented in *Văn Mới* journal in 1946: “In terms of creation, from the last autumn to this one, the revolutionary harvest has been rich, but the literary harvest has been lost.”⁴¹

Nevertheless, although the revolution did not push literature out of its impasse, it at least helped artists escape from the psychological crisis. They no longer felt wretched and humiliated as they had when they were forced to become the slaves of foreign countries. The restless dream of independence which was in every Vietnamese soul for eighty years had now become true. In 1945 Hoài Thanh described the great change in his perception as follows:

The collective re-created us, and in the new sphere of our country, we who were the victims - or, if you like, you can say the criminals - of the age of the ‘I’, found that the individual’s private life had become meaningless in the collective’s broad life.⁴²

No work of literature expresses the change in writers’ minds more profoundly and sophisticatedly than the essay “Vô đề” (Without Title) by Nguyễn Tuân.⁴³ In a highly polished and talented style, Nguyễn Tuân depicted his process of complete change, from a conceited and eccentric person, who “only performed a solo” (chỉ chơi một lối độc tấu),⁴⁴ or “a vainglorious person, who wandered in life like a traveller

⁴⁰ Ngô Thảo, “Sự hình thành và phát triển của đội ngũ nhà văn kiểu mới”, in Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh et al (eds.) (1987), *Một thời đại văn học*, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 213.

⁴¹ Quoted in Hoài Thanh (1958), “Thực chất của tư tưởng Trương Tửu”, *Văn Nghệ*, no. 11 (April 1958), p. 19.

⁴² Hoài Thanh (1945), “Dân khí miền Trung”, *Tiên Phong*, 16 December, reprinted in Hoài Thanh (1982), *Tuyển tập*, vol. 2, Hanoi: Văn Học, pp. 329-335.

⁴³ This essay was first published in *Văn Mới* journal, 1945, reprinted in Nguyễn Tuân (1981), *Tuyển tập*, vol. 1, Hanoi: Văn Học, pp. 261-274, under the new title “Lột xác”.

⁴⁴ Nguyễn Tuân (1981), *ibid.*, p. 269.

without any specific homeland, doubting everything and merely relying on feelings and impressions”,⁴⁵ to an optimist who aspired to participation in common activities, sharing the common sadness or happiness of his society. “Before, he merely read poetry. Now he is addicted to reading newspapers. He no longer pays attention to his inner feelings but to what is happening around him.”⁴⁶ Undoubtedly, this process was not easy. Old habits, memories and thoughts, which Nguyễn Tuân called “disconcerted old friends”, sometimes revived, turning writers’ souls into a permanent battlefield. Determined to self-reeducate in order to become “a new person suitable for a new life”, Nguyễn Tuân vowed:

Eliminate all old friends in one’s soul!... This is not enough. You must kill them. Kill, kill all of them. When any old friend appears and demands anything in your present soul, you must kill him immediately. You must destroy your old soul first. You must become a fire which burns all landscapes of your soul.⁴⁷

“Without Title” outlines three important phenomena relating to the Vietnamese artists’ processes of ideological change: the first is a determination to break completely with the past; the second is a tendency to “turn toward the outside” (hướng ngoại) and passionately look for beauty in reality and in life rather than nibble at the complexity and subtlety in one’s soul; and the third is the giving of prominence to the role of the community. Thus, in such changes, not only was individualism to be condemned but also the reticent way of living was to be seen as dangerous: a new person was not the result of self-improvement but of the common work of the revolutionary community. Nguyễn Tuân expressed this idea through the use of a naive image: a group of people, growing alive to the ideals of revolution, wrote a common diary in which everyone wrote about changes in his or her thoughts so that others could analyse, criticise and encourage him or her to develop.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 241.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 265.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 268.

Nguyễn Tuân's attitude and perception was probably popular at that time. Most theoretical writings which were published in *Tiền Phong* magazine in the second part of 1945 and in 1946 focused solely on the issue of national identity and popularity in literature: they expressed the artists' inner urge to confirm the value of literature as a weapon of the revolution and as an effective means to serve the nation and its people.

There was a great change in the Vietnamese writers' views on the issue of nation at this time. When referring to nation, prior to 1945 the Vietnamese people merely thought of preserving their tradition, but after the Revolution they thought of preserving their country's independence and how to transform their country into a developed and advanced one. The first way of understanding "nation" was connected to a conservative or nostalgic attitude. The second was linked to rejection of "the old", which might be understood in some ways as "tradition", in order to do something completely new. According to Lại Nguyên Ân, the slogan "to be nationalistic" at that time meant an endeavour to serve the nation's immediate and political tasks rather than make full use of the available literary legacy of the nation.⁴⁸

Another extreme manifestation of the writers' determination to break with "the old" was to deny the value of French modern literature. In a short article written after his trip to France in 1946, Xuân Diệu, who a few years earlier wrote: "I miss Rimbaud and Verlaine" and who was hailed as the most "Western" in the poetry period from 1932 to 1945,⁴⁹ commented:

French literature from the twentieth century onwards has been precarious and seems to lose direction. We did not realise that most fine writers at the top were merely rotten wood... French poetry no longer has great and genuine poets who might water humanity's soul. It has become further and further from its readers, living in a separate ivory tower. French novels are very rare. While people in other countries are depicting new, overflowing, weird and energetic lives, French writers have continued to write short novels... skilfully depicting life in small

⁴⁸ Lại Nguyên Ân, "Về đời sống văn nghệ năm Cộng Hoà thứ nhất", op. cit., p. 15.

⁴⁹ Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân (1967), op. cit., p. 119.

provinces, stories about disputes over inheritance, small landscapes and petty philosophies. These are only rock-work, not the sea or the forest.⁵⁰

Xuân Diệu's extreme attitude is understandable for two main reasons. Firstly, in his psychology, rejecting French literature also meant rejecting the past in which he had been trained. Secondly, his criterion for assessing literature had changed: a great literature, according to him, must be a useful literature, closely connected with the nation and the masses.

Literary thought during this period became degenerate rather than innovative. Although the Vietnamese writers were never really aesthetical, in the 1930s a large number of them realised the relatively autonomous character of literature: it had its own traits, its own laws of development and its own criteria for judgement. And it could not be confused with philosophy, psychology, ethics or politics. Thus, although not everyone denied the impact of literature on society, all broke completely with the dry and heavy didacticism and rationalism which had dominated Vietnamese literature during all the classical periods. They studied and thoroughly analysed people's psychology rather than reflecting on the naked reality in their sight. They attempted to individualise their language and style rather than copy available clichés. Unfortunately, after the Revolution, all these first achievements were destroyed. The view of 'wen yi zai dao', which regards literature as a vehicle to convey the Way, was restored. There was only a small change in the concept of "Dao" (Way): first, it meant the morality of saints and sages, later it referred to the Vietnamese Communist Party's policies. Didactic literature and propaganda literature developed rapidly.

In fact neither the Party nor Marxist literary theory was responsible for this degeneracy. Firstly, in the years 1945 and 1946, the Party's propaganda machine was not strong enough to persuade many writers in such a short period of time. Secondly, at that time, the Party did not have any cadre specialising in arts and literature. All activities in the field of arts and culture were generally spontaneous and based on three

⁵⁰ Quoted in Lại Nguyên Ân, "Về đời sống văn nghệ năm Cộng Hoà thứ nhất", *ibid.*

general principles that Trường Chinh had put forward in his *Theses on Culture* in 1943: to be national, to be popular, and to be scientific.

The reason for the degeneracy may be found in writers themselves rather than in outside factors. The time during which people had contact with the West was too short. All they had received from French literature was a mere thin glaze. In the depths of their heart, there remained a Confucian scholar full of responsibility for the community. In the period 1932-45, this very Confucian scholar contributed in preventing the development of individualism and aestheticism in Vietnam: Vietnamese writers have never been able to break through with individualism or aestheticism. Hoài Thanh, who was seen as the representative of the “art for art’s sake” side in the years 1935 to 1939, a few years later, when writing his *Thi nhân Việt Nam* in the early 1940s, became cautious. Thinking about Xuân Diệu’s poetry, he wrote:

The contact with the West has caused the disintegration of many solid ramparts. Vietnamese young people have the opportunity to look at the high sky and the immense earth but at the same time realise the desolation of the universe and the lamentation of human life. They think they may close their eyes and venture out by using individuality as their aim and life as life’s goal. However, this was just to lie to oneself. “Chớ để riêng em phải gặp lòng em” (Don’t let me see my own heart!), although an entreaty of a courtesan, has also been that of human beings throughout the ages. Individuals’ lives need to rely on something more sacred than their individuality and life.⁵¹

Then, when criticizing the poetic works of the Xuân Thu Nhã Tập group, Hoài Thanh did not hide his aversion to their inscrutable poems and their attempts to create a purely formal beauty in the symbolist and surrealist vein. He feared that “all Vietnamese poets would emulate one another on this dark road. This would cause poetry to become an entertainment for the leisured people and have nothing to do with

⁵¹ Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân (1967), op. cit., p. 119.

common life”.⁵² Taking this opportunity, he advised young poets to go back to folk songs, to rustic and simple peasantry and to the national spiritual legacy

It may be said that in the seething atmosphere of the first half of the 1940s, the hidden ‘Confucian scholar’ in the heart of every Vietnamese writer suddenly woke up, urging them to ‘practice the moral’ (hành đạo) and turned them into soldiers who employed literature as a weapon and put lyrical sensitivity at the service of a cause.

Looking for a Literary Path 1947- 48

The momentous turning-point in the process of transforming Vietnamese writers from moral-practitioners in the Confucian vein to politically-committed writers under the spell of Marxism is the very anti-French resistance which broke out in December 1946.

The August Revolution, in spite of its great significance in Vietnamese history, simply shook some writers and artists, whilst the vast majority of them wavered or remained indifferent to the tremendous changes. Tô Hoài recounted that, on the Revolution day in Hanoi, Đinh Hùng was actually dead drunk, oversleeping until the afternoon of the next day. It was only when he saw the revolutionary flags flying everywhere that he realized that everything had changed.⁵³ At the end of 1946, Lưu Trọng Lư left Huế for Hanoi to attend the conference of the Cultural Association for National Salvation where he met a certain scholar who was also a well-known writer. When this scholar asked him: “Are you also attending this conference?” Lưu Trọng Lư replied: “Yes, I am”, but in fact said to himself: “I’ll just wait and see!”⁵⁴ Chế Lan Viên was in the same situation: he was elated to welcome the Revolution at its very beginning, but in the bottom of his heart he was worried: “The Revolution makes me

⁵² Ibid., p. 42-43.

⁵³ Tô Hoài (1993), “Những năm 1944-45”, *Tác Phẩm Mới*, no. 6 (1993), p. 32.

⁵⁴ Lưu Trọng Lư, “Những bước đi”, *Tác Phẩm Mới* no. 22 (1972), pp. 33-49, reprinted in Lưu Trọng Lư (1978), *Mùa thu lớn*, Hanoi: Tác Phẩm Mới.

happy but it also concerns me: Do I still have freedom? Is literature still literature?”⁵⁵ Nguyễn Tuân remembered that on the day the Japanese staged a coup d'état against the French, while everyone was extremely excited and prepared for rebellion, he was not at all aware of this event. Then, on the day of the outbreak of the August Revolution, he wore formal clothes in order to “go and see”, as a bystander. Afterwards, he started abhorring politics because of the dreadful conflicts between the political parties. He wrote in one of his articles: “Now, wherever I see flags flying, regardless of which kind of flag, I am scared.”⁵⁶ Only when the anti-French resistance broke out did he completely change his attitude: “There was no need to discuss whether or not we should rise up against the French who wanted to make us slaves. I decided to join the resistance with an easy and serene mind.”⁵⁷

Furthermore, in the second part of 1945 and in 1946, Vietnamese literature disintegrated seriously in terms of attitude to politics and literary trend. While some writers joined the Cultural Association for National Salvation, supporting the new regime and advocating realism, others protested against the communist-led government on behalf of freedom and democracy and continued to extol romanticism, symbolism and surrealism. Even the Tự Lực Group, a group which was closely organized and had had a clearly theoretical platform since the 1930s, started to split at the beginning of the 1940s: Nhất Linh, Khái Hưng and Hoàng Đạo strongly opposed the Viet Minh, whereas Thế Lữ and Tú Mỡ tended to follow this organization.⁵⁸ For those who declared themselves Marxists, the contradictions between the Third and Fourth International became more and more serious. However, at the outbreak of the anti-French resistance, all these conflicts disappeared.

The resistance, at least in the first years, from 1946 to 1949, gathered almost all writers, not only realists but also romanticists, symbolists and surrealists, and not only

⁵⁵ Ché Lan Viên (1976), *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), *op.cit.*, pp. 40-1.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁵⁸ See Tú Mỡ (1996), *Toàn tập*, vol. 1, Hanoi: Văn Học, pp. 561-601.

those who advocated art for human life's sake, as there were also advocates of art for art's sake. The main motivation for their active attitude was nationalism. They acted on the Vietnamese tradition: "When aggressors arrive at people's homes, even women have to fight"⁵⁹ and all differences in political outlooks were to be put aside. Khái Hưng, who throughout 1946 kept on criticizing the Viet Minh and the communists, left Hanoi for his native district, Nam Định, to join the resistance. But a short time later, at the beginning of 1947, he was killed by the Viet Minh because of their old hatred towards him.⁶⁰

Writers and artists spontaneously evacuated Hanoi and other cities, dispersing in all directions: some returned to their native district, and others joined their friends. Their main goal was to escape from the French occupied zones. Early in 1947, one of the Vietnamese Communist Party's policies was to canvass writers and artists for participation in the resistance. Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, Nguyễn Đình Thi and Nguyễn Văn Mãi were responsible for this task. The Ministry of the Interior granted a sum of money to every writer's and artist's family for their living and activities.⁶¹ As a result, artists were gradually concentrating in some specific places, especially in the following five zones: Việt Bắc, the Third, the Fourth, the Tenth and the Twelfth.

In Việt Bắc, most writers and artists, including Xuân Diệu, Huy Cận, Hoài Thanh, Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, Nguyễn Đình Thi, among others, worked for the central organs which were at first based in Đạo Từ and Thái Nguyên and later in Ghềnh Quít and Tuyên Quang. In the Tenth and Twelfth Zones, writers, artists and their families lived in two villages, Nguyên Hồng, Kim Lân, Ngô Tất Tố and Trần Văn Cẩn sharing the Đồi Cháy hamlet in Yên Thế, while Thế Lữ, Phan Khôi, Tô Ngọc Vân, Thanh Tịnh and Nguyễn Tư Nghiêm lived in the Xuân Áng village at Phú Thọ.

⁵⁹ A Vietnamese proverb: "Giặc đến nhà, đàn bà cũng đánh".

⁶⁰ Details on the death of Khái Hưng can be found in Trần Khánh Triệu, "Papa toà báo" and Huy Quang Vũ Đức Vinh, "Nhớ về nhà văn Khái Hưng, chàng lần thân và người ngọc nói hoa cười", *Thế Kỷ 21*, no. 104 (December 1997), pp.13-21, and 23-31.

⁶¹ See Nguyễn Văn Mãi, "Công việc của tôi trong những ngày kháng chiến", in Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), *op.cit.*, pp. 229-235.

In the Third Zone, writers and artists, including Đoàn Văn Cừ, Huyền Kiêu, Vi Huyền Đắc, Vũ Hoàng Chương, Đinh Hùng, Hoàng Công Khanh, Trần Lê Văn and Bùi Huy Phồn, were concentrated in Thái Bình. However, at the end of 1951, when the French invaded that province, some of them returned to Hanoi, and others moved to Thanh Hoá. In the middle of 1952, the Fourth Interzone Union of Writers and Artists disintegrated completely.

In the Fourth Zone, Thanh Hoá was the most crowded and cheerful place, with no sign of war during the nine years of resistance, and where Đặng Thai Mai, Nguyễn Đức Quỳnh, Trương Tửu, Nguyễn Xuân Sanh, Nguyễn Tuân, Hải Triều, Bùi Hiên, Sĩ Ngọc, Chu Ngọc, Mạnh Phú Tư, Vũ Ngọc Phan, Hằng Phương, Bửu Tiên, Nguyễn Đình Lạp, and a short time later, Lưu Trọng Lư and Chế Lan Viên, lived. Most of them were concentrated in the Quần Tín village. At first they received Viet Minh government grants. Then, in 1950, during the recession, they had to support themselves. The vast majority of them had to move to Cầu Thiều hamlet (Đông Sơn district) where they founded the Cultivating Art and Letters Group (Nhóm Văn nghệ Canh tác), and where their families each received at least 2,400 square metres of ricefield plus some farming equipment to make their living.⁶²

In 1948, aiming to develop the central office of the Union of Writers and Artists, the Vietnamese Communist Party transferred several talented and trustful writers and artists such as Nguyễn Tuân, Vũ Ngọc Phan and Nguyễn Xuân Sanh to Việt Bắc.⁶³

In other areas, from Đà Nẵng to South Vietnam, writers and artists were not only very few in number but also had to move continuously because of the fighting situation. In the Fifth Zone, there were Nam Trân, Tế Hanh, Nguyễn Văn Bổng, Phạm Hồ, Nguyễn Thành Long and Yên Lan. In South Vietnam, there was only one writer who was well-known nation-wide: Nguyễn Bính. Sơn Nam, whose real name was

⁶² See Bùi Huy Phồn, “Đường về Liên khu 3”, in Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), *ibid.*, pp. 360-372.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 52, 143, 165, 360, 363, and 450.

Phạm Anh Tài, started his writing career with short stories. Anh Đức, whose real name was Bùi Đức Ái, published his first short stories in the *Lá Lúa* magazine. Apart from these writers, a few, including Lý Văn Sâm, Đoàn Giỏi, Thẩm Thệ Hà and Hoàng Xuân Nhị, were sometimes mentioned, but their talent was limited.

Irrespective of where they lived, most writers and artists participated actively in the resistance activities. Lưu Trọng Lư was the head of the Branch of Art and Letters of the Fourth Interzone, the editor-in-chief of *Thép Mới* magazine in Thanh Hoá, the vice-director of the Art and Propaganda of the Zone and a member of the Art and Letters Sub-Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party's Central Committee. Tế Hanh joined the service responsible for the anti-illiteracy schools in Central Vietnam. Nguyễn Xuân Sanh published the *Sáng Tạo* magazine in Thanh Hoá and from 1949 was transferred to Việt Bắc with the position of vice-director of the People's Art and Letters Committee. Together with Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, he was in charge of the People's Art and Letters School in Thái Nguyên. Chế Lan Viên was the editor of *Quyết Thắng*, *Cứu Quốc* and *Kháng Chiến* magazines in the Fourth Zone. Anh Thơ worked for the *Phụ Nữ Việt Nam* magazine and was the vice-director of a traditional operetta group which belonged to the People's Folk-Dance and Song Ensemble Union. Nguyễn Bình was the vice-director of the provincial Việt Minh organization in Rạch Giá and worked later for the Art and Letters organ of the Eighth Interzone. Nguyễn Công Hoan joined the army, was the editor of *Vệ Quốc Quân*, the director of the People's Cultural School of the High Command, and the editor-in-chief of *Quân Nhân Học Báo*. Others were either mass cadres or reporters and feature writers, especially of *Cứu Quốc*, whose publisher was Xuân Thủy, belonging to the Viet Minh Central Executive Committee, or *Vệ Quốc Quân*, whose publisher was Trần Độ, a military newspaper.

The above positions and tasks, in principle, seemed to be closely connected with literature and art, but in reality were merely focused on political and propaganda aspects. According to Nguyễn Tuân, who was elected General Secretary of the Association of Literature and Art during the anti-French resistance, the main duty of a general secretary consists of engaging in military operations from one campaign to another, joining guerrilla militia to enemy posts and lines, propagandising the

agriculture tax collection policy and agitating the masses to participate in the government's policy of tax reduction and land reform.⁶⁴

Thus, writers' memoirs were usually about their journeys. They travelled endlessly, and their life was linked with roads. Nguyễn Tuân wrote in "Đường vui" (Happy Road) as follows:

After the resistance, of the innumerable images around us, that of a road, of many roads, impressed us the most... More than a home or a warm cooking fire of the pre-war period, now the road is the crux of our character and our thoughts.⁶⁵

Nguyễn Đình Thi wrote about Trần Đăng:

Spending autumn and winter 1947 in Yên Thế Thượng (La Hiên), spring 1948 around Hanoi, spring 1949 on Highway no. 13, penetrating into desolate mountains and hills in the enemy lines, Trần Đăng was so absorbed in travelling that he did not feel tired and in need of rest.⁶⁶

Tô Hoài was in the same situation. In the middle of 1945, he was in Hanoi. He arrived in a flash in Vĩnh Yên, Việt Trì, in South Vietnam, even in Nha Trang; then he returned to North Vietnam, participated in the Sông Thao and the Border Campaigns, and in 1952 reached Việt Bắc, staying there for a long period of time, before moving from one village to another, and living with ethnic groups such as the Thái, Mèo, Mường and Dao.⁶⁷ Quang Dũng's 'Con đường Tây tiến' (Road to the West) comprised endless and tortuous roads through forests, from Châu Mai, Châu Mộc to Sầm Nứa, Thanh Hoá, Laos, and then back to Thái Bình.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Nguyễn Tuân, "Trò chuyện", *ibid.*, p. 54.

⁶⁵ Nguyễn Tuân (1949), *Đường vui*, Viet Bac: Hội Văn Nghệ Việt Nam, excerpted in Nguyễn Tuân (1981), *Tuyển tập*, vol. 1, pp. 305-8.

⁶⁶ Nguyễn Đình Thi (1994), *Tuyển tập văn xuôi*, Hanoi: Văn Học, pp.57-63.

⁶⁷ Tô Hoài, "Thêm một ít tài liệu và kỷ niệm về thời kỳ kháng chiến chống Pháp ở Việt Bắc", in Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), *op. cit.*, pp. 161-8.

⁶⁸ See Trần Lê Văn, "Nghĩ về thơ bạn", *Quân Đội nhân dân*, 2 August 1986.

Obviously, Vietnamese artists were launching out into the anti-French resistance, and in the seething atmosphere of revolution, it seems that they were prepared to sacrifice themselves for their country's independence. Differences in political outlook and literary thoughts which had split Vietnamese writers before 1946 suddenly disappeared. Vietnamese literature had never before been united like this. All of a sudden, opponents of the pen-war in the matter of art for art's sake versus art for human life's sake became comrades.

Nevertheless, as Ché Lan Viên commented, there was still a differentiation between a citizen-person and an artist-person: "Their citizen part is very active, serving their country at all costs, but their artist part stays separate, steps backward, ponders over, and searches."⁶⁹ When making this comment, Ché Lan Viên remembered his own experiences: despite the Communist Party's slogan of being 'nationalized', and its appeal for simple writings in order to help even farmers to understand and enjoy them, Ché Lan Viên continued to use a symbolic and surrealist style in many poems. His first revolutionary poem entitled "Chào mừng" (Welcome), came into being only in 1950, four years after the outbreak of the resistance.

Ché Lan Viên's mood was probably also shared by Hoài Thanh, the author of *Thi nhân Việt Nam* (Vietnamese Poets) and the best-known critic of the 1930s and 1940s. After the Revolution, Hoài Thanh wrote in *Tiên Phong*: "The 'I' individual is meaningless compared with the broad life of the association."⁷⁰ However, in spite of his enthusiasm and in spite of "being ready to do anything to fight the French", he merely joined the resistance as a citizen, not as an artist:

In my mind, I still keep an autonomous zone where there are different views... I think that, apart from political and social aspects which have changed, everything else remains the same. I happily joined the revolution, and believe that my whole old world, including the immense moonlight of *The*

⁶⁹ Ché Lan Viên (1971), *Suy nghĩ và bình luận*, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 150.

⁷⁰ Hoài Thanh, "Dân khí miền Trung", *Tiên Phong*, no. 3, 1945, reprinted in Hoài Thanh (1999), *Toàn Tập*, volume 3, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 697.

Tale of Kiều, the sad yellow sunlight of the New Poetry Movement, and the different views on human beings and literature etc... throughout the ages has joined the revolution along with me.

All these things strongly attract me and are valuable as undeniable objective truths. For me, the world has the same number of mountains and rivers, flowers and leaves. So do human souls, which still consist of sadness, happiness, love and hatred. Thus, literature surely remains the same.⁷¹

Gradually, living and fighting in harsh conditions in the forest and mangrove swamp areas, writers' ways of thinking and feeling changed. This resulted in changes in their aesthetic viewpoint. Hoài Thanh later wrote:

Once, as I was walking in the forest, skirting a stream, I went over some of Tản Đà's poetic lines. Obviously, the stream next to me and the one in Tản Đà's poems were very different, so I longed for other poems. It may be said that since then, in my mind, there have been other views on literature and art.⁷²

But the problem was: if they did not want to write as before, what would they write? Before 1948, this question was ignored. Nobody attempted to find a solution to it, apart from Đặng Thai Mai with his article entitled “Kháng chiến và văn hoá” (The Resistance and Culture), written in 1947. According to him, in respect of culture, Vietnam continued to pursue the three principles of *Theses on Culture*, which was released in 1943: the culture ‘must be national’ (dân tộc hoá), ‘it must be scientific’ (khoa học hoá) and ‘it must be popular’ (đại chúng hoá). However, in his article, it is hard to understand why Đặng Thai Mai changed the ‘being national’ principle into “being democratic” and asserted that in the resistance situation, the way we apply these three principles should be flexible:

The spirit of democracy does not require the liberation of individuals and a particular class, but the whole nation. At the present, the main enemies of our democratic regime are the colonialist reactionaries and the invaders. The spirit of

⁷¹ Hoài Thanh, “Nhìn lại cuộc tranh luận về nghệ thuật hồi 1935-1936”, *Tập san Nghiên cứu Văn học*, 1 January 1960, reprinted in Hoài Thanh (1999), *Toàn Tập*, volume 2, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 575.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 577.

popularity, during the recent fighting process, has a new meaning. It needs to eliminate all thoughts which disintegrate the social stratum, ideals in order to implement unity, and the active co-operation of all the Vietnamese people. What about the scientific mind? The scientific mind is also determined by the nation's circumstances. The main goal is to find sensible ways to solve problems and review one's work in order to draw experience. We should pay attention to practical and immediate problems, and pigeon-hole sublime doctrines, marvellous themes and subtle theories.⁷³

In respect to literature, after maintaining that "literature is the most appropriate means to propagate thoughts", Đặng Thai Mai wrote:

In the resistance period, writers must use a confident, bold and firm style to attract, console and guide able citizens in their struggle. Therefore they should put aside literary theory issues. Before the outbreak of the war, we found many questions in newspapers, magazines, cultural conferences and heated discussions such as: To whom do we write? Why do we write? How do we write? etc. Today, these questions have almost been solved. Literature has its own function and goal, which is fighting our foreign invader and preserving the country. Apart from this, the remaining are merely idle and unnecessary matters.⁷⁴

With such a pragmatic mind, Đặng Thai Mai believed that literature's goal was to explain the situations and provide the basic military, social, economic and cultural knowledge, and draw experience from the fighting. The first goal of writing was to form a firm confidence in the nation's future in people's minds.

We can write anything as far as people like and understand it [...] To sum up, writing clearly and easily is the distinguishing feature of the present-day literary form.⁷⁵

⁷³ Đặng Thai Mai, "Kháng chiến và văn hoá", in *Cách mạng và Kháng chiến*, published by Hội Văn Nghệ Việt Nam in 1947, reprinted in Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), op. cit., p. 33.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 37.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 37-38.

Đặng Thai Mai's view on literature was relatively extreme and naive. It confused literature with other types of discourse in general, and hence it was not able to convince people. As a result, writers continued to turn the question "How to write?" over and over in their minds. Nguyễn Hồng "took down quite a lot of notes but confessed that he did not know how to write."⁷⁶ When Nam Cao finished seven or eight chapters of his long unfinished novel describing changes in his village before, during and after the revolution, he read them to his friends and decided to tear them up because Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, Kim Lân and Tô Hoài had criticized them as cursory.⁷⁷ Trần Đăng did the same thing with his reportage because of his friends' criticism.⁷⁸ Nguyễn Tuân "sees that my pen, when moving on pages, cannot keep up with my real characters' progress, and many times I want to throw away my individual 'I'."⁷⁹

Nguyễn Huy Tưởng's diary teemed with references to his restlessness about writing. He wrote on October 24, 1947:

The moon was completely hidden as if it had not been there. The host was out. People went to bed early. Although I was exhausted, I kept the light on to read again my old diary which contains ideas, plans and writhing sentiments. No plan was implemented. Do things continue to remain the same? I am worried. Tô and Lành have been out since the afternoon and, after a day of discussing the plan for literary activities, I feel like writing, but I do not know what to write.

On October 28, 1947:

Phạm Duy dropped in and talked about music... about Anatole France and Romain Rolland. Why are their works so great? I feel extremely hopeless. I should strive for self-improvement in order to be able to write a lot.

⁷⁶ Vũ Đức Phúc, "Hoạt động văn nghệ ở một vùng địch hậu", in Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), op. cit., p. 219.

⁷⁷ Tô Hoài, "Thêm một ít tư liệu và kỷ niệm về thời kỳ kháng chiến chống Pháp ở Việt Bắc", in Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), op. cit., p. 167.

⁷⁸ Từ Bích Hoàng, "Vài kỷ niệm văn nghệ bộ đội", in Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), op. cit., p. 304.

⁷⁹ Quoted in Phong Lê (1972), *Máy vấn đề văn xuôi Việt Nam, 1945-1970*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, p. 41.

I decided to spend two hours a day for writing. I must set some specific time to sit down and write. And concentrate on a specific topic.

On December 4, 1947:

1.00 p.m. It was raining. We pitched the tent, burned some firewood, and dried some canvass. Talking about literature, reciting *Chinh Phụ Ngâm*, *Tỳ bà* etc., commenting on Đỗ Phủ. I only had a good nap. Then worrying about my life and literary achievement, I said to Phi: “If the resistance lasts ten years, we will become old then. What will we be able to do after that?” He answered: “So we have to think about writing during the resistance!” I dozed off with my rucksack and firewood as a pillow. I heard the stream babbling and the wind blowing impetuously.

On December 6, 1947, he wrote again about the same concern:

I tossed about all night, worrying about my future works, which will be as monumental and thick as Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. But I feel that I am old...⁸⁰

Nguyễn Huy Tưởng was born in 1912. When he wrote the above lines, he was only thirty-five years old. When he complained that he was already “old”, he obviously exaggerated his situation. In fact, he was pessimistic and had reached an impasse. This was also the popular mood of most writers and artists at that time whose works declined both in quantity and quality. Until 1949, the vast majority of writers only wrote some short stories and poems; and of these, refined works were very rare. Nguyễn Đình Thi, in his article entitled “Nhận đường” (Recognizing the Way), written in 1947, sharply expressed the writers’ and artists’ pessimistic mood:

Undoubtedly, we are boldly moving forward. However, why are we often unhappy and hesitant? When reading again our finished work, we realize that our art is clumsy and weak, which is far from being a hurricane for the struggle. Many of us just want to throw our pen away in order to do something else more efficiently.[...] Around us, there is anxiety amongst our friends: Why can we only provide childish works for the resistance, whereas our soul feels strong anguish?

⁸⁰ Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, “Nhật ký cuối năm 1947”, in Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), op. cit., pp. 73-93.

Why?⁸¹

As an artist, Nguyễn Đình Thi was deeply conscious of the weakness of the resistance literature. But as a political activist and as one of the Party's leaders in the field of literature and art at that time, he understood that this weakness was not in terms of art or aesthetics but mainly in social effects. Vietnamese literature was weak because it could not “make a hurricane for the struggle”, was not “a bullet firing at the enemy's head” and “does not make up people's enthusiasm”. With such an understanding, he proposed a pure political measure to overcome that problem: writers should “travel and see a lot”, “live the resistance life of the nation, understand the way our nation is going, and share new feelings of the resistance.”⁸² By “living the resistance life”, he meant: “fighting together with the masses instead of seeing as an outsider”, and “we must go to the front lines of our nation's war, the most fierce battle of the resistance, where a new life rises like a storm, blowing away all obstacles. We must fight along with soldiers, we must go to wonderful workshops in the deep forest, and we must rush to the enemy occupied zones.”⁸³

It is hard to say that Nguyễn Đình Thi's view is precise. Theoretically, the view which sees political effects as a criterion to assess literature is a quite naive view: it does not recognize any other literary and artistic function apart from that of reflecting reality and enticing and stimulating the masses. In reality, a large number of writers and poets, including Nguyễn Đình Thi, participated actively in the resistance and did what Nguyễn Đình Thi required. The question to be asked, however, is: why were they still unable to produce any great works?

Nguyễn Đình Thi's view of literature is understandable for two reasons. Firstly, it is very close to the traditional Vietnamese view which regards literature as a kind of weapon or means. In the thirteenth century, Trần Thái Tông believed that “the pen can

⁸¹ Nguyễn Đình Thi, “Nhận đường”, in Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), op. cit., pp. 65 and 71.

⁸² Ibid., pp. 71-72.

⁸³ Ibid.

destroy thousands of enemies” (văn bút tảo thiên quân chi trận); in the nineteenth century, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu also saw literature as a ship carrying “Đạo” (Way) and as a sword to kill the evil; at the beginning of the twentieth century, both Phan Bội Châu and Phan Châu Trinh held that in the struggle for national independence the pen is stronger than the sword (“sức văn hồi bút mạnh hơn gươm” or ‘bút lưỡi muốn xoay dòng nước lũ”).⁸⁴ Secondly, this attitude was compatible with the Vietnamese writers’ mood at a time when foreign invasion, aspiration for independence and the Viet Minh’s tactful propaganda were causing the hidden Confucian scholar in every writer’s mind to wake up. The traditional view of “wen yi zai dao”, which regarded literature as a vehicle to convey the Way, revived. The impact of the art for art’s sake view, which sprang up in Vietnam in the mid-1930s, faded rapidly. In literary thought, the priority of content over form, purpose over means, and lyrical sensitivity was put at the service of a political cause. This was manifested in the indifference of the general public towards literature: “Books on politics and philosophy are sold like hot cakes, whereas literary works, especially those which are long, do not meet with a generous response.”⁸⁵ This also had another manifestation in the writer’s cult of the role of political standpoint in the process of creating.

The significance of the issue of political standpoint in writing may be found in Nam Cao’s short story entitled “Đôi mắt” (The Eyes), which was widely regarded as one of the most sophisticated works in the resistance literature and, according to Tô Hoài, a kind of writers’ art declaration.⁸⁶

Written in 1948, “The Eyes” was about two writers, Hoàng and Độ. Both were writers before 1945. However, whilst Độ was a young and poor writer, Hoàng was an experienced hack writer who also worked as a well-off black-market trader. A few

⁸⁴ Quoted in Lê Trí Viễn (1984), *Đặc điểm có tính quy luật của lịch sử văn học Việt Nam*, Ho Chi Minh City: Đại Học Sư Phạm, pp. 167, 170 and 171

⁸⁵ Vũ Đức Phúc, “Hoạt động văn nghệ ở một vùng địch hậu”, in Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), *op. cit.*, p. 220.

⁸⁶ Tô Hoài, “Người và tác phẩm Nam Cao”, in Viện Văn Học (1992), *Nghĩ tiếp về Nam Cao*, Hanoi: Nxb Hội Nhà Văn, p. 231.

years after the outbreak of the resistance, they met again in a resistance zone about one hundred kilometres from Hanoi. ĐỘ went to Hoàng's place with the intention to invite Hoàng to join the resistance, but Hoàng immediately disappointed him. At this time, their thinking differed completely, even in the most basic matters. Hoàng did not want to live in a French occupied zone, but at the same time did not trust the masses who were carrying out the anti-French resistance. He regarded them as "dim-headed, blunt, selfish, greedy and stingy", or "dull-headed but fussy" persons who "spent at least fifteen minutes to read an identity card, but were interested in asking trespassers to show their papers", who "wrote Vietnamese national script (chữ quốc ngữ) incorrectly (sai vắn) but often talked about politics". In contrast, ĐỘ, who experienced hardships in the resistance and performed his propaganda task actively, saw country people as "weird", and "still a mystery" for an intellectual like himself. Also most of them had "black teeth, rheumy eyes, pronounced 'nữ đạn' instead of 'lữ đạn', and sang *Tiến quân ca* like sleepy prayers, but were very brave in the battlefields."⁸⁷

ĐỘ judged Hoàng as follows:

I knew he would never agree to being a simple propagandist like me. Moreover, I could not convince him to do what I was doing, to carry a sack on his shoulder and go from one village to another to gain an insight into the countryside and understand it better. It would be of no interest to him. He had a one-sided outlook on the people's life. He saw the young peasant saying by heart his lesson of 'three stages' but he failed to see the bundle of bamboo he carried on his shoulder to stop the enemy. And even in the fact that the young peasant said by heart like a parrot the article which he had read in a newspaper, he only saw the apparent stupidity of the thing and did not see the very lofty motive inside. If he still went on looking at things the same way as he was doing, the more he looked into things, the more he would become bitter and discouraged.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Nam Cao (1983), *Chi Pheo and Other Stories*, Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, pp. 181-202.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

The “The Eyes” problem, in fact, was the standpoint problem. According to Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh, “the contradiction between ĐỘ and Hoàng was first of all a contradiction in standpoint.”⁸⁹ While ĐỘ participated actively in the resistance and saw it as his duty, Hoàng stood outside like a stranger and decided not to do anything. While ĐỘ was elated by any change in the revolution, Hoàng merely saw the ridiculous and funny aspects of those changes.

In fact, “The Eyes” raised many significant problems. First, the frontier between writers did not result from art problems, including talent, different style, view and method, but mainly from political problems: whether they participated or not in the resistance. Second, writers’ political attitudes were closely connected with their attitude towards country people. Although people like Hoàng consented to and believed in the resistance, in the gifted leading role of the Viet Minh, they were still outsiders to the resistance for they did not accept country people and did not rank with farmers. This was closely linked with the nature of the resistance, which was a resistance of all the Vietnamese people, of which ninety percent were peasants. Now we can understand why since 1943, in *Theses on Culture*, the slogan of ‘being popular’ was one of three main principles, and why after the August Revolution until the anti-French resistance, the issue of being popular was always the main and foremost concern, compared with the two other principles. Third, one’s attitude to the masses was generally closely connected with one’s way of living. Despising the masses, Hoàng’s family had a reticent life, and was separated from the people around them. Their gate was always locked and guarded by a fierce dog. This living condition and style were totally opposite to the Party’s policy, which required that writers and artists had to live exactly like the masses, feel what they felt and say what they said. Fourth, “The Eyes” also raised the issue of art’s object, which was the central issue of revolutionary literature. In the pre-1945 literature, heroes were those who had been petty bourgeois, young and romantic. For Hoàng, they should be like Tào Tháo in the *Stories of the Three Kingdoms*. In contrast, for ĐỘ, as a resistance writer, heroes were rustic farmers, those who might be ignorant and awkward, but were dauntlessly

⁸⁹ Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh (1999), *ibid.*

fighting against the French invader. The new type of hero differed from that of romanticism in one crucial point: he or she represented a very crowded community bloc, and therefore had an enormous strength rather than just representing one or two lonely individuals who had come out of the blue. This basic characteristic of the new type of hero led to optimism in the resistance literature: unlike Hoàng, Độ still believed in the final success of the resistance, despite his hard experiences in an arduous war. With such a great significance, Nam Cao's "The Eyes" has been widely hailed by Marxist critics as a declaration of the new literature.

The Two Decisive Years 1948 and 1949

In the developing history of socialist realism in Vietnam, the years 1948 and 1949 are the decisive ones. Before that period of time, the Communist Party had concentrated their efforts on political and military activities in order to seize power, and then defend it. Consequently, it did not have many opportunities to concern itself with the literary and artistic fields. The *Theses on Culture*, published by the Party in 1943, was a mere general strategic policy which aimed at calling upon writers and poets to take part in the political struggle led by the Party, rather than one which put forward a literary conception or a clear-cut and specifically creative method. The only individual efforts to approach and introduce socialist realism were those of Hải Triều and Đặng Thai Mai. From 1947, the Party officially assigned Tố Hữu, a young and well-known poet as well as a political cadre, to be responsible for the fields of literature and arts, which were directly dependent on the Department of Propaganda of the Party's Central Committee led by Trường Chinh, its Secretary General.⁹⁰ Gradually, the Party came to exercise strict control over all literary and artistic activities. The National Congress of Culture and the Conference on Literature and the Arts were held, the Association of Vietnamese Writers and Artists was founded, and the propaganda on Marxist literary theory was implemented more systematically and on a larger scale. From 1950, as the Party started its counter-attack and the military situation became

⁹⁰ Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), *op. cit.*, p. 209.

more tense, all literary and artistic activities were grinding to a standstill until the battle of Điện Biên Phủ brought the war to an end and the Communist Party came to power in North Vietnam.

Another significant change that the years 1948 and 1949 brought to the North was that the political leaders took over the role of leading the ideology for literature and the arts, as Vũ Đức Phúc remarks:

From the Second National Congress of Culture (1948) and the First National Conference on Literature and Art (1948) onward, President Hồ Chí Minh, Trường Chinh and Tố Hữu became theorists of Vietnamese revolutionary literature and art. This phenomenon may be seen as a specific trait of Vietnamese conjuncture: political leaders were art theorists as well... Other theorists, although productive and prestigious, were not able to solve issues raised by the literary reality.⁹¹

It seems abundantly clear that two consequences may be derived from the fact that political leaders took over the role of literary leaders: firstly, literature was politicised; secondly, literary thoughts that those political leaders put forward tended to become dogmas. In this chapter, we are going to study the redirection of Vietnamese literary thinking in the period 1948 - 1949 by analysing the thoughts of two leading figures: Trường Chinh and Tố Hữu.

Trường Chinh (1907-1988):

Trường Chinh, whose real name was Đặng Xuân Khu, was born on February 9, 1907. Until 1929, he attended the College of Commerce in Hanoi. He then participated in a campaign to found the Vietnamese Communist Party in the North. In 1930, he was a member of the Central Propaganda Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party. At the end of the same year he was arrested and imprisoned by the French in Sơn La before being released in 1936. In the late 1930s he lived in Hanoi. Professionally he

⁹¹ Viện Văn Học (1986), *Văn học Việt Nam kháng chiến chống Pháp (1945-1954)*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, pp. 57 and 67.

was a journalist and proof-reader at the Lê Văn Tân Printer;⁹² politically he was a member of the Northern Region Committee. When the Second World War broke out, he was engaged in clandestine activities. In 1940, he was the editor of the *Giải Phóng* newspaper, which was the mouthpiece of the Northern Region Committee. In 1941, at the Eighth Conference of the Central Party, he was appointed Secretary General of the Party's Central Committee as well as Head of the Department of Propaganda and Training. In that same year, he was the editor of the *Cờ Giải Phóng* magazine, which later changed to *Sự Thật* magazine, as well as being the Party's central mouthpiece. In 1943, as Secretary General, he compiled his *Theses on Culture* while initiating the establishment of the Cultural Association for National Salvation, which aimed at gathering intellectuals and artists under the leadership of the Party. From 1951 to 1956, he was the Party's Secretary General. In 1958, he was the Deputy Prime Minister. In 1960, he was the President of the National Assembly Standing Committee and responsible for the ideological tasks of the Party. In 1981, he was elected President of Vietnam. In July 1986, he was elected Secretary General of the Communist Party. However, six months later, at the Sixth Congress of the Party, as Nguyễn Văn Linh took over this post, he became the Advisor of the Executive Committee of the Central Party. He died on 30 September 1988 at the age of eighty-one.

Among Vietnamese communist leaders, Trường Chinh has been widely hailed as a theorist. His role in literary theory was widely recognized when he compiled his *Theses on Culture* and especially in 1948, when he, on behalf of the Party, delivered his report on *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture* at the Second Congress of Culture held in Việt Bắc from 16 to 20 July, 1948.

Approximately twenty thousand words long and divided into seven chapters (excluding the introduction and conclusion), *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture* focuses on three main issues: general theory of culture, the development process of Vietnamese culture, and specific issues related to literature and the arts.

⁹² Ibid., p. 219.

Trường Chinh used the first two chapters to present some of the basic concepts of Marxist cultural theory. First of all he stated that culture, politics and law were the elements which made up the superstructure of society. They were determined by society's material conditions of life and at times brought their influence in return to bear upon the material life. He also emphasized that, although economics determined the culture of a nation, this did not mean that (i) when certain economic conditions no longer existed, the corresponding culture would die out; or that (ii) culture and economics always developed evenly, one keeping in step with the other. Being determined by economics and society, in a class society a culture (especially literature and the arts) would not be devoid of tendencies. "Each work of art implies a definite social attitude. It sides with the oppressors and exploiters or opposes them."⁹³

Trường Chinh quoted Marx and Engels' well-known theoretical point in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: "The ruling ideas of each age have always been the ideas of the ruling class."⁹⁴ Then, with no further explanation, he went on to assert that, at that particular time in Vietnam, there were two different types of culture: the anti-national culture which was fostered by the French colonialists and their Vietnamese collaborators, and the patriotic culture of resistance. The latter had two tendencies or two sub-divisions: the culture of the working class and that of the national bourgeoisie. It is obvious that Trường Chinh's latter viewpoint springs from Lenin's theoretical point of the co-existence of two types of culture:

The *elements* of democratic and socialist culture are present, if only in rudimentary form, in *every* national culture, since in *every* nation there are toiling and exploited masses, whose conditions of life inevitably give rise to the ideology of democracy and socialism. But *every* nation also possesses a bourgeois culture (and most nations a reactionary and clerical culture as well) in the form, not merely of "elements", but of the *dominant* culture.⁹⁵

⁹³ Trường Chinh (1974), *Chủ nghĩa Mác và văn hoá Việt Nam*, second edition, Hanoi: Sự Thật, p. 21.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁹⁵ Lenin (1978), *On Literature and Art*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, p. 93.

According to Trường Chinh, the most outstanding feature of the counter-revolutionary culture is that its unscientific content is enveloped in a scientific form, while its poor content is hidden inside rich, glossy, subtle and sophisticated forms such as cubism, impressionism, surrealism and dadaism. He compared those doctrines with gaudy mushrooms sprouting from the rotten wood of imperialist culture.⁹⁶ In contrast, the most striking feature of the revolutionary culture was that it valued the truth by laying bare social corruption and, at the same time, depicting a new age which comes into being as an ineluctable historical event.

Trường Chinh summed up “the most revolutionary cultural standpoint in the world”, and in Vietnam as well, as follows:

The working class constitutes the social basis.

National independence, people's democracy and socialism are the political basis.

Dialectical materialism and historical materialism form the ideological basis.

Social realism should be treated as the artistic basis.⁹⁷

Under the spell of Marxism, Trường Chinh argued that ancient Vietnamese culture, despite the valuable efforts of men of genius from different generations, had two shortcomings: a weak scientific basis and a too-strongly Chinese influence.⁹⁸ When Vietnam was dominated by the French, its culture was influenced by both the Chinese and French imperialists.⁹⁹ The national bourgeoisie, while not daring to fight against the imperialists on the political and military fronts, carried out a cultural struggle against feudal and backward thinking, thus contributing to the development of Vietnamese literature and the arts. However, a real cultural revolution could only be carried out under the Communist Party's leadership. This culture must have the following characteristics: national, scientific and popular. From these three characteristics, the Communist Party put forward three guidelines to establish the new

⁹⁶ Trường Chinh (1974), *op. cit.*, p. 19.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

culture: to be national, to be scientific and to be popular.¹⁰⁰ Closely connected with these three guidelines were the following three attitudes:

- a. Be absolutely loyal to the Fatherland and the resistance; neither accept compromise with reactionary thoughts and culture nor adopt either neutralism or the attitude of on-lookers.
- b. Strive to conduct scientific and technological research and apply the results to benefit production, the struggle and human life; rely on Marxist theory as the compass for action; combine knowledge with action, theory with practice.
- c. Serve the people wholeheartedly; remain close to the workers, peasants and soldiers, be in sympathy with the masses, learn from, but at the same time educate and lead, the people.¹⁰¹

To carry out the above guidelines and adopt the above attitudes, cultural workers who “fight for independence and freedom of the fatherland cannot remain outside the National United Front in the fight against the French colonialist aggressors.”¹⁰² Moreover, writers and artists should join tight organizations led by the Communist Party.¹⁰³

Vietnamese literary researchers have always extolled Trường Chinh's report on *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*. Thành Duy declared that it was “a scientific work marking a great landmark in literary and artistic development” in Vietnam.¹⁰⁴ Phan Hồng Giang believed that this was the first time “Marxist cultural theories were presented systematically and concisely” in Vietnam.¹⁰⁵ According to Phan Cự Đệ, the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 75-76.

¹⁰² Ibid., pp. 77-78.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 79.

¹⁰⁴ *Tạp chí Văn Học* (Hanoi), no. 2 (1997), p. 8.

¹⁰⁵ Phan Hồng Giang, “Một số thu hoạch khi đọc cuốn Chủ nghĩa Mác và văn hoá Việt Nam của đồng chí Trường Chinh”, *Tác Phẩm Mới*, nos. 45-46 (January and February, 1975), p. 23.

report was “the first systematic theoretical work on socialist realism in Vietnam”,¹⁰⁶ “a compass for all writers and artists in the first process of seeking the literary path.”¹⁰⁷

Vũ Đức Phúc maintained:

Marxism and Vietnamese Culture is a significant theoretical work which solves or traces out measures to solve all current cultural and artistic issues and open a new area in the development of literature and the arts of resistance.¹⁰⁸

Vũ Đức Phúc brought out much evidence showing Trường Chinh's contributions to the theoretical field, the first of which was:

Before, many Trotskyists and scholars like Đào Duy Anh (with his book entitled *What is Culture*, 1946) put forward incorrect cultural theories. *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture* gives a clear definition of culture, bringing out correct and scientific basic principles and laws on cultural development as well as the relationship of culture with other aspects of life.¹⁰⁹

The definition of culture in Trường Chinh's *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture* that Vũ Đức Phúc believed “clear”, “correct” and “scientific”, was in fact the first short paragraph of Chapter One, “Culture and Society”:

Culture is a very vast domain which encompasses literature, art, science, philosophy, customs, religion and more besides. There are people who hold culture and civilization to be one and the same thing. History has shown, however, that many nations had a culture before they had a civilization. It is not until culture has enriched itself in substance and has developed to a certain point that it becomes civilization.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Phan Cự Đệ and Hà Minh Đức (1979), *Nhà văn Việt Nam (1945-1975)*, vol. 1, Hanoi: Nxb Đại Học và Trung Học Chuyên Nghiệp, p. 373.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 384.

¹⁰⁸ Viện Văn Học (1986), *op. cit.*, p. 53.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Trường Chinh (1974), *op. cit.*, p. 9.

In fact, saying that culture and civilization are identical is not always incorrect. As Raymond Williams points out, “civilization and culture (especially in its common early form as 'cultivation') were in effect, in the late eighteenth century, interchangeable terms”.¹¹¹ In addition, when stating that “culture has enriched itself in substance and has developed to a certain point to become civilization”, Trường Chinh made two mistakes. Firstly, he unintentionally stated that culture is on a higher level than civilization. Secondly, he placed culture and civilization in the same category, whereas most critics agree that “civilization is now generally used to describe an achieved state or condition of organized social life”¹¹² and, culture is used to describe “a process of 'inner' development” which includes a descriptive sense of the means and works of such development, that is, culture is a general classification of “the arts, religion, and the institutions and practices of meanings and values”.¹¹³

Although Trường Chinh has always been seen as a theorist of the Vietnamese Communist Party and *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture* as his typical work, it may be said that in his work, Trường Chinh either merely repeated general and basic knowledge of Marxism and Leninism or he was immersed in tiny details, floundering beyond his ability, in such issues as literary techniques and devices and collection of material for writing. This was noticeable to many people from the very beginning. Hà Xuân Trường, who was Trường Chinh's own secretary at that time, reminisced:

I remember the time when the sub-committee for literature and the arts had a preparatory meeting for the Second National Congress of Culture, discussing Trường Chinh's report on *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*. Most of the ideas that came across in the debate on the first chapter (the chapter that raised the very general issue on Marxist philosophy) and the final chapter (“Some concrete problems of our country's present literature and art”) differed immensely. Those who opposed Trường Chinh argued that for intellectuals, there was no need to

¹¹¹ Raymond Williams (1977), *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 14.

¹¹² Raymond Williams (1983), *Key Words, A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, London: Fontana Press, p. 57.

¹¹³ Raymond Williams (1977), *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

bring up simple, general issues - issues that everybody already knew about, and issues that were too concrete. Therefore, they did not come to a complete agreement on many issues. Trường Chinh then explained that he needed to go back to basic issues and concepts, because intellectuals in a colonial country like Vietnam did not have enough knowledge of Marxism-Leninism. He also declared that, although he himself compiled the report, the Central Standing Committee had already approved it and President Hồ Chí Minh had read the report and commented on it as well.¹¹⁴

From the above reminiscence, it may be easily seen that, on the one hand, Trường Chinh was deliberate in affirming the power of political leaders over issues related to culture and arts. When declaring that the Report was read and commented on by Hồ Chí Minh as well as being approved by the Central Standing Committee, Trường Chinh intended to end the debate. On the other hand, he also showed his contempt for intellectuals, writers and artists since, according to him, they did not even have a basic knowledge of philosophy and literary theory. As a result, the words that he used were forceful words of power but not of theoretical language. For example, he mentioned the issue of freedom:

Those who enjoy freedom are the ones who have cognisance of the objective, inescapable laws of nature and society, and act within the limits defined by their knowledge of these laws to bring about progress for humanity and their own people. In contrast, all those who oppose social evolution, democracy and progress will certainly be ground to dust under the wheel of history, and are then 'free' to serve as manure.¹¹⁵

He also mentioned the issue of criticism:

Some friends object to criticism as tantamount to 'washing our dirty linen in public', thereby displaying our weaknesses for the enemy to seize and beat us with. The criticism we have in mind is criticism that abides by principles and democratic discipline and not 'free criticism'. There may be some who wish to use

¹¹⁴ Hà Xuân Trường, “Văn học và đời sống văn hoá văn nghệ mấy năm đầu kháng chiến chống Pháp trên trang báo Đảng”, in Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), *op. cit.*, p. 210.

¹¹⁵ Trường Chinh (1974), *op. cit.*, p. 23.

criticism to sow dissension and doubt in the ranks of our people and supply the enemy with documents to be used against us. They are not critics but trouble-makers, who seek not progress but provocation. Their place is not on the public debating platform of a democratic country but in the prisons of the people's government!¹¹⁶

These words are powerful but not convincing in solving literary theoretical issues. The section he wrote on literature in *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture* was quite short and concentrated only on some main points related to socialist realism.

Trường Chinh defined socialist realism as follows:

As we understand it, socialist realism is a method of artistic creation which portrays the truth in a society evolving towards socialism according to objective laws. Out of objective reality we must spotlight 'the typical features in typical situations' and reveal the inexorable motive force driving society forward and the objective tendency of the process of evolution.¹¹⁷

Trường Chinh did not go on to analyse the typical features and typical situations but discussed how to depict the truth. He raised the question: "There are objective truths which are unfavourable to us. For example: shall we report a battle we have lost truthfully?"

Then he himself replied:

We can, of course, depict a lost battle, but in doing so, we must see to it that people realise how heroically our combatants accepted sacrifices, why the battle was lost, what our gains were and notwithstanding the defeat, that our combatants never felt demoralised because all were eager to learn and draw the appropriate lessons in order to secure victories in future battles. We can depict a local defeat while showing that the war is going our way. It should be borne in mind that there are truths worth mentioning, but there are also truths which are better left unmentioned, at least temporarily, and if mentioned at all, the question is where

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 101.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 94-95.

and how they should be.¹¹⁸

It should be mentioned that, when discussing culture in general, in this report and in other writings, such as the article entitled “Eighteen pieces of advice to be considered when writing” in 1947, Trường Chinh spoke of three principles: national, scientific and popular; but when he limited his discussion to literature and art, it seems that he stressed merely the third requirement: the character of being popular. According to Trường Chinh, the audience for artistic creation was the people, and therefore, in order to produce good works of art, “what is essential is to live among the masses of the people, that is to live a worthy life, the militant life of our people”; furthermore, writers and artists should ask themselves: “Who is to enjoy and watch what we are creating?” and create accordingly with “the average level of the majority of the people.”¹¹⁹

More importantly, Trường Chinh advised writers to trust the masses' judgement and rely on their opinion to check and correct their works. He believed that, although the masses did not have much education, they were capable of more accurate criticism of all works of art than professional critics,¹²⁰ because “[t]he feelings of the masses are pure, sincere and exceedingly warm. They show indifference only to insincere, recondite, recherché, evasive, preposterous works of art and hate the monsters of imagination.”¹²¹ In the end, he concluded:

The masses are the most impartial and perspicacious judges of art. If works of art, once created, are devoured, admired, enjoyed, adopted, applied, and chosen by the people as their daily spiritual nourishment, they must have value. In contrast, those works whose birth is heeded and cared for by no one will die an early death.¹²²

¹¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 95-96.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., pp.100-101.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 103.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 94.

¹²² Ibid., p. 103.

We should pay attention to this significant change in Trường Chinh's attitude to literature and the arts: during the previous year, in his article “Eighteen pieces of advice to be considered when writing”, when referring to the literature of resistance, Trường Chinh stressed three principles: to be national, to be scientific and to be popular.

To be national:

1. Do not use any unnecessary foreign words.
2. Do not write any sentence according to foreign construction.
3. Do not use classical references (điển tích) that do not improve your piece of writing.
4. Do not deflect from the precious literary tradition of the nation.
5. Do not slight the national literary capital.
6. Do not disdain the goodness of foreign literature and art.

To be scientific:

1. Be grammatically correct.
2. Do not use any superfluous word, except when deliberately repeating it for emphasis.
3. Do not write any sentence that may be misunderstood or that might have two meanings.
4. Do not separate our style from the people's language.
5. Do not write in disorder.
6. Do not use clichés from Vietnam or overseas (do not confuse clichés with dialect and maxims.)

To be popular:

1. Dare to use the usual words of the masses.
2. Do not write anything that the average reader would not understand.
3. Do not write for only a small number of 'upper class individuals and intellectuals'.
4. Do not write verbosely and quote uselessly in order to throw dust into people's eyes.
5. Do not neglect the duty of raising the standard of the people just because of a need to be popular.

6. Do not use vulgar and rude words just to increase your popularity.¹²³

In his *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*, when discussing culture, Trường Chinh also mentioned and analysed thoroughly the three above principles. However, when discussing literature and the arts, he especially stressed the third one: to be popular. This may not be a change in his standpoint but only a change in his priorities. When stressing the third principle, he also stressed the propaganda function of literature and the arts. This resulted in a paradox: theoretically, Trường Chinh recognized the close relationship between the arts and propaganda; they were not, however, the same thing:

As it attains a certain level, propaganda becomes art, which in turn has the unmistakable character of propaganda if it is to some extent realistic. Thus, we can say that there are propagandists who are not or not yet artists, and that there are no artists who are in no way propagandists.¹²⁴

But in reality, when analysing the significance of literature, he only concentrated on the propaganda significance and completely let the aesthetic and cognitive significance pass unnoticed. He encouraged writers and artists to use art as a kind of propaganda weapon. Thus, art gradually became a form of propaganda.

A great many writers and artists opposed Trường Chinh's viewpoint. In the article entitled “To learn or not to learn”, published in *Văn Nghệ*, artist Tô Ngọc Vân maintained that Trường Chinh's policy did not solve the legitimate uneasy state of mind of writers and artists when they faced the conflict between the two ideals: to serve either the masses or the arts. Furthermore, he definitely declared that if the people did not have any knowledge of art, they were not able to criticize it accurately. He wrote:

The people must learn about the art of painting to be able totally to enjoy the paintings. They must learn about the voice of figures and colours to be able to listen to what the figures and colours tell [...] When we know about Van Gogh's

¹²³ Trường Chinh (1985), *Về văn hoá và nghệ thuật*, volume 1, Hanoi: Văn Học, pp. 50-1.

¹²⁴ Trường Chinh (1974), op. cit., p. 92.

tragic biography, we can understand clearly and enjoy his emotional and stormy style. When we understand the historic stand of cubism and its technique, we do not waste time to mock it, or even if we mock it, we understand the reasons why we do it.¹²⁵

However, we should remember that, at that time, Trường Chinh was Secretary General as well as head of the Department of Propaganda and Training of the Communist Party. Thus, his voice had a special significance: it became both dogma and policy. Writers and artists' doubtful and opposed attitudes were seen as signs of their ideological ignorance. And for this reason, the Party decided to organise a four-day debate on literature and the arts in Việt Bắc, from 25 to 28 September, 1949, with the participation of a great number of writers and artists who had taken part in the resistance. The aim of this debate, according to Vũ Đức Phúc, was to “help everybody to understand clearly that when an artist does not have revolutionary thoughts and does not strive to thoroughly study the working class, he will certainly have incorrect artistic viewpoints and will create dull works of art.”¹²⁶

At the Viet Bac Conference of debate on literature and art, Tố Hữu's role became obviously noticeable as a direct leader of literary and artistic activities. He actually kept this role at least until 1986, when he was eliminated from the Political Bureau of the Party.

Tố Hữu (1920-2002)

Tố Hữu, whose real name is Nguyễn Kim Thành, was born in 1920 in Thừa Thiên. He joined the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1939. In April of the same year, he was imprisoned by the French. He escaped in March, 1942 and continued his revolutionary activities. After the August Revolution, he was the chairman of the

¹²⁵ Tô Ngọc Vân, “Học hay không học?”, *Văn Nghệ*, no. 10 (March 1949), p. 57.

¹²⁶ Vũ Đức Phúc (1971), *Bàn về những cuộc đấu tranh tư tưởng trong lịch sử văn học Việt Nam hiện đại (1930-1954)*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, p. 208.

Insurrection Committee in Thừa Thiên - Huế. At the end of 1946, when the Resistance War broke out, he was Secretary of the Thanh Hoá Province Party Committee. In 1947 he was responsible for artistic and literary activities in the Việt Bắc revolutionary base. In 1951 he was elected the alternate member of the Party Central Committee and became a full member in 1955. In 1960 he was a member of the Party's Central Committee Secretariat. In 1976 he rose to alternate rank in the Political Bureau and became a full member in 1980. In 1981 he was named Deputy Premier Minister. He was dropped from the Political Bureau and from the government machinery as well at the Sixth Party Congress in December 1986.

Having started writing poetry in 1937, Tố Hữu was seen as “the poet who opens and leads the way for socialist realistic poetry”¹²⁷ and “a great poet of Vietnam in the revolutionary proletarian era”.¹²⁸ Tố Hữu had seven collections of poems published: *Thơ* (1946; when reprinted in 1959, changed to *Từ ấy*), *Việt Bắc* (1954), *Gió lộng* (1961), *Ra trận* (1972), *Máu và Hoa* (1977), and *Một tiếng đờn* (1993).

Apart from writing poetry, Tố Hữu, as head of the Literature and the Arts Department and later head of the Department of Propaganda and Training of the Party Central Committee, was also the direct leader of Vietnamese literary and artistic activities. His writings, as well as his speeches on literature and art, became the Party's official standpoint. One of his first pivotal speeches was that given at the conference on literature and art in Việt Bắc in September 1949, in which, as the Party's direct leader of literary and artistic activities, Tố Hữu talked about the task of “building a people's art (or a new-democracy art): to make thoughts revolutionary and activities popular” as a strategic policy in the field of literature and art.

The first noticeable point in his speech was the concept of “people's art” itself. In the *Theses on Culture*, (1943), *The Resistance Will Win* (1947) and *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*, Trường Chinh had used the terms “new-democracy culture” and

¹²⁷ Chế Lan Viên, “Đọc lại Tố Hữu”, in Tố Hữu (1991), *Từ ấy... chào năm 2000*, Huế: Nxb Thuận Hoá, p. 12.

¹²⁸ Phan Cự Đệ and Hà Minh Đức (1979), op. cit., p. 462.

“literature with a socialist realist trend”. The term “people’s art” was a totally new one. Worrying that people might not understand it, Tố Hữu put another synonym: “or a new-democracy art” in brackets. When this text was reprinted in 1973 in the book entitled *Building a Great Art Worthy of Our People and Our Era*, its editors gave an explanation in the footnote:

The term 'people's art', as used by the writer, aims at setting up the artistic direction our Party has decided to establish, which is of the people, serves the people and has the people's art movement as the source and basis of the new art.¹²⁹

Tố Hữu's “people's art” term in fact met Trường Chinh's requirement in his report on Marxism and Vietnamese culture, where Trường Chinh merely stressed the characteristic of being popular when talking about literature and the arts. With his new term, Tố Hữu officially regarded this characteristic and its propaganda function as the most striking features of the new art. He asserted:

In order to become popular and raise the political consciousness of the people, a work of art must first have a content related to their fate, raise and solve their pressing issues, and connect with their life in their anguish, happiness, hatred and aspirations. It must also have a form which suits their level of understanding and feeling.

Any work of art containing backward and fantastic content will certainly not be enjoyed by the people, even though written in a subtle way.¹³⁰

Although embracing the dialectical viewpoint, communist literary theorists usually think that the content and form of a literary work have a very close relationship, Tố Hữu, in his statement above, separated them into two parts, believing that the first was the most important. In fact, in regard to content, Tố Hữu only concerned himself with the topic and the theme: the topic should be kept in close touch with the people and the theme should solve their problems.

¹²⁹ Tố Hữu (1973), *Xây dựng một nền văn nghệ lớn xứng đáng với nhân dân ta, với thời đại ta*, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 23.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 31.

From such a standpoint, Tô Hữu opposed the trend of separating art from politics, aestheticist thinking, and the attitude of worshipping pure art. He even opposed the attitude of attaching too much importance to creative technique. He called upon people to oppose “idle and impractical psychology which made literature and arts lose their practical significance, turning art into a kind of luxury good that may sometimes become an obstacle on the struggling road of the nation”.¹³¹ He put forward some main tasks to be achieved: the first was to “popularise art and train new art cadres from within the people”; the second was to “re-educate the ideologies and lifestyles of current professional writers and artists, turning them into art cadres who serve the people and the resistance in a practical way”.¹³² In the second task, there were two main points: to revolutionise thought and to popularise activity.¹³³

Revolutionising thought meant, on the one hand, to abolish idealistic thought and individualism, and on the other hand, to learn dialectical materialism and historical materialism in order to “find out the truth and clearly see the forward movement of society”.¹³⁴ Furthermore, it was not enough to clearly see the truth. “A true revolutionary artist of the people must be one who is aware that his/her artistic ability is active within the people and for the people. Thus, the issue of revolutionising thought should go together with the issue of popularising activity.”¹³⁵

Popularising activity meant living, labouring and fighting with the people in order to gradually gain their habits and sympathize with their mood. During the debate on social class issues held on 25 September, 1949, Tô Hữu pointed out another reason for this requirement: most writers and artists come from the petty bourgeoisie class, a class which naturally “oscillates, has unstable thoughts, [...] has no right thinking, no sound outlook on life, and therefore is not able to look clearly at life. Of course, they

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 27.

¹³² Ibid., p. 28.

¹³³ Ibid., p.125.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 37.

¹³⁵ Ibid., pp. 37-38.

are not capable of producing works of art which reflect feelings of life”. Tô Hữu then affirmed that “Without the people's activities, we cannot have works of art which have the character of being popular.”¹³⁶

In the debate on Nguyễn Đình Thi's poetry on 28 September, 1949, Tô Hữu saw the above characteristics as a criterion to judge literary works. He asked himself: “What is the criterion of the beautiful?” Then answered: “I cannot use the 'self' as this criterion. The writer has to ask himself: How do the people enjoy this piece of writing? Do they feel anything? Are their feelings mentioned in it? If it does not reveal people's life or if it reveals the opposite of that, it cannot be seen as a good literary work.”¹³⁷ This was also echoed in Nguyễn Đình Thi's speech on literary criticism in the debate on the 26th:

A critic must see himself as the people's loudspeaker, understand them, try to listen to them and mention their ideas. However, he should not imitate them thoughtlessly but should try to avoid criticism based on knowledge that is subjective, partial, or based on formulae or only on a few atypical opinions. The critic's task is to direct people.¹³⁸

The issue of socialist realism was also raised during the debate on art on September 26, in Nguyễn Đình Thi's speech, in which he concentrated on two aspects only: the relationship between instinct and wit when producing works of art, and the relationship between reality and art. Referring to the first aspect, Nguyễn Đình Thi mentioned familiar perceptions such as: art springs from instinct but should be enlightened by wit, and present thoughts are almost political ones. Relating to the second aspect, he maintained that socialist realism has three levels corresponding with three different periods of time: firstly, in the old society, it unmasked the bad aspects of the ruling class, which needed to be overthrown; secondly, in the revolutionary era, it

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 32.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 46.

¹³⁸ *Văn Nghệ*, nos. 17 and 18 (November and December 1949), p. 22.

reflected the progressive trend of life; and thirdly, in the socialist era, it truly reflects the main aspects of the new life.¹³⁹

From Nguyễn Đình Thi's speech, another issue was raised: Was socialist realism able to be applied in Vietnam while it was not yet a socialist country? Tố Hữu answered: "We have not yet been in a socialist era but we are in an era that is moving forward towards socialism."¹⁴⁰

The debate on socialist realism on 26 September 1949 was, according to Vũ Đức Phúc, "not profound enough, and does not sum up all the previous ideas of theorists and critics on this creative method (phương pháp sáng tác). Nguyễn Đình Thi's speech on the issue is not clear and suffers from shortcomings".¹⁴¹ This may be the main reason why, a month later, Tố Hữu went back to the same issue in his article "The art issue", in which he defined socialist realism as

a literary trend of the proletariat striving for the socialist ideal. Observing from the dialectical materialist standpoint the real situation of social and individual life, it recognized the good progressive as well as the bad degenerate truth in the chaotic life, it saw the inevitable future trend of the object and presented this life in its progressive subjective process, and it did not explain according to its objective decisions.

Socialist realism, on the one hand, built a new type of human being and a new life; and on the other hand it fought for the abolition of the old type of human being and the old life.

A socialist realist writer and artist should be a philosopher, a politician, a military person, a history writer, and a life organizer. He is an engineer of the new human souls, the socialist persons' souls.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁴¹ Viện Văn Học (1986), *Văn học Việt Nam kháng chiến chống Pháp*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, p. 63.

¹⁴² Tố Hữu (1973), op. cit., pp. 50-51.

By his new definition, Tố Hữu gathered some of what were seen as the typical characteristics of socialist realism; for example, it might reflect the real situation and at the same time predict the progressive general trend of society. When stating “socialist realism is an art trend of the proletariat striving for the socialist ideal”, it seems that he indirectly tried to answer the question that was raised and discussed during the debate at Việt Bắc the previous month: do we not need to live in a socialist society to have a socialist literature? This was a remarkable change, because in his *Theses on Culture* (1943), Trường Chinh had maintained that the new Vietnamese culture that the Indochinese Communist Party advocated was not yet a socialist culture or a Soviet culture (for example the culture of the Soviet Union). This new culture is a type of culture which has nationalism in its form and new-democracy in its content. Trường Chinh also believed that “the cultural revolution is only completed when the political revolution succeeds (the cultural revolution must follow the political one). The methods of reforming culture that we put forward now are merely paving the way for the future thorough revolution”.¹⁴³

When stating that socialist realism might have existed before the success of the socialist revolution, on the one hand Tố Hữu expanded the concept of socialist realism, and on the other hand recognized that in the socialist literature socialism might be merely a goal but not a reality. However, such a viewpoint is similar to the view that in the two functions of reflecting and predicting socialist realistic literature, the latter would be more important. The fact of emphasizing the function of predicting the general progressive trend of history is similar to that of stressing the role of political leaders. We now understand why, when analysing the conditions of success of socialist realism, Tố Hữu first of all stressed two factors: the first was having a thorough grasp of dialectical materialism and historical materialism; the second was “having a thorough grasp of the Party's lines and policies as well as understanding the Party's attitudes to a fact, a lifestyle and an individual. Only the Party can clearly see the

¹⁴³ Lại Nguyên Ân and Hữu Nhuận (eds.) (1996), *Sưu tập trọn bộ Tiền Phong*, Hanoi: Nxb Hội Nhà Văn, p. 34.

content of the reality and its developing law”.¹⁴⁴ He required that writers should “be under the leadership of the Party, which is a Party of wisdom. To accept the Party's lines means to accept the truth and the inevitably progressive way of humanity.”¹⁴⁵

In his report *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*, Trường Chinh held that, in order to have good works of art, “what is essential is to live among the masses of the people”. It is “to commit oneself wholly to the movement”, “to share the people's joys and sorrows, to labour and fight with them and to share their faith and hatred”.¹⁴⁶ In his speech “Building a people's art (or a new-democracy art): to make thoughts revolutionary and activities popular”, delivered in September, 1949, once again, Tô Hữu repeated the above statement. However, the point that he emphasized had now changed: he did not concentrate on the people any more but on the roles of Party leadership. With this change, the concept of socialist realism was restricted more than ever before: it was now almost totally identified with the artistic creation itself being in accordance with the Party's policy.

¹⁴⁴ Tô Hữu (1973), op. cit., p. 51.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 57.

¹⁴⁶ Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), op. cit., p. 101.

CHAPTER FIVE

Maoism and the Culture of War

In a Conference of debate on literature and art held in Việt Bắc in September 1949, on behalf of the cadre who was in charge of arts business, Tố Hữu raised seven crucial and urgent tasks for Vietnamese writers and artists. The first six tasks were far from new: they aimed at mobilizing the energies and strengths of the nation, glorifying the victories of the anti-French resistance, laying bare the enemy's schemes, and similar aims. They were what the Vietnamese Communist Party had already been called upon to do since its establishment in 1930. Only the seventh task, which was reported in the *Văn Nghệ* magazine nos. 17 and 18, published in November and December 1949, was remarkable: “to prepare to make contact with literary and artistic movements from the new democratic nations, especially China.”¹ Twenty-four years later, when this article was reprinted in the book entitled *Xây dựng một nền văn nghệ lớn xứng đáng với nhân dân ta, với thời đại ta* (Building a Great Literature and Art which are Deserved to our People and our Age) in 1973, the last phrase, “especially China”, was cut out.²

The disappearance of the phrase “especially China” reveals two things: first, the relationship between Vietnam and China in the 1970s was no longer as warm as before; and second, there was an attempt by the Vietnamese government to wipe out all vestiges of influence from China. This attempt became public in 1979 when the Vietnam - China war broke out. In *Cách mạng kháng chiến và đời sống văn nghệ*

¹ *Văn Nghệ* magazine, nos. 17 and 18 (November and December 1949), p. 6.

² Tố Hữu (1973), *Xây dựng một nền văn nghệ lớn xứng đáng với nhân dân ta, với thời đại ta* (Building a Great Literature and Art which are Deserved to our People and our Age), Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 57.

(Revolution, Resistance and Arts Life), Hà Xuân Trường, who headed the Party Committee responsible for art and literature, stated that although Mao Zedong's writings, including the *Talks at the Yan'an Forum*, had been imported into Vietnam, their impact was not very deep or long-lasting.³

Maoist Influence

Historical accounts demonstrate that Hà Xuân Trường's statement is not true. From 1949 onwards, particularly after Hồ Chí Minh's trip to China in early 1950, as several historians have already remarked, "a crash campaign was launched to study the Chinese revolutionary experience, and 200,000 copies of some forty-three Communist Party books and articles were translated and printed."⁴ In his *Following Hồ Chí Minh, the Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel*, Bùi Tín reminisces:

The situation started to change towards the end of 1950 after we forced the French to abandon their garrisons along the northern border, and the Resistance of the Vietnamese people was able to link up with the People's Republic of China which was founded in October 1949. The ever-increasing amount of military and civilian aid from China enabled the Viet Minh to strengthen its position. But it became more complex and tension grew. Many people left the Resistance and returned to the French-occupied zone as large numbers of Chinese advisers arrived and were attached to every unit at all levels. The friendly, even cosy atmosphere which had previously existed disappeared with talk of orthodox class warfare. Marxism had come to Vietnam via Maoism.

[...]

The wind from the north first engulfed the Viet Bac region and then all the other liberated zones. Chinese books, films, and songs were everywhere and all of us in the Resistance regarded them as first-class works. [...] At the same time, a

³ Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), *Cách mạng kháng chiến và đời sống văn học, 1945-54*, Hanoi: Nhà Khoa Học Xã Hội, p. 213.

⁴ Zachary Abuza (2001), *Renovating Politics in Contemporary Vietnam*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, p. 42.

campaign got under way to encourage the reading and speaking of Chinese while a constant stream of cadres was sent north to study in Peking, Shanghai, Nanking, Nanning and Canton. For instance, Peking University threw open its doors to hundreds of Vietnamese students. China was the immense rear area for the Vietnamese Revolution. It was a tremendous advantage but we had to pay very dearly for it. Having just escaped from the long night of being slaves to the French, we were dazzled by the new light of the Chinese Revolution which was acclaimed as our role-model. We accepted everything impetuously and haphazardly without any thought, let alone criticism.⁵

According to Kim N. B. Ninh, “[n]owhere was Chinese influence more evident than in the use of the rectification technique.”⁶ This technique was introduced into the educational system as early as 1950, and into the literary circle in the winter of 1951. Tô Hoài’s recollection of his first rectification session provides some details:

Waking up in the middle of the night, in the middle of the jungle hundreds of torches were lit, slogan bands of black cloth with white words glittering: *Disclose weakness... Measure loyalty...* Gut-wrenching cold weather. Ink-dark jungle night. Filthy human beings, full of sins. Not enough. Not enough sincerity. Do it over. Do it over again. Each time doing it over, uneasiness and worry mounted. The wait to be cleared by the group remained long. Confessing to being degenerate [e.g., sleeping with someone to whom one is not married] was easiest, even if it were not true. Pounded the chest to say yes.⁷

After the Geneva Agreements, China’s influence in North Vietnam was even growing. More and more books were imported into Vietnam, many of them were translated into Vietnamese. Most of the Vietnamese who were sent abroad for education went to China.⁸ More importantly, Maoist influence can be seen in the

⁵ Bui Tin (1995), *Following Hồ Chí Minh, Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel*, translated from the Vietnamese by Judy Stowe and Do Van, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, pp. 14-5.

⁶ Kim N.B. Ninh (2002), *A World Transformed*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, p. 112.

⁷ Quoted in Kim N.B. Ninh (2002), *ibid.*, p. 113.

⁸ Ilya V. Gaiduk (2003), *Confronting Vietnam, Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954-1963*, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, pp. 108-9.

thoughts of the top leaders of the Vietnamese Communist Party. The three principles, nationalization, popularization and scientific orientation, prescribed by the *Theses of Culture*⁹ drafted by Trường Chinh and cleared by Hồ Chí Minh,¹⁰ were clearly replicas of Mao Zedong's thoughts on China's new democratic culture which would be "a national, scientific and mass culture."¹¹ In 1947, Trường Chinh published a book entitled *Kháng chiến nhất định thắng lợi* (The Resistance Will Win), which not only set forth a three-stage evolution of the war but, as Vietnamese critics eulogize, also became one of the basic documents of literary and cultural theory in the French War period.¹² However, according to Melvin Gurtov, this book was Maoist "to the point of being plagiarized."¹³ Hồ Chí Minh was also an admirer of Mao Zedong. In the second Congress of the Vietnamese Communist Party held in February 1951, Hồ Chí Minh announced that the Vietnamese Communist Party rested ultimately upon the foundations of Marxism-Leninism and it took Mao Zedong's thoughts as its lodestar. At that moment, one of the representatives from the South, Mr. Nguyễn Văn Trấn, suggested: "Why don't we write: Mao Zedong's and Hồ Chí Minh's thoughts?" but Hồ Chí Minh refused: "No, I don't have any thoughts but Marxism-Leninism."¹⁴ Also at that Congress, Hồ Chí Minh declared: "Anyone can make mistakes with the exception of Comrade Stalin and Comrade Mao Zedong."¹⁵ At another time, when being asked why he did not write anything about the theory of communism, Hồ Chí Minh answered

⁹ The text of this work was reprinted in Nguyễn Phúc et al. (eds.) (1985), *Một chặng đường văn hoá (Hồi ức và tư liệu về việc tiếp nhận Đề cương văn hoá (1943) của Đảng)*, Hanoi: Nxb Tác Phẩm Mới, pp. 15-20.

¹⁰ David G. Marr (1981), *Vietnamese tradition on Trial 1920-1945*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 363.

¹¹ Mao Zedong (1967), *On New Democracy*, Peking: Foreign Languages Press, p. 60.

¹² Viện Văn Học (1986), *Văn học Việt Nam kháng chiến chống Pháp*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, p. 42.

¹³ Melvin Gurtov (1967), *The First Indochina War: Chinese Communist Strategy and the United States*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 16.

¹⁴ Nguyễn Văn Trấn (1995), *Viết cho Mẹ và Quốc Hội*, California: Văn Nghệ, pp. 150-152.

¹⁵ Olivier Todd, "Huyền thoại Hồ Chí Minh", (translated from the French by Nguyễn Văn), in *Hồ Chí Minh, Sự Thật về Thân Thế và Sự Nghiệp*, published by Nam Á, 1990, p. 276.

sincerely that he did not need to write because everything had already been written by Mao Zedong.¹⁶

Hồ Chí Minh's admiration for and allegiance to Mao Zedong was quite understandable. Recently, several scholars, eager to see Vietnam on "its own terms", have demonstrated that, socially, Chinese influence over the centuries was deeper among the literati than among the peasantry; geographically it tended to wane with distance from the Red River delta; and chronologically it was particularly strong only during certain periods, the fifteenth, late seventeenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁷ However, no one can deny the Chinese influence on Vietnam, a country dominated by China for over one thousand years, from 111 B.C. to 938 A.D. When Vietnam overthrew Chinese rule and restored her independence, the cultural influence of China continued, particularly at the official level, where the rulers of the new Vietnamese state looked at Chinese ideology and administrative organization as their models.¹⁸ It may be said that politically, militarily and culturally, China was for Vietnam both an aggressor and a teacher. Vietnamese learned from China's administration, education, philosophy, literature, the arts and even written language, while at the same time, continuously struggled against all of China's schemes of assimilation in attempting to protect her national identity and cultural uniqueness.

From the mid-nineteenth century, when Vietnam was invaded and dominated by France, Vietnamese Confucians sought intellectual guidance from the leaders of the Chinese reform movement such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, whose writings were regarded as a source of ideas about Western civilization which, in the Vietnamese scholars' view, would be useful in the process of Vietnam's modernization.¹⁹ In 1902, when Phan Bội Châu (1867-1940), one of the most prominent leaders of the early

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 277.

¹⁷ Victor Lieberman (2003), *Strange Parallels, Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830*, vol. 1: Integration on the Mainland, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 340.

¹⁸ King C. Chen (1969), *Vietnam and China, 1938-1954*, Princeton (N.Y.): Princeton University Press.

¹⁹ See David G. Marr (1971), *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885-1925*, Berkeley: University of California

twentieth century Vietnam, went to China, there began a new revolutionary period when China became an important base for the Vietnamese nationalist movement. Several Vietnamese revolutionary organizations were established in China such as the League for the Restoration of Vietnam (Việt Nam Phục Quốc Đồng Minh Hội) in 1912 and the Heart to Heart Association (Tâm Tâm Xã) in 1923, among others.²⁰

From 1924, when Hồ Chí Minh, under the alias Lý Thụy, went to Canton from Moscow as a Chinese translator at the Soviet consulate, China became a place where Hồ Chí Minh gathered and trained revolutionary cadres with whom he founded the Indo-Chinese Communist Party in 1930.²¹ Being educated in China, those people who later became the major leaders of the Vietnamese communist revolution were strongly influenced by their Chinese comrades. Following the Chinese model, Vietnamese communists led the hungry peasants to revolt and to set up the Nghệ An Soviet, which was suppressed immediately by the French army.²² It should be noted that “Trường Chinh”, the pseudonym of Đặng Xuân Khu, who served as Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party from 1941 to 1956, literally means “Long March”; he borrowed from the name of a well-known military campaign led by Mao Zedong in 1934 and 1935. According to Tô Hoài, Trường Chinh told him and some other writers that in the early 1930s he had learned the vernacular Chinese from Hoàng Văn Thụ and could read Mao Zedong’s writings on the “new culture” in the original Chinese.²³ However, before 1949, in order to win over the Western countries, including the United States of America, and to unite the whole country to resist the French invasion, the Vietnamese communists had to adopt the camouflage of a nationalist movement.²⁴

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ For further details, see Ellen J. Hammer (1955), *The Struggle for Indochina 1940-1955*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 79-82; Ken Post (1989), *Revolution, Socialism and Nationalism in Vietnam*, vol. 1, Hants (England): Dartmouth, pp. 21-79; William J. Duiker (1996), *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, second edition, Boulder: Westview Press, pp. 17-8.

²² Stein Tonnesson (1991), *The Vietnamese Revolution of 1945*, London: Sage Publications, pp. 100-1; and William J. Duiker (1996), *op. cit.*, pp. 33-45.

²³ Tô Hoài (1997), *Hồi ký*, Hanoi: Nxb Hội Nhà Văn, p. 373.

²⁴ Robert D. Schulzinger (1997), *A Time for War, the United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975*, Oxford:

They pretended to transform the Communist Party into the Marxist Studies Association and to hide their close relationship with the Chinese communists.²⁵ This may be one of the real reasons why in *The Marxism and Vietnamese Culture* (1948), Trường Chinh did not refer to Mao Zedong's talks on literature and art at Yan'an although he made many of the same points as did the Chinese communist leader.

Maoism began to be imported massively into Vietnam in late 1949, when Mao Zedong took power in China. His *Talks on Literature and Art at Yan'an Forum* was translated into Vietnamese and published in Vietnam in 1949. This book was reprinted in the same year.²⁶ Furthermore, it was used as a textbook in several political workshops and classes organized by the Vietnamese Communists. In a memoir published in *Cách mạng kháng chiến và đời sống văn nghệ*, Nguyễn Thành Long wrote: "I read the *Talks on Literature and Art at Yan'an Forum* and I still remember a sentence which left a long-lasting impression on me: 'Intellectuals are shits'. We had to believe that and we had to deny ourselves."²⁷

Apart from Mao Zedong's *Talks on Literature and Art at Yan'an Forum*, many works of Chou Yang, the powerful cultural chief of the Chinese Communist Party, were also translated and widely quoted on all cultural matters. These works include: *Văn nghệ nhân dân mới* (The People's New Literature and Art) in 1950; *Phấn đấu để sáng tạo những tác phẩm văn học nghệ thuật càng nhiều càng hay hơn* (Strive to Create More and Better Works of Literature and Art) in 1951; and in Kim N. B. Ninh's account: "In 1952, his recent speech to the Institute of Literary Research in Beijing, which elaborated Mao Zedong's directives on art and literature, was translated and

Oxford University Press, p. 29.

²⁵ Ellen J. Hammer (1955), op. cit., p. 141.

²⁶ Vương Trí Nhàn, "Những vốn quý không nên để phí phạm", *Tạp chí Văn Học* (Hanoi), no. 1 (1997), p. 64.

²⁷ Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), op.cit., p.527.

given a prominent position in two issues of the journal *Văn Nghệ*, the organ of the Vietnamese creative community.”²⁸

It can be said that Vietnamese literature in the period between 1949 and 1954 was mainly shaped by Mao Zedong’s *Talks on Literature and Art at Yan’an Forum*.

The Yan’an Forum on art and literature in May 1942 was widely regarded as “a landmark in the history of Chinese Communist cultural policy,”²⁹ where Mao Zedong made two significant speeches. In the “Opening Remarks”, he emphasized the basic tenets of socialist realism: in the struggle against Japanese aggressors and Chinese nationalists, there were various fronts, among them the military and cultural fronts. In the latter, literature took an important part. What Mao Zedong wanted was to ensure that literature fitted well into the whole political machine of the Communist Party. In so doing, he set out several issues for discussion: the problems of the class stand of the writers, their attitudes, their audience, their work and their study. To these issues, Mao Zedong’s points of view were very firm and clear. The stand of writers had to be that of the proletariat and of the masses, and for those writers who were members of the Communist Party, “this means keeping to the stand of the Party, keeping to Party spirit and Party policy”.³⁰ It seems that Mao Zedong regarded this view as a truth too obvious to need further explanation or analysis. Using this class stand as a dogma, he formulated the communist writers’ attitude towards different kinds of persons: with regard to the enemy, the writers’ tasks were to expose their duplicity and cruelty, and at the same time to point out the inevitability of their defeat; with regard to the allies, the writers’ tasks were to support their resistance against the common enemy, to criticize their impassiveness, and to oppose their reaction; with regard to the people, the writers’ tasks were to depict and praise their labour and the struggle to help them to make progress, and more importantly, as Mao Zedong insisted, “[a]s long as they do

²⁸ Kim N.B. Ninh (2002), op. cit., p. 112.

²⁹ Cyril Birch, “The Particle of Art” in Cyril Birch (ed.) (1963), *Chinese Communist Literature*, New York: Frederick A. Praeger, pp. 21-2.

³⁰ *Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Zedong*, published by the Foreign Languages Press in Peking in 1967, p. 205.

not persist in their errors, we should not dwell on their negative side and consequently make the mistake of ridiculing them or, worse still, of being hostile to them.”³¹

The original theory of socialist realism, which was formulated in the Soviet Union in 1934, consisted of three basic ingredients: popular-mindedness, class-mindedness, and party-mindedness. Of these, it is clear that party-mindedness is the most important. In the article “Party Organization and Party Literature”, published nearly three decades prior to the promulgation of socialist realism as a literary theory, Lenin stated that “literature must become part of the common cause of the proletariat, ‘a cog and screw’ of one single great Social-Democratic mechanism set in motion by the entire politically-conscious vanguard of the entire working class. Literature must become a component of organized, planned and integrated Social-Democratic Party work.”³² Although, as T.A. Hsia commented, “Mao could not claim any originality for his theory”,³³ his emphasis was obviously different from that of his Russian comrades. In both opening and concluding speeches, after several brief mentions of class-mindedness and party-mindedness, Mao spoke at length about the relationship between the writers and their audience. In his “Opening Remarks”, he announced:

If our writers and artists who come from the intelligentsia want their works to be well received by the masses, they must change and remould their thinking and their feelings. Without such a change, without such remoulding, they can do nothing well and will be misfits.³⁴

In his lengthy “Concluding Remarks” given on May 23, 1942, Mao Zedong continued to delve into the issue of the relationship between the writers and their audience by raising the question: literature and art for whom? For Mao Zedong, this question of “for whom” was a fundamental question of principle. However, he believed that its answer was already given by Lenin in 1905 when he pointed out that

³¹ Ibid., p. 206.

³² Lenin (1967), *On Literature and Art*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, pp. 25-6.

³³ T.A. Hsia, “Twenty Years after the Yan’an Forum”, in Cyril Birch (ed.) (1963), *op. cit.*, p. 246.

³⁴ *Selected Readings From the Works of Mao Zedong*, *op. cit.*, p. 208.

revolutionary literature aimed at serving “the millions and tens of millions of working people”, and therefore needed no further discussion. Mao Zedong only categorized the so-called “working people”.³⁵ For him, “working people” consisted of four kinds: first, the workers who led the revolution; second, the peasants, who were the most numerous and most steadfast of the workers’ allies; third, the soldiers, who were the main forces of the revolutionary war; and fourth, the urban petty bourgeois and the petty-bourgeois intellectuals.³⁶ He emphasized that to serve these four kinds of people, writers “must take the class stand of the proletariat and not that of the petty-bourgeoisie.”³⁷ Unfortunately, in Mao’s view, many Chinese writers in the 1940s who were middle-class intellectuals clung to an individualist and petty bourgeois stand, and as a result, could not truly serve the masses of revolutionary workers, peasants and soldiers. But, if writers did not serve the masses well, their works could not be regarded as good, because, as Mao declared, “a thing is good only when it brings real benefit to the masses of the people.”³⁸ In order to serve the masses well, writers had to learn from the masses, concentrate on their lives, typify their contradictions and their struggles, and equally, popularise the works of literature so that the masses could understand and appreciate them. Mao advised writers and artists to pay attention to “the wall newspapers of the masses and to the reportage written in the army and the villagers.”³⁹ Furthermore, he insisted:

China’s revolutionary writers and artists, writers and artists of promise, must go among the masses; they must for a long period of time unreservedly and wholeheartedly go among the masses of workers, peasants and soldiers, go into the heat of the struggle, go to the only source, the broadest and richest source, in order to observe, experience, study and analyse all the different kinds of people, all the classes, all the masses, all the vivid patterns of life and struggle, all the raw

³⁵ Ibid., p. 210.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 212.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 220.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 219.

materials of literature and art. Only then can they proceed to creative work.⁴⁰

A few days after the Yan'an Forum where Mao Zedong gave an opening and a closing address, the Central Political Institute held a series of meetings in which those writers who had been critical of the Communist Party's policies, such as Ding Ling, Xiao Jun and Ai Qing, were required to make self-criticism, and Wang Shiwei was confined for five years, and after that was executed.⁴¹ The method of criticism and self-criticism was widely used in the literary circle for remoulding the ideological outlook of wavering writers and artists. In respect to literary creation, according to Lu Ting-yi, Mao's speeches resulted almost immediately in the appearance of novels in the traditional style of story-telling and poetry in imitation of the folk-song rhythm and idiom.⁴²

One year after the Yan'an Forum, the edited version of Mao's speeches was published.⁴³ It became not only the official policy of the Chinese Communist Party but also the theoretical foundation of the Vietnamese Communist Party's literary policy for several decades.

Mao Zedong captured power in mainland China in 1949, the same year that the Vietnamese Communist Party organized a long conference of debate on literature and art in Việt Bắc, a minimized replica of China's Yan'an Forum.⁴⁴ Tô Hữu gave the opening speech, entitled "Building a People's Literature and Art".⁴⁵ Differently from

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 216-17.

⁴¹ Bonne S. McDougall and Kam Louie (1997), *The Literature of China in the Twentieth Century*, London: Hurst and Company, p. 196.

⁴² Quoted in T.A. Hsia, op. cit., p. 237.

⁴³ According to T.A. Hsia, "In LD November 15, 1942, p. 4, Chiang Pu quoted Mao as having complained at the Forum about the writers 'having neither life, nor Marxism-Leninism'. This phrase is not found in the published texts." (T.A. Hsia, op.cit., p. 246.) The sentence that Vietnamese communist writer Nguyen Thanh Long recalled, which I quoted in the earlier part of this chapter, could not be found in any English version of Mao's speeches.

⁴⁴ A full report of this conference of debate can be found in *Văn Nghệ* magazine, nos. 17 and 18 (November and December 1949).

⁴⁵ Printed in *ibid*, pp. 103-114, reprinted in Tô Hữu (1973), *Xây dựng một nền văn nghệ lớn xứng đáng*

the Soviet socialist realism, which was described as “national in form, socialist in content”,⁴⁶ the Vietnamese people’s literature and art, like those in China, because of their being in the process of struggling for national liberation, were defined as “national in form, and new democratic in content”. However, instead of analysing the concepts of “national in form” and “new democratic in content”, Tô Hữu concentrated on the three basic principles of the people’s literature and art: to be national, to be popular and to be scientific. These were also principles of the new culture put forward by Trường Chinh, the then Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party, in his *Theses on Culture* in 1943. Based on these principles, Tô Hữu declared that Vietnamese literature and art had three main shortcomings: they were backward, unbalanced and poor. They were poor because several traditional genres of arts were not well brought into play and several new artistic techniques were not applied with sophistication. Their development was unbalanced: while the literary and artistic activities of soldiers flourished, those of workers and farmers had withered. They were backward because their contents did not reflect the reality of national liberation, whereas their forms were too complex and too difficult to understand. In order to overcome these three shortcomings, Tô Hữu put forward two policies. First, the creative capacity of the common people had to be fully exploited. According to Tô Hữu, in the anti-French resistance there were more and more people who wanted to express themselves and who believed that they could create if they were taught how to write and/or how to paint, etc. In his view, these people needed to be trained and to be supported to become writers and artists. Second, professional writers and artists had to do their best to create popular works which could be understood and appreciated by the masses. Echoing Mao Zedong’s speech at Yan’an, Tô Hữu announced that

In our opinion, works of art and literature which become popular and those which have a good effect on the masses, are those which first of all have a close association with the fate of the masses, which rise and correctly solve the urgent problems of the masses, which are linked with their happiness and unhappiness, hatred and dreams, and which have a form suited to the level of the masses.

với nhân dân ta, với thời đại ta, Hà Nội: Văn Học, pp. 22-39.

⁴⁶ C. Vaughan James (1973), *Soviet Socialist Realism, Origins and Theory*, London: Macmillan, p. 97.

A work which is even sophisticatedly written but backward and fantastic in its content is certainly not appreciated by the masses.

Therefore, if the author lives distantly from the masses, does not understand the daily activities of the masses, ignores their psychology, their language, and their habits, and does not have a deep and sincere sense of responsibility for the masses, how can he/she represent their lives? No author can produce popular works without a popularised life.⁴⁷

From these two policies, the Vietnamese Communist Party set forth the strategic slogan “revolutionalize the thoughts and popularize the way of living”. To “revolutionalize the thoughts”, writers and artists had to struggle against idealism and individualism, and also to learn dialectic materialism and be willing to serve the nation. To “popularize the way of living”, they had to live with and work with the masses in order to understand them and empathize with them. Under this slogan, several rectification campaigns were held, in which all writers and artists were required to attend political classes where they learned Marxism - Leninism and the Party’s policies, and more importantly, to make self-criticism publicly. Anh Thơ, a female poet, confessed that in the early years of the resistance, she thought that a revolutionary had to be more beautiful than others, so she used powder and perfume, but these habits resulted in avoidance by her friends; later, drawing on this experience, she wore dyed brown clothes, and her friends loved her again. Similarly, she once thought that literature had to be mannered and complex; later she learned from her practical works that the masses only loved simple and easy stories and poems, so she attempted to change her style.⁴⁸ Nguyễn Tuân, the secretary general of the Vietnamese Association of Writers and Artists, claimed to abandon his three earlier works: *Vang bóng một thời* (Echoes of the Past), *Nguyễn* (Mr. Nguyen) and *Thiếu quê hương* (Lack a Country), which had been published prior to the 1945 Revolution, when he had been a writer of the petit-bourgeois and feudalism.⁴⁹ He also vowed that he would try to write novels

⁴⁷ Tô Hữu (1973), op. cit., pp. 31-2.

⁴⁸ *Văn Nghệ* magazine, the debate issue, nos. 17 and 18 (November and December, 1949), pp. 12-13.

⁴⁹ Phong Lê (1972), *Máy vấn đề văn xuôi Việt Nam, 1945-1970*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, p. 45.

instead of literary essays, his favourite genre, because he believed that novels could represent reality more objectively.⁵⁰ Like Nguyễn Tuân, Trần Đăng, a young writer, longed to write completely objective works which truthfully mirrored life. Nguyên Hồng, who was widely regarded by Vietnamese critics as the Maxim Gorky of Vietnam, admitted that although he participated in the anti-French war for a long time, he could not produce any significant work. The reason, in his view, was that he had not yet felt a strong attachment to the resistance movement, his enthusiasm and sincerity were still weak, and as a result, what he needed to do first was to re-educate himself.⁵¹

Along with rectification campaigns, writers and artists were encouraged to join the army. When the anti-French resistance broke out in December 1946, several writers and artists enlisted, individually and voluntarily, such as Mai Văn Hiến, Thâm Tâm, Văn Chung, Nguyễn Công Hoan, and Nguyễn Đình Lạp. From early 1949, the enlistment of writers and artists became a policy: they were required to join the army in order to enrich their experience, enhance their view, and consolidate their political standpoint. The enlistment of poets and artists like Tố Hữu, Thế Lữ, Nguyễn Xuân Khoát, Thanh Tịnh and Phạm Văn Khoa was celebrated solemnly and reported in the newspapers.⁵² In October 1949, more than thirty well-known writers and artists, including Phan Khôi, Nguyễn Tuân, Nguyên Hồng, Kim Lân, Nguyễn Đình Thi, Trần Đăng, Nguyễn Đỗ Cung, Tô Ngọc Vân, and Văn Cao, participated in the autumn - winter military campaign,⁵³ in which Trần Đăng was killed by the French more than two months later.

In respect to creative activities, one of the deepest influences of Mao Zedong's thought was the domination of popular-mindedness. For a thousand years, Vietnamese literature had been neither elitist nor popular. Regarding the Chinese literature as an eternal, and even sacred, model, most Vietnamese writers were quite humble: they

⁵⁰ *Văn Nghệ* magazine, the debate issue, op. cit., pp. 26-7.

⁵¹ Phong Lê (1972), op. cit., pp. 45-46.

⁵² *Văn Nghệ* magazine, nos. 12 and 12 (April and May 1949), pp. 58-61.

⁵³ *Văn Nghệ* magazine, nos. 18-19 (November and December 1949), pp. 132-135.

wrote like students who tried to copy their great masters.⁵⁴ The use of clichés was considered evidence of erudition. However, their writings were far from popular, because they were written either in Chinese script or in *Nôm*, a special script to transcribe the Vietnamese language. Both writing systems were used by an insignificant minority of the people. As a result, prior to the twentieth century, Vietnamese literature was divided into two distinctive parts, folk literature, which was based on oral tradition, and written literature, which was also called scholarly literature (*văn chương bác học*). These names revealed that, for Vietnamese people, “written” was a synonym for “scholarly”, and written literature was in some ways a privilege of a small circle of learned people. From the late nineteenth century, as a French colonialist policy, the *quốc ngữ*, a Romanised script, gradually replaced the *Nôm* script as the official writing system of the Vietnamese language. Associated with this, a literature in *quốc ngữ* was born and, thanks to the development of modern printing technology, quickly became the dominant, and then, from the 1930s, the only trend of literature in Vietnam.⁵⁵ Interestingly, in its process of establishment, the literature in *quốc ngữ* had little to inherit from that in Chinese script because of the difference in language. It also had little to inherit from that in *Nôm*, because firstly, *Nôm* consisted of too many loanwords, particularly from the Chinese, and secondly, the language of *Nôm* was mainly that of poetry: before the twentieth century, no artistic prose was ever written in *Nôm*. In building the literature in *quốc ngữ*, Vietnamese writers understood clearly that in order to modernize Vietnamese literature, they had to concentrate on writing novels, short stories, scholarly researches, and journalistic reportages in prose. The only heritage that they could directly inherit for this task was the folk literature, especially folk tales, from legends to anecdotes and funny stories. Not surprisingly, collections of folk tales were among of the first works published in *quốc ngữ* in the late nineteenth century.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Trần Đình Hượu (1998), *Nho giáo và văn học Việt Nam trung cận đại*, Hanoi: Nxb Giáo Dục, p. 423.

⁵⁵ See Hoàng Ngọc Thành, “Quốc ngữ and the development of modern Vietnamese literature”, in Walter F. Vella (ed.) (1973), *Aspects of Vietnamese History*, Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, pp. 191-236.

⁵⁶ For example, Trương Vĩnh Ký (1837-1898) published *Chuyện Đời Xưa* (Old Stories) (1886) and

It can be said that, with the introduction of literature in *quốc ngữ*, the trend of scholarly literature and that of folk literature were amalgamated. It can also be argued that, through this amalgamation, the “mass style” became one of the elements, which constituted the canon of modern Vietnamese literature.⁵⁷ However, in an attempt at professionalization, Vietnamese writers, starting with the *Đông Dương Magazine* in 1913, and in particular the *Nam Phong Magazine* in 1917, advocated a polished style which limited the use of colloquialism and was complicated in its syntactical structure. In the period when only about ten percent of the population was literate,⁵⁸ literary readers were mostly middle-rank officials, teachers and students, those belonging to the urbanized petit-bourgeois class. In the early 1940s, however, under Mao Zedong’s spell, the masses came back, and this time became a dominant element in the literary world.

The masses were seen first of all as a creative source, and in Mao Zedong’s words, “the only source”, and “a mine of the raw materials for literature and art”,⁵⁹ where writers and artists could learn about the variety and complexity of life and, more particularly, refresh their language. In the opening speech at the Yan’an Conference, Mao Zedong remarked that “[s]ince many writers and artists stand aloof from the masses and lead empty lives, naturally they are unfamiliar with the language of the people. Accordingly, their works are not only insipid in language but often contain nondescript expressions of their own coining which run counter to popular usage.”⁶⁰ In Vietnam, Hồ Chí Minh advised journalists and writers that they had to learn the way the masses spoke.⁶¹ Trường Chinh reminded writers that they should not be afraid of

Chuyện Khôi Hài (Funny Stories) (1882); Huỳnh Tịnh Của (1834-1897) published *Chuyện Giải Buồn* (Funny Stories) (1886).

⁵⁷ Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, “Tính đại chúng: kẻ thù của văn chương”, *Văn Học* (California), no. 211 (November 2003), pp. 33-46.

⁵⁸ David G. Marr (1981), *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial 1920-45*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 34.

⁵⁹ *Selected Readings From the Works of Mao Zedong*, op. cit., p. 216.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁶¹ Hồ Chí Minh, et al. (1976), *Về văn hoá văn nghệ*, Hà Nội: Văn Hoá Publishers, pp. 63 and 72.

using the people's common words, and never write anything which the masses misunderstood or understood vaguely.⁶² Over the following decades, Vietnamese writers were always taught that only the language of the masses was rich, various, lively and creative. Nam Cao wrote in his diary of March 2, 1948:

Every evening, the Tho villagers from the other huts came to ours to have a chat or to read newspapers. I have more opportunity to understand better their knowledge, their way of speaking and way of living, and their worries and wishes. Thanks to that, I correct my style and find subject matters for writing.⁶³

In a poetry competition organized by the Institute of Resistance Culture in 1948, the winning poems were praised thus: "How wonderful they are! This is exactly what the masses have often talked of!"⁶⁴ Tế Hanh recollected that during the anti-French war, he did not write poems, he just wrote doggerel verses which were loudly recited in public in order to promote a political campaign, and which made him feel shameful every time he reread them.⁶⁵ Tế Hanh's colleague, Nguyễn Thành Long, recalled that at that time he and several fellow poets, tried to imitate Tế Hanh in writing poems which could be sung like folk songs.⁶⁶

It is not difficult to understand why the Chinese and Vietnamese communists emphasized the task of learning the masses' language more than their comrades in Russia and Eastern European countries. The first reason is certainly the people's cultural standard: in the mid-twentieth century, in both China and Vietnam, the percentage of illiterate population was very high.⁶⁷ Secondly, in both countries, the

⁶² Trường Chinh (1985), *Về văn hoá và nghệ thuật*, Hà Nội: Văn Học Publishers, pp. 50-51.

⁶³ Nam Cao (1983), *Chi Pheo and other Stories*, Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, p. 173.

⁶⁴ Đoàn Giỏi, "Một ít kỷ niệm về hoạt động của chi bộ văn nghệ Nam Bộ", in Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), *op. cit.*, p. 618.

⁶⁵ In Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), *op. cit.*, p. 505.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 532.

⁶⁷ According to David G. Marr (1981), in his *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial 1920-45*, published by the University of California, Berkeley, at the end of the 1930s, about 10 percent of Vietnamese population was literate; one decade earlier, this number was only about 5 percent (p. 34).

traditional literatures were written in a language other than those used in the everyday lives of the masses: in China, until the May Fourth Movement in 1919, literary works were mostly written in the Han classical language (“wenyan” in Chinese), but not in the contemporary vernacular (“baihua” in Chinese),⁶⁸ whilst in Vietnam, they were mainly written in Chinese characters.⁶⁹ In this context, the policy of attaching the utmost importance to the language of the masses was an attempt to modernize their own literature. This effort of modernization had begun even before the establishment of the Communist Party: in 1917, Hu Shi (1891-1962), then a Ph.D. student at Columbia University, under the influence of Ezra Pound’s “A Few Don’ts”, which constituted the most deliberate statement of Imagist theory, put forward an eight-point programme for a reform of Chinese literature. Of these, the last four points were: Don’t use clichés and worn-out phrases; don’t use classical allusions; don’t write in parallelism; and don’t avoid colloquial words and phrases.⁷⁰

In spite of a long history of a close relationship between China and Vietnam, Hu Shi’s reform programme and the May Fourth Movement in general had no direct and immediate impact in Vietnam. According to Trương Chính, the most important reason for this was the French colonial government’s policy of prohibiting books and magazines from China in order to prevent the impact of Chinese revolutionary movements.⁷¹ Another important reason that should be added is that, in the early twentieth century, the main concern of old generation intellectuals in Vietnam, who were familiar with the Chinese culture and who looked for a new “enlightenment” from Chinese writers, was political rather than literary; whereas that of the new generation intellectuals, who were trained in the French education system, was the language in general rather than the literary language in particular: for them, the crucial

⁶⁸ Wilt Idema and Lloyd Haft (1997), *A Guide to Chinese Literature*, Ann Arbor: Centre for Chinese Studies, the University of Michigan, pp. 6-8.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Nguyễn Đình Hoà (1994), *Vietnamese Literature, a Brief Survey*, San Diego: San Diego State University.

⁷⁰ Wong Yoon Wah (1988), *Essays on Chinese Literature: A Comparative Approach*, Singapore: Singapore University Press, p. 39.

⁷¹ Trương Chính (1997), *Tuyển Tập*, vol. 1, Hà Nội: Văn Học, p. 181.

decision that Vietnamese people should make was to develop with determination the *quốc ngữ*, a new writing system for the Vietnamese language.⁷² The problem of literary language only arose in the early 1930s when the Tự Lực Group considered the use of popular words as the motto of their writing.⁷³

The Viet Minh government, especially in the South, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, pushed this tendency to its extreme by stating that writers and artists had to follow not only colloquialism but also the popular genres of the people. Free verse was completely forbidden.⁷⁴ The two of favourite forms of poetry were “lục bát” (six-eight) and “song thất lục bát” (seven-seven-six-eight).⁷⁵ These are the only indigenous forms of traditional poetry in Vietnam. In its basic unit, the “lục bát” form was structured by two lines: the first consists of six syllables, and the second consists of eight; the last syllable of the first will rhyme with the sixth syllable of the latter. A poem in “lục bát” can be constituted by one or more basic units. The “song thất lục bát” originated from the “lục bát”. While the basic unit of “lục bát” is two lines, of six and eight syllables, the basic unit of “song thất lục bát” is four lines, with seven syllables for the first two lines, six for the third and eight for the last. A poem in “song thất lục bát” can be constituted by one or more such basic units. These two poetic forms were popular first in folk literature and then in written literature. Their forte lies in story-telling.⁷⁶ Most of the famous narrative poems in Vietnam, including the *Tale of Kieu* by Nguyễn Du (1766-1820), were written in “lục bát” and to a lesser degree, in “song thất lục bát”. In giving prominence to the “lục bát” and “song thất lục bát” forms, the Viet Minh

⁷² See David G. Marr, “The Vietnamese Language Revolution”, in Wang Gungwu, M. Guerrero and David Marr (eds.) (1981), *Society and the Writer: Essays on Literature in Modern Asia*, Canberra: The Australian National University, pp. 21-33.

⁷³ *Phong Hoá*, no. 87 (2 March 1934), quoted in Nhật Thịnh (n.d.), *Chân dung Nhất Linh*, California: Đại Nam, p. 131.

⁷⁴ Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), *op. cit.*, p. 622.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Recent research on the poetic forms of “lục bát” and “song thất lục bát” can be found in Phan Diễm Hương (1998), *Lục bát và song thất lục bát (lịch sử phát triển, đặc trưng thể loại)*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội.

government also encouraged the writing of narrative poems so that people could sing them and learn them by heart.

The Viet Minh government in the South preferred narrative poems to stories in prose because, in the war conditions, poems would be easier than prose to remember, and easier to disseminate among the public. In respect to stories in prose, novelists were required to write them short. It was taught that readers only needed to have a thorough grasp of the plot, rather than a description of the setting or an analysis of the characters' mood. Highly artistic devices of language were regarded as unnecessary. Each story had to have a happy ending, in which good triumphed over evil.⁷⁷ Through this policy, Vietnamese literature retrogressed to the period of oral culture.

In both his opening and closing speeches at the Yan'an Forum, Mao Zedong regarded the masses as the people whom writers and artists had to serve, and as "an inexhaustible source" from which writers and artists could observe, experience, study and analyse in order to proceed to their creative works. In respect to literary criticism, he claimed that political criteria were more crucial than artistic criteria;⁷⁸ and according to the political criteria, "everything is good that is helpful to unity and resistance to Japan, that encourages the masses to be of one heart and one mind, that opposes retrogression and promotes progress."⁷⁹ The Vietnamese communists went further by claiming that the masses were the real and most important critics of literature and arts. In his *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*, Trường Chinh wrote:

To be a good finished product, a work of art must be born of the movement and the masses and return to where it originates. If one does not live with the army or is not a member of an army unit, one cannot write a play about the army. Even a play written by someone in the army itself still has to be performed before the army and the people, and be touched up on the basis of criticism from various army units and the people in order to ensure its artistic worth. The masses are the

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 623.

⁷⁸ *Selected Readings From the Works of Mao Zedong*, op. cit., p. 221-2.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 223.

most impartial and perspicacious judge of art. If works of art, once created, are devoured, admired, enjoyed, adopted, applied, and chosen by the people as their daily spiritual nourishment, they must have value. In contrast, those works whose birth is heeded and cared for by no one will die an early death.⁸⁰

After that, Trường Chinh put a question: “Do the masses have to learn about art before they are capable of criticizing art?” and, as Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party, he gave a simple and clear-cut answer: “No”. He continued:

They are the most expert art critics of all, precisely because they have many ears and eyes, sound judgment and a responsive collective sentiment. In this respect no art critic can compare with the masses. It is quite possible that the majority of the masses are not knowledgeable about some technical aspects, but the masses include both experts and non-experts; what some cannot see, others can.⁸¹

There was at least one artist under the Viet Minh controlled area who publicly disagreed with Trường Chinh. Tô Ngọc Vân wrote in the article “Study or Not Study?”:

I [...] reached a conclusion which was opposite of that stated by Mr. Trường Chinh: the masses had to learn art in order to have a full appreciation of art, had to learn how to listen to the sound of colours in order to understand what the colours said.⁸²

Trường Chinh kept silent, but his secretary, Hà Xuân Trường, an editor of *Sự Thực* journal, the official voice of the Vietnamese Communist Party, wrote an article to criticize Tô Ngọc Vân. Hà Xuân Trường asserted that

1. The masses do not need any training to sympathize with the artists’ feeling and emotion.
2. The masses’ criticism is the decisive one.
3. The masses have the right of criticism without a need of obtaining professional knowledge.

⁸⁰ Trường Chinh (1994), *Selected Writings*, new impression, Hà Nội: The Gioi Publishers, pp. 274-75.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 275.

⁸² *Văn Nghệ* magazine, no. 10 (March 1949), p. 56.

4. The artistic point of view must originate from the masses; the masses always learn from each other and educate each other.⁸³

Tô Ngọc Vân's view was also criticized in the conference of debate on literature and art in Việt Bắc in September 1949. After a long debate, several conclusions were drawn:

1. The view stating that the masses have to learn techniques in order to evaluate art is wrong.
2. The problem is to help the masses to participate in literary and artistic activities, to develop the masses' literary and artistic activities, and to try to shorten the gap between the masses and literature and art.⁸⁴

Finally, in the political rectification campaign in 1952, Tô Ngọc Vân made a self-criticism that:

We believe in our own capacity and responsibility, in our friends' love and sincerity. We believe that the masses are not only an endlessly creative source but also the bright and truthful critics of arts. We believe in the leadership of President Hồ Chí Minh and our vanguard Party.⁸⁵

In the early 1950s, writers were required to read their work aloud in front of a group of people where they were working or living in order to draw comments prior to their publication. Vũ Ngọc Phan recalled that those people were not necessarily professionals. They might be illiterate workers or farmers who did not have any basic knowledge of literature and art. However, he himself had to revise his works many times after receiving their criticism. He also revealed that he often re-read in shame his collection of folk stories, that had been written and revised after the masses' criticism.⁸⁶

⁸³ *Văn Nghệ* magazine, nos. 15-16 (September and October 1949), p. 74.

⁸⁴ *Văn Nghệ* magazine, nos. 17-18 (November and December 1949), p. 22.

⁸⁵ Quoted by Vũ Đức Phúc (1971), *Bàn về những cuộc đấu tranh tư tưởng trong lịch sử văn học Việt Nam hiện đại*, Hà Nội: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, p. 218.

⁸⁶ Vũ Ngọc Phan (1987), *Những năm tháng ấy*, Hà Nội: Văn Học, p. 413.

With the appearance of the masses as a creative source and as the most authoritative critics, the line between literary and non-literary works was eradicated. Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh commented that in this period,

the social types and the artistic typification were identified; the role of creative subjectivity of writers was denied; the aesthetic quality of the work of art and the individual style of writers were belittled, etc. This was a period when literary texts taught in schools were daily newspaper articles on agrarian reforms, and when notes of real people and real facts were regarded as the highest genre of literature.⁸⁷

It can be said that Vietnamese literature after 1949 was the people's literature. In it the most striking characteristic was the domination of the masses: it was created for the masses, and therefore it was evaluated by the masses. Literature was so popularised that it became, on the one hand, a kind of oral literature which existed without formal texts, and on the other, a form of journalistic discourse whose function was very practical. In both cases, the people's literature could effectively serve the political aims of the Party but it could hardly be considered literature as an art of language.

The Culture of War

The quick and strong impact of Mao Zedong's theory of socialist realism on Vietnamese literary thought and activity after the August 1945 Revolution can be explained by several factors, geographical, political and cultural, of which the most important one may be the war. During three decades, from 1945 to 1975, Vietnam was always at war, first with the French, and later with the Americans. It can be argued that it is the very culture of war that helped to create the type of intellectual and emotional environment necessary for the easy reception of Maoism, an ideology which was originally born in a time of war and aimed to serve that war. It can also be argued that,

⁸⁷ Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh et al. (eds.) (1996), *Một thời đại mới trong văn học*, Hà Nội: Văn Học, p. 314.

together with Maoism, the war culture itself became one of the crucial factors in determining the shape of socialist realism in the anti-French resistance areas during 1945-54 and in North Vietnam during 1954-1975.

Terms like “culture” and “culture of war” refer to an enormously complex accumulation of theoretical speculation. One of the best-known scholars of cultural studies, Raymond Williams, once said, “Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.”⁸⁸ It is complicated partly because its meaning changes over time. An illustration of this is the research completed in 1952 by the two American anthropologists A.L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, in which they collected and analysed 164 different definitions of culture. Of these definitions, only six appeared from 1871 to 1920, twenty two appeared in the 1920s, thirty five in the 1930s, and one hundred in the 1940s.⁸⁹ The number of definitions clearly increased steadily over the first half of the twentieth century. Since the mid-twentieth century, the use of the term “culture” has even been thoroughly popularized. Culture seems to be everywhere these days: we speak of Western culture, Asian culture, Chinese culture, Vietnamese culture, and so on. We also speak of youth culture, academic culture, political culture, and, as a result of the influence of globalization, the global culture, and so on. The former President of Russia, Boris Yeltsin once said that Russia needed “a new economic culture...[that is] a culture of dealing with money.”⁹⁰ It can be said that one of the most striking characteristics of modern times has been the fascination with the issue of culture itself. As a result of this increased popularity, the range of meanings to which it can be applied has become increasingly diverse. From global culture, Western culture or Asian culture to economic culture and prison culture, the connotation of culture varies greatly. It can refer broadly to the whole way of living of

⁸⁸ Raymond Williams (1983), *Keywords, A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, London: Fontana Press, p. 87.

⁸⁹ Bernardo Bernardi (1977), *The Concept and Dynamics of Culture*, The Hague: Mouton Publishers, p. 10.

⁹⁰ Quoted in Christopher Clausen (1994), “The culture of culture”, *The New Leader*, June 6, 1994; reproduced at Expanded Academic ASAP: http://0-web1.infotrac.galegroup.com.library.vu.edu.au/itw/infomark/619/185/44345726w1/purl=rc1_EAIM_0_A15729756anddyn=16!xrn_93_0_A15729756?sw_aep=vut_main.

a society or human beings in general. It can also refer, more narrowly, to activities relating to music, art, literature, cinema and the like. However, in this chapter, the term culture will be used as a “system of meaning”, a broad definition now gaining favour among sociologists, anthropologists and cultural theorists. This view is summarized by Ulf Hannerz as follows:

In the recent period, culture has been taken to be above all a matter of meaning. To study culture is to study ideas, experiences, feelings, as well as the external forms that such internalities take as they are made public, available to the senses, and thus truly social. For culture, in the anthropological view, is the meanings which people create, and which create people, as members of societies. Culture is in some way collective.⁹¹

While this view includes the external forms of culture, its emphasis lies in the shared ideas, experiences and feelings of a human community. It regards culture as a symbolic system which governs the creation and use of symbols and signs. It shows two major dimensions of culture. First, there is the cognitive dimension, which refers to the knowledge shared by members of a group or society. Such knowledge provides the conceptual content of a culture, and also underlies the way in which we interpret and evaluate reality, as well as differentiating right from wrong. Such knowledge is associated with a system of values and norms by which a society judges human relationships to be moral or immoral, something to be good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable. Without this knowledge, communication and community life are impossible. Second, there is the affective dimension, which refers to the emotional side of a people's lives, including their notion of beauty, their likes and dislikes, their ways of enjoying themselves and experiencing sorrow, and so on.

Both these dimensions of culture are transmitted from generation to generation. As a result, the processes of learning and sharing these cognitive and affective values are an essential characteristic of culture. Culture, in this sense, can be defined as everything acquired by individuals through social learning. Consequently, the way

⁹¹ Hannerz, U. (1992), *Cultural Complexity: Studies in the Social Organization of Meaning*, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 3.

culture is interpreted, taught and reproduced is in itself an important component of culture. This explains why culture can be significantly influenced by the state because, as most scholars agree, states play a key role in shaping the body of knowledge which is dispensed by the education system, by community cultural centres, and by the media. As Michael J. Mazarr summarizes:

All of the readings agree that states play some role in forming culture. Harrison quotes Daniel Patrick Moynihan: “The central conservative truth is that it is culture, not politics, that determines the success of a society. The central liberal truth is that politics can change a culture and save it from itself” (p. 1). And indeed there is a venerable school of thought that holds that “fundamentally the state shapes society, not the other way around” (Zakaria 1995). Gellner (1983) contends that industrial societies create a “school-transmitted culture” that “cannot normally survive without its own political shell, the state” (pp. 36, 243).⁹²

Furthermore, culture is not only what is transmitted from previous generations, but also includes what each generation invents in order to meet the challenges of its social and political environment. In this respect, culture becomes an expression of what Michel Foucault calls “relations of power”. Culture provides the rationale, the standard of truth, by which groups of people sort out differences, respond to problems and make crucial choices. It is used to organize relations within and between groups, establish a public identity, maintain social stability, and develop a position from which to argue for political rights and dignity.

However, nowhere are the “relations of power” more evident than in a war culture. If culture is defined as a system of meanings, a war culture should be understood as a special system of meanings which underlies the whole society's thinking in responding to war and its aftermath. In the cognitive dimension, a war culture refers to specific norms and conventions which distinguish allies and enemies, defining what people consider valuable and worth fighting for. In the affective dimension, as Paul Fussell has observed, a war culture is dominated by fear and hatred,

⁹² Michael J. Mazarr, “Race and Culture: a World View”, *The Washington Quarterly*, Spring, 1996. Read on the “Expanded Academic” website.

by guns and blood, by irrational actions and atrocious results, and by representation of ideas, of patriotism, sacrifice, honours and traitors.⁹³ What is also remarkable is that within war cultures, the process of homogenisation in both cognitive and affective dimensions accelerates very quickly. Normally, as a system of meanings, a culture always consists of negotiated agreements by which members of a society agree to relationships between a word or a type of behaviour and its corresponding significance or meaning. In a war culture, such agreement is often made by propaganda, by censorship or even by order from the government. In peacetime culture, people mainly follow the example of their ancestors; in war culture, people tend to follow the leadership of state and military authorities. Paul Fussell argues that

If you are trained to be uncritical of the military, you can easily go a little further and learn to be uncritical of government and authority, and even to be uncritical of all established and received institutions. The ultimate result is the death of the mind, the transformation of the higher learning and independent scholarship into a cheering section for whatever popular notions and superstitions prevail at the moment.⁹⁴

It can be said that war culture is essentially an obedience culture in which the masses suspend criticism of authority. This culture of obedience played a crucial role in the literary culture in wartime. On the one hand, it enforced solidarity within the literary community, shaping a community into a united frontline against a common enemy. On the other hand, it turned all writers and artists into soldiers. The terms “soldier-writer” and “soldier-poet” became popular in the period 1945-1975. These were not soldiers who wrote poetry or prose but writers or poets whose works served mainly as weapons against the common enemy. In a letter sent to Vietnamese artists and intellectuals on May 25, 1947, Hồ Chí Minh called upon everyone to use their pens

⁹³ Paul Fussell (1996), “The culture of war”, *Society*, Sep-Oct 1996; reproduced at Expanded Academic ASAP: http://0-web1.infotrac.galegroup.com.library.vu.edu.au/itw/infomark/619/185/44345726w1/purl=rc1_EAIM_0_A18688805anddyn=8!xrn_55_0_A18688805?sw_aep=vut_main.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

as “sharp weapons to fight for justice and destroy the enemies”.⁹⁵ Three years later, in another letter sent to Vietnamese painters, Hồ Chí Minh declared more bluntly: “Culture and arts are also a front. You are soldiers in that front. As other soldiers, the artistic soldiers have a clear duty: that is, to serve the resistance, the country, and the people, particularly the workers, farmers, and soldiers.”⁹⁶ Speaking at the Third Congress of Vietnamese Writers and Artists held in Hanoi in 1962, Trường Chinh, on behalf of the Party, put forward for the first time the concept of “Party-mindedness”, which consists of four major components:

1. Writers and artists have to accept that literature and arts are used to serve politics and the policies of the Party. They have to be loyal to the communist ideals and struggle tirelessly for the victory of socialism.
2. Writers and artists, through their artistic and social activities, always try to improve the leadership of the Party, consolidate the people’s faith in the Party, and protect the purity of Marxist-Leninism.
3. Writers and artists are always in the attacking position, fighting against the reactionary and depraved thoughts of imperialism and feudalism, and capitalist and petty bourgeois ideologies.
4. Communist writers and artists, like all other communist members, have to obey the Party organization...⁹⁷

In a letter sent to the Fourth Congress of Vietnamese Writers and Artists held in Hanoi in January 1968, the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party declared that “Vietnamese writers and artists should be worthy of being valiant soldiers against the Americans in the literary and artistic front”. In so doing, the Central Committee instructed that:

With enthusiasm and determination, you should live passionately and for a long time in the grassroots of the Party, associate with the common people who are labouring and struggling: these should be regarded as the most important

⁹⁵ Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), op. cit., p. 9.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Viện Văn Học (ed.) (1978), *Văn học, cuộc sống, nhà văn*, Hanoi: Văn Học, pp. 303-304.

requirements in the process of creating literature and arts.⁹⁸

Speaking at the Congress, Lê Đức Thọ, the head of the Party Organization Committee, emphasized that:

The existence of a literary work is not dependent on the author's subjective desire. While the youth in the whole country flock to join the army in order to fight against the American invaders, our poets can't be allowed to express such feelings as 'being distant from you I feel like a boat which is far away from the dock' or 'it seems stormy in the heart'.⁹⁹

Following the order of the Party, writers and artists were engrossed in writing as soldiers. In a poem, Hoàng Trung Thông wrote: "Once again, we are writing our poems on the rifle stock",¹⁰⁰ and Chế Lan Viên also proudly said: "the stature of poets and the fortification are of equal height".¹⁰¹ Titles of the works published by most respected writers and poets in the North reflect the common tendency of the age: *Ra trận* (Going to the Battlefields) by Tố Hữu; *Những bài thơ đánh Mỹ* (Poems Fighting against Americans) by Chế Lan Viên; *Chiến trường gần đến chiến trường xa* (From a Near Battlefield to the Far Battlefields) by Huy Cận; *Nhắm thẳng quân thù mà bắn* (Shooting Straight at the Enemies) by Hồ Phương.

It can be said that under the communist leadership and within a war culture, the social status of Vietnamese writers changed completely. Before 1945, Vietnamese people were often proud of their literature. They called their country a country of poetry (nước thơ) where almost everyone was a poet, using poetry not only in lyrical expression but also in narrative forms, including historical and political writings. Poets and writers were admired. They belonged to the highest class in society.¹⁰² In the

⁹⁸ Hồ Chí Minh et al. (1976), *Về văn hoá nghệ thuật*, Hanoi: Văn Hoá, p. 36.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Hà Xuân Trường (1977), *Đường lối văn nghệ của Đảng, Vũ khí, Trí tuệ, Ánh sáng*, Hanoi: Sự Thật, p. 96.

¹⁰⁰ Viện Văn Học (1984), *Nhà thơ Việt Nam hiện đại*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, p. 291.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

¹⁰² In Vietnamese traditional society, apart from the king and mandarins, there were four main classes, of

1930s, under the influence of French romanticism, writers and poets were inclined to regard themselves as an extraordinary kind of being. According to Hàn Mặc Tử, “apart from angels and humanity, God created a third species: Poets. This species is very precious and rare flowers.”¹⁰³ Similarly, Chế Lan Viên stated that “a poet is not a human being. He/she is a Dreaming Person, a Drunken Person. He/she is a fairy, a devil, a spirit, a goblin.”¹⁰⁴ In a poem called “Self-Portrait”, Thế Lữ presents himself as “a strange chap” who is always alone with the Muse of Poetry as a friend.¹⁰⁵ Xuân Diệu compares a poet with a person who carries a thousand hearts in one heart and who can understand the voice of the stream, the speech of birds, the sound of sobbing in the rain and the cry of words struck by beams of moonlight.¹⁰⁶ In another poem, Xuân Diệu claims that “I am the only One, the Unique, the Foremost / I am incomparable.”¹⁰⁷ These imageries and comparisons, like clichés, can be found easily almost everywhere in the 1930s literature, especially poetry. However, from 1945 onwards, they all disappeared. In wartime and under the Marxist spell, writers and poets suddenly became soldiers, and as soldiers they understood that they were only the lowest soldiers who were always far from the front line, and whose weapons were only pens which could not actually kill the enemy. This explains why, in 1946 when the war broke out, many writers could not write anything. They wanted first to live, to participate in the struggle, and to postpone writing.¹⁰⁸ Others believed that literature always trailed along behind history, and as a consequence they always trailed along behind the political leaders who were the true pioneers of history, the true avant-

which intellectuals, including writers and artists, were on top, and the next were farmers, workers and businesspeople (Sĩ, nông, công, thương).

¹⁰³ Hàn Mặc Tử (n.d.), *Chơi giữa mùa trăng*, California: Xuân Thu, pp. 35 and 38.

¹⁰⁴ Nguyễn Tấn Long and Nguyễn Hữu Trọng (1986), *Việt Nam thi nhân tiền chiến*, Paris: Institut de l’Asie du Sud-Est, pp. 65-66.

¹⁰⁵ Thế Lữ (1995), *Tuyển tập*, volume 1, Hanoi: Văn Học, pp. 76-78.

¹⁰⁶ Xuân Diệu (1983), *Tuyển tập*, volume 1, Hanoi: Văn Học, pp. 65-66.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

¹⁰⁸ This was discussed in details in the previous chapter.

garde.¹⁰⁹ This is what Trường Chinh wanted to deliver in his poem “To Be a Poet”, which has often been regarded as a manifesto of socialist realism in Vietnamese literature:

*To be a poet one must to join in the chorus that swells,
The choir of the planet in struggle;
Five continents fiercely resisting aggression
Through the world to raise high the flag of the people.
Seize the pen to cast down the world's tyrants
Make rhymes into bombs and from verse make grenades.
And when the time comes, let drop the pen,
Drop the pen and snatch up the sword!¹¹⁰*

Although Sóng Hồng points out that poets can “make rhymes into bombs and from verse make grenades”, he still maintains that literature is less important than the actualities of military struggle. Literature is also less important than productive labour, as Chế Lan Viên asserts in his poem “The Practical Truth” which describes an experience of a poet who worked for the first time on a rural farm:

*All his life he has eaten the rice of the people.
Today he is transplanting rice for the people.
What good is all that futile verse that flows like water,
And does not serve the people so much as a single bowl of rice?*

Literary criticism is even less important as Tô Hữu claims:

*Dẫu một cây chông trừ giặc Mỹ
Hơn nghìn trang giấy luận văn chương.¹¹¹*

(Tô Hữu)

A bunji stick that kills the Americans

is much more precious than a thousand pages of literary criticism

¹⁰⁹ Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh et al. (eds.) (1985), *Các nhà văn nói về văn*, vol. 1, Hanoi: Nxb Tác Phẩm Mới, p. 111.

¹¹⁰ Nguyễn Khắc Viện and Hữu Ngọc (eds. and trans.) (n.d.), *Vietnamese Literature*, Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, p. 570.

¹¹¹ Tô Hữu (1994), *Thơ*, Hanoi: Nxb Giáo Dục, p. 390.

It is clear that the concept of “soldier-writer” and “soldier-poet” changed the artists’ status and the significance of literature in society. Furthermore, it dissolved the awareness of individual personality. The collectivity dominated the individual. The poet Xuân Diệu, who had been one of the pioneers of Vietnamese romanticism and individualism in the 1930s, found ecstasy in community:

*Body and soul, flesh and blood, I am with my people
warm with the ardour of the heart, sweating their sweat,
sharing the life and the struggle
of millions who suffer... the people I love.*¹¹²

Tố Hữu captures this relationship between the community and the individual in a well-known piece of poetry:

*Như buổi đầu hò hẹn say mê,
Anh nắm tay em, sôi nổi, vụng về,
Mà nói vậy: Trái tim anh đó,
Rất chân thật chia ba phần tươi đỏ,
Anh dành riêng cho Đảng phần nhiều,
Phần cho thơ và phần để em yêu.
Em xấu hổ: “Thế cũng nhiều anh nhi?”
Rồi hai đứa hôn nhau, hai người đồng chí.*

Like in the first intoxicating date,
I hold your hands, clumsy but passionate,
And say: This is my heart,
Truly divided into three red parts,
The biggest part is for the Party,
One part for you and one part poetry.
Embarrassed, she says “I don't deserve it”
And then we kissed, the two comrades.¹¹³

¹¹² Nguyễn Khắc Viện and Hữu Ngọc (eds. and trans.) (n.d.), op. cit., p. 666.

¹¹³ Translated by Tôn-thất Quỳnh-Du, unpublished.

Tố Hữu's devotion to the Party is quite understandable. It was very common for those who engaged in revolutionary activities. It was also quite common in traditional Vietnamese society, where the fatherland was superior to family, and family, in turn, was superior to the individual. However, we should pay attention to the last line, “And then we kissed, the two comrades”. What is the function of the noun phrase “the two comrades” here? It signals that this is first of all a kiss between two people who have the same political ideals. Comradeship becomes a condition of erotic love, and also, of the kiss. The distinction between the private and public life was erased. The entire life of each individual was politicized. Lê Đạt, one of the Vietnamese poets in the dissident movement Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm (1956-58), decried:

*Placing police stations and machinery in the centre of the human heart,
Forcing feelings to be expressed according to a set of rules promulgated by
the government.*¹¹⁴

The domination of “soldier-writer” image also transformed the concept of aesthetics. Traditionally, living in an agricultural society and seeking harmony between nature and humans, the concept of beauty developed by Vietnamese poets and writers was highly romantic. They often considered as beautiful what was tender and dreamlike. They preferred to speak about the moon rather than the sun, the night rather than the day, love rather than hatred. In the more than one thousand year history of Vietnamese literature, no epic or epic-like work was ever written. In the Vietnamese language, the word denoting “poetry” (thơ) is synonymous with the words denoting “childhood” (thơ ấu), “naivety” (thơ ngây) or “wanderings” (thơ thần). However, after 1945, during the anti-French and then the anti-American wars, war and violence were romanticized as poetic and touching. Phạm Tiên Duật wrote: “The road to the battlefield is so beautiful in this season” (Đường ra trận mùa này đẹp lắm).¹¹⁵ Xuân

¹¹⁴ Translated by Neil L. Jamieson (1993), *Understanding Vietnam*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 259.

¹¹⁵ Phạm Tiên Duật (1983), *Vàng trắng và những quãng lừa*, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 42.

Diệu wrote: “Oh! How tender I feel while I hold the gun” (Ôi êm ái khi tay cầm vũ khí).¹¹⁶ Lê Anh Xuân describes the death of a soldier in the Tet offensive of 1968:

*Và anh chết trong khi đang đứng bắn
Máu anh phun theo lửa đạn cầu vồng.*¹¹⁷

And he died still standing as he fired
His blood gushing out in harmony with the rainbow of ballistic fire.

The same aesthetic informs the following lines from Chế Lan Viên:

*Hoan hô cái hầm chông
Hỡi cái hầm chông
Ta yêu người hơn vạn đóa hoa hồng.*¹¹⁸

Long live punji sticks!
O the punji sticks!
I love you more than ten thousand roses.

It is very difficult, if not impossible, for those poets who love punji sticks¹¹⁹ more than roses to devote themselves to literature as the pure art of language. The superiority of punji sticks over roses implies the superiority of life over art, and of pragmatism over aestheticism. To some extent, it can be said that in the field of literature, the culture of war is a-literary: its emphasis lies solely on the social effect of literature, not literature in itself, hence wiping out the differentiation between literary and non-literary writing. In Roman Jakobson's words, it defines the concept of

¹¹⁶ Xuân Diệu (1983), *Tuyển tập*, vol. 1, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 214.

¹¹⁷ Tế Hanh, Ngô Văn Phú and Văn Long (eds.) (1993), *Thơ Việt Nam hiện đại*, Hanoi: Nxb Hội Nhà Văn, p. 389.

¹¹⁸ Chế Lan Viên (1985), *Tuyển tập*, vol. 1, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 151.

¹¹⁹ “Punji stick” is defined by *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language* (fourth edition, 2000) (<http://www.bartleby.com/61/23/P0662300.html>) as follows: “A very sharp bamboo stake that is concealed at an angle in high grass, in a hole, or in deep mud, often coated with excrement, and planted to wound and infect the feet of enemy soldiers. Also called *punji stake*.”

literature by focusing on the “addressee” or “reader”; or in the words of the American New Critics, on “what literature does”, and not on “what literature is”.¹²⁰

Focusing on the social and political effects of literature, Vietnamese leaders and theorists paid special attention to a certain genre: reportage (ký). Normally, reportage, which tries to reflect reality from an eyewitness account, and is often used by newspaper reporters, particularly foreign correspondents, is widely regarded as a journalistic rather than a literary genre. However, in Vietnam, because modern literature emerged roughly at the same time as journalism, many novels were written in the reportage manner and in reverse, many reportages have exhibited highly aesthetic values.¹²¹ In these reportages, there are not only facts but also the authors’ own experiences, and more importantly, their own personality. Vietnamese theorists of socialist realism did not turn a journalistic type of writing into a literary one. But they thought highly of reportage as a major genre in the field of literature. They called upon writers and poets to write reportages about the “real people and real facts” (người thật việc thật). In 1953, Hoài Thanh regarded the first reportages written by amateurish writers in the anti-French war as the first foundation on which the new typical heroes were formed in Vietnamese arts and literature.¹²² In 1962, Tô Hoài stated that:

A writer is the secretary of his/her age. [...] In my opinion, this honourable name should be given first of all to those who write reportages and the like: these are those who hold rifles, and like those who hold ploughs and hoes, they are the majority and always at the front lines in all cultural battles and life.¹²³

¹²⁰ W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley (1946), “The Intentional Fallacy”, *Sewanee Review*, Summer 1946, reprinted in *The Verbal Icon* by W.K. Wimsatt, London: Methuen, 1970, pp. 3-18.

¹²¹ See Greg Lockhart and Monique Lockhart (trans. with an introduction) (1996), *The Light of the Capital, Three Modern Vietnamese Classics*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

¹²² *Văn Nghệ* magazine, no. 46 (December 1953).

¹²³ *Văn Nghệ* magazine, no. 8 (1962).

In 1967, Phạm Văn Đồng, the then Prime Minister of the North, called upon writers and artists to concentrate on writing short reportages in order to serve politics at that time. He said that:

Nowadays, looking back at the highly qualified works written by the revolutionary South. What are they? They are works writing about the real people and real facts such as *Sống như Anh* (Live Like You), *Người mẹ cầm súng* (A Mother Holds a Gun), etc. Try to note down the facts and the people [that you see] by any means and according to your own understanding.¹²⁴

With such a view, most of the award-winning works of literature in the North were reportage. For example, in 1965, the collection of letters sent from the South to their relatives in the North *Từ tuyến đầu tổ quốc* (From the Frontline of our Country) and the reportage-poem *Sống như Anh* (Live Like You) received Special Prizes. Among eight award-winning pieces of prose, there were six reportages or reportage-novels: *Những ngày gian khổ* (Arduous Days) by several authors, *Cửu Long cuộn sóng* (Wavering Cửu Long River) by Trần Hiếu Minh, *Người mẹ cầm súng* (A Mother Holds a Gun) by Nguyễn Thi, *Bức thư Cà Mau* (Letter Sent from Cà Mau) by Anh Đức, *Trường Sơn hùng tráng* (The Grandiose Trường Sơn) by Hồng Châu, *Rừng xà nu* (The Xanu Forest) by Nguyễn Trung Thành and Nguyễn Thiều Nam.

Reportage became the favourite genre of the age. Not only writers but poets also wrote in reportage, for example, Xuân Diệu had *Đi trên đường lớn* (Walking on the Big Road) (1968), Chế Lan Viên had *Những ngày nổi giận* (Outraged Days). Chế Lan Viên also wrote several poems in the reportage manner which were labelled “reportage-poems”.

A similar situation can be found in the Soviet Union. From the 1920s, the “ocherk”, a genre between a journalist’s report and an essay, not only flourished in all Russian periodicals but, as Marc Slonim remarks, also occupied a large and honored

¹²⁴ Phạm Văn Đồng (1975), *Xây dựng một nền văn hoá văn nghệ ngang tầm vóc dân tộc ta, thời đại ta*, Hanoi: Sự Thật, p. 104.

place in Soviet letters.¹²⁵ However, in the Soviet Union, this genre declined after the death of Stalin. In Vietnam, it was dominant until the early 1980s.

It is often believed by Western theorists that the value of reportage or of realist works in general depends largely on the degree of objectivity in the writing. However, in the socialist realist culture, as it was formulated in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and in Mao Zedong's speeches in the Yan'an Forum in 1942 and adapted in Vietnam since the 1940s, "objectivity" is not what is based on facts and things that can be seen or measured but what is defined by dialectical and historical materialism and seen through the glass of "partiinost", the "Party-minded spirit". In other words, to be objective is to be faithful to the Party's teaching. As a result, all depictions in reportages or socialist realist literature in general were quite uniform: they viewed all situations in relation to the Party line. For example, in their view, the world was divided into two camps: capitalism (and its allies) and socialism; and human beings accordingly were categorized either as capitalist, colonialist and reactionary or as socialist, revolutionary and patriotic. In such a conflicting world, there is no place for those who want to remain in a neutral position. A person who is a "middle-of-the-roader" can be treated as an enemy, as stated in a poem written by Xuân Diệu:

*Hello, Comrades. Let us unite our forces,
Destroy our mortal foes without remorse.
Landlords, notabilities and opposition groups
We must reduce to ash;
Middle-of-the-roaders and reactionaries,
Their bones we must smash.*¹²⁶

Any writer who confuses these categories could be criticized for not being clear in their political thinking. The following poetic stanza written by Việt Phương can be taken as an example:

¹²⁵ Marc Slonim (1977), *Soviet Russian Literature, Writers and Problems, 1917-1977*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 170.

¹²⁶ Translated by Hoàng Văn Chí, in Hoàng Văn Chí (1961), *From Colonialism to Communism, A Case History of North Vietnam*, London: Pall Mall Press, p. 91.

*Ta thắng Mỹ cho ngàn vạn năm đời sắp tới
Cho cả thời cháu con ta sẽ hỏi
Vì đâu
Ngày xa xưa trước năm 2000
Người ta giết nhau mạng người như hòn sỏi?*¹²⁷

We win over Americans so that a thousand years later
Our grandchildren will ask:
Why
In ancient times, before the year 2000
Did people kill each other; and human lives were like pebbles?

Almost immediately after its publication, elements of ambiguity in the above stanza drew strong criticism from orthodox writers. Hoàng Trung Thông, one of the leading figures in North Vietnamese literature commented:

Why “people”? Does the term “people” include us? It cannot and should not be confused in this manner. Not only we but also our grandchildren should not confuse this. If someone asks, the question should be: why did our grandparents who lived before the year 2000 have the marvellous strength to win over the Americans, a bloody invasive devil?¹²⁸

Hoàng Trung Thông criticizes the term “people” used by Việt Phương because he, like other Marxists, believes that in a class society, all people belong to definite classes and follow definite political lines. There is no such thing as “people” or “war” in general. These terms used generally are not only a misunderstanding but also a dangerous political mistake: it eliminates the difference between friend and foe.

Similar arguments can be found everywhere in Vietnamese literary criticism before the “renovation” period, which began in the mid-1980s. It can be said that for the Vietnamese government, the nature of the Vietnam War against the Americans was a use of force for defense against a foreign invasion, for punishment of evil. It was

¹²⁷ Quoted in Hoàng Trung Thông (1979), *Cuộc sống thơ và thơ cuộc sống*, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 72.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

therefore a just war, sometimes described as a “sacred war”. And because the war against the Americans was considered a sacred war, Americans and their allies were accordingly dehumanised and demonised. It should be noted that, in all wars, it is common for the enemy to be dehumanised. The psychiatric report on William Calley who was tried for killing hundreds of Vietnamese civilians in My Lai in 1968 showed that he felt not as if he was killing humans but “rather that they were animals with whom one could not speak or reason”.¹²⁹ However, William Calley was quite exceptional and his act of killing was regarded as a war crime. In fact, several people had acted like Calley, although few managed to be reported so plainly. In Vietnam, during the time of war, by contrast, enemies were publicly dehumanised in literature and in the mass media. In the poem entitled “To Glorify Our Nation”, Tố Hữu writes:

*Thực dân địa chủ một bầy
Chúng là thú vật, ta đây là người.*¹³⁰

Colonists and landlords are of the same herd.
They are beasts, and we are human.

It should be remembered that Tố Hữu was, and still is, regarded as one of the leading poets, if not *the* leading poet in Vietnamese realist literature after 1945. He was also a politician, a member of the Central Committee and the Politburo of the Vietnamese Communist Party. During more than three decades, from the late 1940s to the late 1970s, he was responsible for the literary and ideological activities of the Communist Party. After that, he was promoted to the position of the first deputy Prime Minister. The views of such a man on the one hand reflected the policy of the Party, and also had a very strong influence on the Vietnamese propaganda machine. Such an influence can be seen in the everyday usage of the Vietnamese language, where there was a refusal to associate enemies with titles such as Miss, Mrs or Mr. During and even after the war, Vietnamese people referred to the enemy as “thằng” or “con”. “Thằng” means a little boy; and “con” means a little girl. Both indicate children or those who

¹²⁹ Michael Bilton and Kevin Sim (1992), *Four Hours in My Lai*, New York: Viking, p. 21.

¹³⁰ Tố Hữu (1994), *Thơ*, Hanoi: Nxb Giáo Dục, p 292.

are thought to be inferior and vile. When an adult is called as “thằng” or “con”, he or she is considered as a thief, a beggar, a prostitute or the like. They are stripped of their maturity and dignity.

In propaganda literature, the enemies were even more dehumanised. They were often labelled through metaphors as dogs, foxes, tigers, snakes, wolves, animals, beasts, ghosts, devils, etc. These metaphors justified the act of killing without remorse or pity. To kill an enemy is not killing a human being, and therefore it cannot be judged according to common ethics. In other words, Vietnamese people thought the conduct of war was not subject to moral limitations. In describing an ambush, Tố Hữu writes:

*Chúng ta ở đây
Trên đầu chúng nó
Đại bác ta sau rèm tre nghiêng cổ
Trông xuống khoanh đôi đờ
Như đĩa huyết còn tươi.¹³¹*

We are here
on top of their heads
Behind the bamboo curtain our cannon cranes its neck
looking down to the red circle of small hills
that looks like a dish of fresh blood.

Poetic devices such as these have never been criticized in Vietnam. They are regarded as a deep expression of the anger and hatred required to be generated against enemies. What would be condemned as bloodthirsty in peacetime becomes normal and permissible within a war culture.

Furthermore, the act of killing enemies was often romanticized and given a sense of bliss. Chế Lan Viên, one of the finest poets in Vietnam, writes:

*Ta đánh mày hân hoan như sinh đẻ
Và thiêng liêng như xây dựng kỳ đài.¹³²*

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 237.

Killing you, I feel bliss as if giving birth
and I feel sacred as if I am building a flagpole.

The same poet writes:

*Hạnh phúc tính theo đầu người là anh giết bao nhiêu đầu giặc Mỹ
Như cây yêu đời sinh được mấy muôn hoa.*¹³³

Happiness is counted by the number of American heads you have cut off.
It's like a tree, in its love for life, giving birth to numerous flowers.

And again:

*Hãy giết chúng như thiên thần giết quỷ
Trên mỗi xác thù, họng súng phải reo ca.*¹³⁴

Let's kill them like angels killing devils
On each enemy's corpse, our guns must sing aloud.

Underlying this glorification of killing is a culture of vengeance. Any kind of war requires its participants to hate the enemy. In the so-called war for national liberation, hatred becomes the highest virtue. One of the most popular slogans during the anti-French resistance was “Love the country and hate the enemy”.¹³⁵ This slogan has its roots in the past. In the late nineteenth century, the poet Nguyễn Đình Chiểu wrote in *Lục Vân Tiên*: “We hate because we love” (*Vì chúng hay ghét cũng là hay thương*).¹³⁶ Hatred towards the enemy was regarded as a manifestation of patriotism. On behalf of the Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Trường Chinh

¹³² Ibid., p. 197.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 173.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 149.

¹³⁵ Viện Văn Học (1986), *Văn học Việt Nam kháng chiến chống Pháp*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, p. 43.

¹³⁶ Nguyễn Đình Chiểu (1980), *Toàn tập*, vol. 1, Hanoi: Nxb Đại Học và Trung Học Chuyên Nghiệp, p. 111.

declared in 1947 that all cultural activities had to aim at stirring up public anger.¹³⁷ In September 1966, the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party announced much the same idea to the people: “The activities of arts and literature play a crucial role in educating people to hate American invaders and their henchmen.”¹³⁸ As a result, hatred became a major theme in literature and one of the major goals of national education.

In conclusion, it can be said that the culture of war and Maoism in Vietnam not only informed an aesthetics of violence in which hatred, vengeance and crimes were romanticized, but also created a culture of obedience in which writers and poets turned into soldiers who used pens as weapons, and a culture of uniformity in which dogmatism dominated people’s thinking. In this sense, socialist realism was very far from being realistic, or even literary: it became a mere weapon for use in politics, propaganda and ideological education. This explain why in Vietnam the doctrine of socialist realism was first criticized by writers and artists who were living under the communist regime, many of them members of the Communist Party. These criticism resulted in the two major movements of dissidence, the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair and the *đổi mới*, which will be discussed in the next chapters.

¹³⁷ Trường Chinh (1985), *Về văn hoá và văn nghệ*, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 47.

¹³⁸ *Nhân Dân*, 28 September 1966.

Peace and Free Market: Enemies of Socialist Realism

CHAPTER SIX

The *Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm* Affair, a “Peace Crisis”

Emerging in North Vietnam shortly after the end of the anti-French resistance, the *Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm* affair was the first intellectual dissident movement occurring under communist rule. It is now among the most discussed issues in the history of Vietnamese socialist realist literature, attracting special attention not only from Vietnamese writers but also from Western academics. To date, there have been a sizable number of research papers dedicated to this affair, written in Vietnamese, in addition to a number in other languages. Examination of these writings, however, reveals that the nature of the movement has been represented differently amongst scholars. For some, especially Vietnamese scholars and critics, the movement was primarily a political event involving Vietnamese intellectuals struggling against communist totalitarianism.¹ Others, for example Kim N. B. Ninh, represented the movement as an intellectual dissent, essentially a “conflict between the government’s vision and the intellectuals’ expectations of the new state and society”,² or in the words of Shawn McHale, “a clash of high modernisms” in which “[k]ey writers ignored, marginalized, or attacked ‘feudal’ and ‘backward’ legacies from the past like Buddhism or Confucianism”, whilst “[a]t the same time, they articulated a forward-looking vision in which scientific thinking and technology was invoked to shape and transform society.”³ The distinction between these views is not clear-cut: under a one-

¹ For example Hoàng Văn Chí (1983), *Trăm hoa đua nở trên đất Bắc*, (first published in Saigon in 1959), re-printed in Paris by Quê Mẹ in 1983; and Trần Gia Phụng (2002), *Án tích cộng sản Việt Nam*, Toronto: Non Nước, pp. 149-216.

² Kim N.B. Ninh (2002), *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945-1965*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, p. 122.

³ Shawn McHale, “Vietnamese Marxism, Dissent, and the Politics of Postcolonial Memory: Tran Duc Thao, 1946-1993”, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 61, no. 1 (February 2002), p. 9.

party ruled state like North Vietnam, all kinds of dissidence, even intellectual or literary ones, usually had a large impact on politics and the dissidents were often accused by the state of being counter-revolutionary. This chapter attempts to demonstrate that the aim of the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm movement was two-fold: politically, it was a struggle against Stalinist and Maoist totalitarianism; and artistically it opposed the theory of socialist realism.

It should be noted that the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair broke out roughly in the same period as the de-Stalinizing movements around the world erupted. The most important and influential event for the participants in these movements was Nikita Khrushchev's secret report on Stalin, delivered on February 25, 1956, in which Khrushchev accused Stalin of being a cruel dictator who had established a cult of personality and killed millions of people, including loyal communists.⁴ In addition to this event, there were several other dissident voices around the world such as the rebellion of Polish workers in Poznan on June 28, 1956, the ferment of the Petofi literary and artistic circles in Budapest, and the October Revolution in Hungary which was crushed by Soviet intervention.⁵

These events were not direct causes of the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm movement, but, as Georges Boudarel and Nguyễn Văn Ký have pointed out, they “found even greater echo in Hanoi because they laid the ground for the gradual revelation of the crimes and social catastrophes caused by the blind acceptance of Maoism”,⁶ and through this, mobilized Vietnamese writers and artists to struggle for creative freedom.

More influential for Vietnamese writers and artists was the Chinese campaign of “A Hundred Flowers Bloomed”, which was initiated by Premier Chou Enlai in

⁴ The English translation of this report can be found at <http://www.trussel.com/hf/stalin.htm> or <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1956khrushchev-secret1.html>. The Vietnamese version, entitled *Tờ Trình Bí Mật của Krúpsép về Stalin* (Khrushchev's Secret Report on Stalin), translated by Đỗ Tĩnh, published by Tủ Sách Nghiên Cứu in Paris in 1994.

⁵ See R. J. Crampton (1994), *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century*, London: Routledge, pp. 275-303.

⁶ Georges Boudarel and Nguyễn Văn Ký (2002), *Hanoi, City of the Rising Dragon*, translated by Claire Duiker, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, p. 120.

January 1956 when he announced that it was necessary for the Chinese Communist Party to understand intellectuals thoroughly and to give them due confidence and support for them to work with real initiative. Three months later, the campaign was officially launched by Mao Zedong when he exclaimed that “In the arts ‘let a hundred flowers bloom’, and in scholarship, ‘let a hundred schools of thought contend’.” Another month later, Lu Dingyi, director of the Propaganda Department of the Party Central Committee, proclaimed that “socialist realism was not a method” and that there were no rigid taboos, formulas or restrictions as long as literature and art served the people and the new regime. During this campaign, lasting one year from mid-1956 to mid-1957, Chinese writers, artists and critics were encouraged to speak out in criticism of the errors of Party cadres, the subjectivism in their way of thinking, bureaucratism in their way of work and sectarianism in organizational questions.⁷

Incidentally, the most influential element of the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm movement was not China’s A Hundred Flowers campaign as an entirety, but the writings of a Chinese leftist literary theorist, Hu Feng, who had been arrested and imprisoned as a bourgeois individualist and counter-revolutionary leader before the bloom of the Hundred Flowers campaign. Born in 1902, Hu went to Japan in 1927, where he avidly read the works of Karl Marx in both English and Japanese translations. In 1931 he became a member of the Japanese Communist Party as well as the Japanese branch of the Chinese League of Left-Wing Writers. Deported to China in 1933 for his leftist activities in Japan, Hu Feng developed a close friendship with Lu Xun, one of the greatest writers in modern China, and became the leading theorist of the non-Maoist communist group, with whom he published the literary journals *July* (Qiyue; 1937-1941) and *Hope* (Xiwang; 1945-46). These journals and his own works made him famous as a provocative critic. In some scholars’ observation, “there was to be no debate in literary circles after 1938 in which Hu Feng did not take an active role.”⁸ Hu was also an outspoken critic of Mao’s view of literature and an opponent of Zhou

⁷ Hualing Nieh (ed.) (1981), *Literature of the Hundred Flowers*, vol. 1: Criticism and Polemics, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. xiii-xxxvii.

⁸ Theodore Hutters, “Hu Feng and the critical legacy of Lu Xun” in Leo Ou-fan Lee (ed.) (1985), *Lu Xun*

Yang, who was regarded as the “cultural czar” in communist China. After 1949, Hu continuously clashed with Party authorities and official ideology. This clash reached its peak in the early 1950s, when Hu Feng publicly expressed his resistance to what he saw as doctrinairism in communist literary circles.⁹ In June 1954, Hu Feng submitted to the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party a book-length report, entitled *A Report on Literary and Artistic Practices since the Liberation*, which was summarized by Georges Boudarel as follows:

Foreseeing a ‘cultural desert’, he denounced [...] the ‘five daggers’ stabbed into the brains of creative artists: enforced communist ideology, inspiration limited to the world of workers and peasants, ideological re-education, prescribed stylistic forms, topics and themes decreed by the Party. According to Hu, socialist realism should turn to man and assert itself as a kind of humanism (nhân văn). Since artistic creation could not be subjected to any dictate, the existing monolith needed to be split into seven or eight totally independent associations allowed to compete with one another, with communists making up no more than a third of the leadership in each. Writers, he declared, should not look at reality through any prism whatsoever. Literature, as he saw it, is a completely open space, a place of untrammelled creation based on total freedom of thought, the *sine qua non* for a sincere and truthful work whose aesthetic value depends essentially on the artist’s talent.¹⁰

The period of time in which Hu Feng’s view of literature was widely discussed in China was also the period when Trần Dần (1926-1997), a young writer, was sent to China to write the narrative for a film shot by the Chinese about the Điện Biên Phủ battle, in which he had personally taken part. He stayed in China only two months, from 10 October to 12 December 1954. It is interesting to speculate about whether Trần Dần was exposed to any of Hu Feng’s papers during his brief stay. Were his own

and His Legacy, Berkeley: California University Press, p. 142.

⁹ Hu Feng’s thoughts on literature are discussed in Adrian Hsia (1972), *The Chinese Cultural Revolution*, London: Orbach and Chambers, pp. 85-6; and more details in Liu Kang (2000), *Aesthetics and Marxism, Chinese Aesthetic Marxists and Their Western Contemporaries*, Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 93-110.

¹⁰ Georges Boudarel, “Intellectual dissidence in the 1950s: The Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm Affair”, *The Vietnam Forum*, no. 13 (1990), p.156.

views influenced or shaped by them? According to Party cadres, the answer to this question is “yes”, but his own friends seemed to deem it to be untrue, as expressed through a cartoon published in *Nhân Văn* no. 2, September 30, 1956.¹¹ Other sources make different claims. In his *Renovating Politics in Contemporary Vietnam*, Zachary Abuza wrote, “While in China, Dân became very influenced by the Chinese literary figure Hu Feng, who wanted to broaden the acceptable bounds of literature”, but he gave no evidence in support of this assertion.¹² Trần Dân’s diary, which was published in the United States of America in 2001, four years after his death, contained no mention of anything related to Hu Feng or any literary events in China. These writings compiled only various ideas he had for future works and thoughts about literature in general. They were by and large a continuation of the same ideas he had pondered over before he departed on this trip and showed no new influences. However, according to Hoàng Văn Chí, what Trần Dân observed on this trip disappointed him very much. Upon returning to Hanoi, he reportedly told friends: “Don’t follow the Chinese policy of literature.”¹³ According to Georges Boudarel, Trần Dân “returned from his brief mission with only one project in mind: to create a work that would both express his own idea and spark an evolution of cultural politics.”¹⁴

Hu Feng’s influence can be seen more evidently in the case of Phan Khôi, another leader of the *Nhân Văn* - *Giai Phẩm* movement, who went to China to participate in the celebration of Lu Xun’s birthday in 1956. After returning to Vietnam, Phan Khôi published a magazine entitled *Nhân Văn* (Humanism) which, as Zachary Abuza commented, was “based on the philosophy of the Chinese dissident intellectual

¹¹ This cartoon was re-printed in *ibid.*, p. 160.

¹² Zachary Abuza (2001), *Renovating Politics in Contemporary Vietnam*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, p. 47

¹³ Hoàng Văn Chí (1983), *Trăm hoa đua nở trên đất Bắc*, Paris: Quê Mẹ, p. 98. (Originally published in Saigon in 1959.)

¹⁴ Georges Boudarel and Nguyễn Văn Ký (2002), *op. cit.*, p. 118.

Hu Feng, who argued that ‘socialist realism should turn to a man and assert itself as a kind of humanism (nhân văn)’.”¹⁵

It is difficult to deny Hu Feng’s influence on the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair. It cannot be said, however, that this influence was decisive. Kim N. B. Ninh rightly emphasized that “the concerns subsequently raised in the period of intellectual questioning in Vietnam had long been in existence”, and “the seeds of the conflict between the intellectuals and the Party’s cultural officials had been sown as early as 1948.”¹⁶ This is true. In the late 1940s, when Maoism was imported en masse into Vietnam, an ideological rectification campaign, which was modelled on China’s *cheng feng*, was launched, and socialist realism was recognized by the communist leaders as the most desirable, if not the only, worthwhile creative method, several talented artists and writers, including the composer Phạm Duy, the poets Vũ Hoàng Chương and Đinh Hùng, and the future novelists Mai Thảo and Doãn Quốc Sỹ, who had been involved in the anti-French resistance because of their patriotism, decided to return to French-controlled cities. In broad terms, as P. J. Honey has asserted, “the more the principles learned from the Chinese communists were applied, the longer became the line of disillusioned intellectuals, abandoning the ranks of the resistance movement.”¹⁷ Others, who constituted the great majority, while still staying in the marquis and continuing to fight against the French under the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party, did not accept socialist realism or accepted it only with great reluctance, sometimes in the agony of losing their individual freedom and independence. The painter Tô Ngọc Vân, one of the first graduates of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts de l’Indochine, and one of the best artists in the history of Vietnamese fine arts, while being ready to serve as a political propagandist, insisted that pure art was substantially different from propaganda art in several aspects. In terms of purpose, propaganda art exists to advocate a policy, raising political slogans and delineating a political path for the

¹⁵ Zachary Abuza (2001), op. cit, p. 48.

¹⁶ Kim N. B. Ninh (2002), op. cit., p. 129.

¹⁷ P. J. Honey (ed.) (1962), *North Vietnam Today: Profile of a Communist Satellite*, New York: Praeger, p. 6.

people to follow, whereas true art is an expression of an individual soul. In terms of technique, in propaganda art, the political message must be direct and forceful, whereas true art is much more subtle, only suggesting meaning and evoking emotional responses from the viewers. In terms of value, propaganda art has temporary worth, whereas the value of true art is everlasting.¹⁸ Phan Khôi, who was deeply and fervently involved in resistance activities, even participating in the military campaigns in spite of his age, complained privately in one of his poems, written in 1952: “My mind and heart are no longer my own” (Tim óc như không phải của mình),¹⁹ and “From the resistance point of view, I am useless” (Kháng chiến thấy thừa ta).²⁰ In 1950, in a conference on art organized in Việt Bắc, the poet Hoàng Cầm, who was head of the Army’s professional psy-war entertainment unit, declared that “the Party should have no hand in the professional areas of art.”²¹

This discontent, which had been kept under wraps in wartime, exploded when the French war ended in 1954. The nine-year war against French invasion and occupation ended with a victory for the Viet Minh at Điện Biên Phủ and officially, through the Geneva Agreements, signed on the night of July 20 – 21, 1954, provided for a cease-fire throughout the whole of Vietnam. However, the price of peace was high: Vietnam was temporarily divided into two parts for two years, awaiting a reunification by general election which, for various reasons, was never held. The seventeenth parallel was established as a provisional line of demarcation: the South was controlled by the American-sponsored government, led by Ngô Đình Diệm, and later, by Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, becoming a strategic bastion of the United States; and the North was controlled by the Viet Minh, led by Hồ Chí Minh.²²

¹⁸ Tô Ngọc Vân, “Tranh tuyên truyền và hội họa”, *Tự Do*, no. 1 (July 1947).

¹⁹ Quoted in Vũ Hoàng Chương, “Sao lại thế được?”, *Hợp Lưu*, no. 33 (February and March 1997), p. 116.

²⁰ Hoàng Văn Chí (1983), *op. cit.*, p. 59.

²¹ Nhà xuất bản Sự Thật (1959), *Bọn Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm trước tòa án dư luận*, Hanoi: Sự Thật, p.102.

²² For further information, see Bernard B. Fall (1965), *The Two Vietnams, a Political and Military*

In the second half of the 1950s, in the South, the Ngô Đình Diệm government tried to suppress French-supported forces and other opposition in order to gain control, and resettle nearly one million refugees who had immigrated from the North.²³ In the North, the Hồ Chí Minh government, on the one hand, attempted to rebuild the economy and lay the foundations for socialism, and on the other hand, prepared for a long and fierce struggle for national reunification. In the process of building the foundations for socialism, the Hồ Chí Minh government focused on two major tasks: firstly, to continue to push the land reform program; and secondly, to establish a Party-controlled state apparatus.²⁴

The land reform program consisted of two major campaigns: the land rent reduction campaign during the years 1953 and 1954; and the land reform campaign proper during the years 1954 and 1956. Both were designed to be part of a class struggle against ‘feudal’ landlords and the traditional village elite. The aim was to liquidate the landowning class, redistributing the wealth, mainly land, from the rich to the poor, and establishing a proletarian dictatorship in the countryside.²⁵ In the middle of the second campaign, as a result of the Eighth Plenum of the Central Committee in August 1955, it was believed that landlords “were acting as agents of the imperialists and their lackeys, particularly in carrying out sabotage”, the mobilization for land reform was extended into “a hunt for spies and counter-revolutionaries”.²⁶ Consequently, many people were falsely thought to be landlords and spies, and executed by the People’s Courts. Common among them were middle peasants or even people who had participated in the anti-French war and had been adopted by the Party

Analysis, London: Pall Mall Press.

²³ See Stanley Karnow (1983), *Vietnam, a History*, New York: Penguin, pp. 206-239.

²⁴ See Bernard B. Fall (1965), *op. cit.*, particularly Chapter 8 “Garrison State”, pp. 130-168 and Chapter 9 “Road to Socialism”, pp. 169-200; William J. Duiker (1996), *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, Boulder: Westview Press, pp. 179-214.

²⁵ Hoàng Văn Chí (1964), *From Colonialism to Communism, a case History of North Vietnam*, London: Pall Mall Press, p. 163.

²⁶ Ken Post (1989), *Revolution, Socialism and Nationalism in Vietnam*, vol. 1, Aldershot (England): Dartmouth, p. 272.

as part of the revolution. This practice was later recognized at the Central Committee's Tenth Plenum as resulting in "serious errors", and a Rectification of Errors Campaign was launched, lasting for the greater part of 1957.²⁷ All of these events made the period 1956-57 one of crisis for the Vietnamese Communist Party and its government in the North. It was marked by widespread discontent and unrest, not only among those who had been wrongly accused but also in the ranks of the local Party and intellectuals, in particular professional artists, writers and musicians, who publicly voiced doubts concerning the workings of the system.²⁸

For the second task, in respect of society, since September 1955, the government has operated the system of "hộ khẩu", stemming from China's *hukou*, meaning "the household registration", which contains the names of all family members with brief resumes, including their ages, occupations and religions.²⁹ This "hộ khẩu" is necessary for all administrative processes, such as education, work, admission to hospital, registration of marriage and birth, the buying of rice from the state-run stores and moving from one city to another.³⁰ In respect of culture, the Vietnamese Association of Literature and Art, which was formed in 1948, was replaced by the Vietnam Union of Literature and Art, consisting of several professional associations, of which the Vietnamese Association of Writers was officially established in April 1957. There was also an association of those writers who were serving in the army. These associations were not purely professional but also political, administratively belonging to the Vietnam Union of Literature and Art and the National Front of Vietnam, but it

²⁷ Ibid., p. 280.

²⁸ More information on the land reform program can be found in Edwin E. Moise (1983), *Land Reform in China and North Vietnam: Consolidating the Revolution at the Village Level*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

²⁹ See Trần Minh, "Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm, một tư trào, một vụ án, một tội ác" in *Diễn Đàn Dân Tộc Dân Chủ*, no. 9 (March 1997), p. 3. Trần Minh is a pen name of Nguyễn Minh Cần, the former deputy president of Hanoi in the 1960s before deciding to live in Russia as a refugee.

³⁰ More details on "hộ khẩu" can be found at the website Immigration and Nationality Directorate <http://www.ind.homeoffice.gov.uk/default.asp?pageid=4328>

was voluntarily put under the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party through its Central Committee of Propaganda.³¹

All of these economic, social, political and cultural policies increased the discontent and indignation of writers and artists, and were really the causes of the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm movement. In other words, this movement was first of all a response to the Maoist policies in post-Geneva Vietnam. China's A Hundred Flowers campaign or Khrushchev's secret report and several other political events in Eastern Europe acted as catalysts which consolidated the belief of Vietnamese intellectuals and encouraged them to struggle for their creative freedom.

The process of transformation from revolutionary to dissident is typified in the case of Trần Dần, one of the leading figures of the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair.

Trần Dần was born on August 13, 1926 in a well-established family. At the age of twenty, together with other poets, Vũ Hoàng Địch and Đinh Hùng, he published a very short-lived journal *Dạ Đài* (The netherworld) to advocate symbolism. The journal ceased after just one issue, which was published on 16 November 1946, one month before the outburst of the anti-French resistance. In 1948, he joined the army, fighting against the French on the northern borders, and became a member of the Vietnamese Communist Party one year later. In the last years of the anti-French resistance, he worked as an artistic and propagandist cadre. In 1954, he was involved in the military campaign at Điện Biên Phủ, at which he wrote his first novel, about this fierce battle, *Người người lớp lớp* (Wave after Wave of Men), which was published early in 1955, and as Georges Boudarel noted, "had brief commercial success".³² However, as Trần Dần revealed in his diary, he was not very happy with this novel. Some time between September 20 and October 1, 1954, a few weeks before his China's trip, he wrote:

I have just completed the novel *Wave after Wave of Men*. [It is] about the Điện Biên Phủ battle. But I am sick of it. There is just a little truth of war in it. And

³¹ Trần Độ (1988), *Đổi mới và chính sách xã hội, văn hoá*, Ho Chi Minh City: Nxb thành phố HCM, pp. 202-3.

³² Georges Boudarel and Nguyễn Văn Ký (2002), op. cit., p. 118.

there are fewer truths about myself in it. It is not the war, nor myself. Consequently, although I wrote up to 300 pages, I don't like it as much as my recent poem "As you saw", which is more or less six pages!

[...]

I want to describe soldiers who are very old and those who are very young; poor peasants and sons of landlords; sons of bourgeois and workers, students and illiterate men. [...] The heroes and the cowards. Those who arrived cowards but became heroes. Those who arrived heroes but became cowards. Those who used guns to fire at the enemy and those who used guns to harm themselves. The quiet soldiers and the talkative soldiers. The gentle people and the reckless people. The docile people and the stubborn people. And most of them are reluctant to study (politics), to listen to the cadre talking over politics. Being reluctant to listen to cadres talking a lot. Being reluctant to see their thoughts controlled. Control, control my cock!³³

A few pages earlier, he wrote:

Why have I met short-sighted and stiff people everywhere? As a result, I want to write more; I want to write what I have dared not to write. And I want to write without censorship. Because if I write under censorship, I will meet such people.³⁴

After returning from China, Trần Dần became sadder. He wrote in his diary on 20 December 1954:

Nothing changes in the artistic and literary body. There are still the thoughts of despising artistic labour, regarding the army artists as mere soldiers, distrusting literature and art. There are still affected, demanding and rigid policies which try to "militarise literature and art". My life has been sunk in these policies, as were my friends.

It is so difficult.

But I have heard a lot of voices raised. Protest. Discussion. Ridicule. And even cursing. These are notices of death of suppressing policies and thoughts on the army's literature and art.

³³ Trần Dần (2001), *Ghi*, Paris: TD Mémoire, pp. 47-8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

In recent days, I have been so sad.

I have suffered from headaches.

And resentment.

[...]

What do I want?

- a right and open policy on literature and art.
- a creative life. The old must be poured out. The new should be accumulated and then poured out whenever it is needed. These two tasks should be done simultaneously.
- practice artistic devices. Poetry is my favourite. Novel. Short story. Literary reportage.
- Reading. Novel. Literary theories. Philosophy. Economy. So ignorant. So ignorant. Art is the fullest way of perceiving and representing life. The artist should be a great intellectual.³⁵

It is not surprising that after that, Trần Dần started to publicly voice his dissent. But he was not alone. Around him there was a group, consisting of two poets, Hoàng Cầm and Trúc Lâm, two composers, Tử Phác and Đỗ Nhuận, and a playwright, Hoàng Tích Linh, all of them in the army. Like Hu Feng, they had the same goal, to convince the Vietnamese Communist Party of the need for artistic and intellectual freedom. At first, they received a favourable response from many people, including several high-ranking cadres. In February 1955, Trần Dần and his like-minded artists presented their proposals to General Nguyễn Chí Thanh, the head of the army's General Political Department (Tổng Cục Chính Trị). The text of their proposal was never published, however, though from several passages, quoted in attacks on its authors, we know that they demanded

- that the army's writers and artists would participate in a professional Association of Literature and Art rather than being under the control of the army's General Political Department (Tổng Cục Chính Trị) and the Department of Propaganda and Political Education (Cục Tuyên Huấn);

³⁵ Ibid., p. 63.

- that the imposition of army laws and regulations on art and literature, and the political commissars' grip on artistic creation, be ended.
- and that writers and artists be able to obtain creative freedom and independence.³⁶

In the view of Georges Boudarel, one of the best experts on the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair, the above proposal launched “a campaign labelled the ‘Hundred Flowers’ in the Department of Culture of the Vietnamese Army. It would be another year before a more famous movement of the same name was launched in China”.³⁷ However, the Party and the military leaders dismissed all the demands in the proposal. According to Hoàng Cầm, General Nguyễn Chí Thanh had asserted: “The spirit of this statement of policy proposal is the unruly ideology of capitalism. It shows that capitalist ideology has begun to attack all of you comrades!”³⁸ Shortly after this event, in defiance of a prohibiting order of the Party, Trần Dần fell in love with a young Hanoi woman who was Catholic and whose family had immigrated to the South nearly a year earlier. In order to marry the woman he loved, on 23 April 1955, he asked to leave the Party and the army. In his diary, he declared that “you should have the guts to risk your life for a poetic experiment.”³⁹ This attitude irritated his leaders, and consequently he was put under house arrest from 13 June to 14 September 1955. After that, he was forced to attend a land reform campaign in a rural village in Bắc Ninh for the purpose of political re-education.

These disciplinary measures came too late. Dissidence had become a common mood among many writers, artists and intellectuals in Hanoi. In February 1956, while Trần Dần was in Bắc Ninh province, his poem, “Nhất định thắng” (We must win) was published in *Giai Phẩm 1956* (1956 Fine Works), which was later renamed and

³⁶ Vũ Tú Nam, “Sự thực về con người Trần Dần”, *Văn Nghệ Quân Đội*, no. 4 (1958), p. 50; Kim N.B. Ninh (2002), op. cit., p. 130.

³⁷ Georges Boudarel and Nguyễn Văn Ký (2002), op. cit., p. 119.

³⁸ Quoted in Kim N.B. Ninh (2002), op. cit., p. 130.

³⁹ Trần Dần (2001), op. cit., p. 77.

became well known as *Giai Phẩm Mùa Xuân* (Fine Works of Spring), with eight other contributors, including four poets: Hoàng Cầm, Lê Đạt, Phùng Quán and Văn Cao, and four artists, Nguyễn Sáng, Sỹ Ngọc, Từ Phác and Tô Vũ. This forty-eight page collection is very humble, not only in its length but also in its genres: it consists of nine poems, two songs, and two miscellaneous notes. An introduction written by the publishers was short and humble, consisting only of two sentences: “On the occasion of the beginning of the year 1956, we are glad to introduce this collection to readers. These are small poems, songs and drawings which contribute to the present struggle for peace and unification and also reveal several new discoveries in artistic creation.”⁴⁰ The major themes of the collection were the assertion of belief in the Party and the revolution; criticism of several negative aspects in society; and a thirst for innovation in literature and art. No work dealt directly with politics. However, it was still castigated by the Party’s cadres as reactionary, mainly because of its inclusion of the poem “We must win” by Trần Dần, in which he depicted the difficult life in the North after the Geneva Agreements; in particular, he repeated the refrain which is, in Kim N. B. Ninh’s words, “painful, echoing the poet’s doubts and sense of isolation”⁴¹:

*I walked
and saw no streets
no houses
Only the rain falling
upon the red flags.*

The political and cultural cadres in the Party reacted strongly to this publication. Copies of *Fine Works of Spring* were confiscated. Trần Dần was arrested while he was still in the Bắc Ninh province with the land reform team. A wave of criticism of him emerged in Hanoi newspapers. According to Phan Khôi, in his article “Phê bình lãnh đạo văn nghệ” (a criticism of the leadership in the field of literature and art), published in *Giai Phẩm Mùa Thu 1* (Fine Works of Autumn 1), a criticism session, organized by the Association of Literature and Art, gathered about one

⁴⁰ *Giai Phẩm Mùa Xuân* (1956), p. 2.

⁴¹ Kim N. B. Ninh (2002), op. cit., p. 139.

hundred and fifty people, and lasted from 7:00 pm to 1:00 am, to accuse Trần Dần of being anti-revolutionary. Hoài Thanh, one of the most ardent advocates of the notion of art for art's sake in the 1930s and now a member of the Executive Committee of the Association of Literature and Art, fiercely accused Trần Dần, both at the session and in an article published in *Văn Nghệ* magazine no. 11, March 1 – 7, 1956, for being influenced by Hu Feng.⁴² He also stated that the goal of the attack on Trần Dần was to send a message to the other writers and artists who had participated in the *Fine Works of Spring*.⁴³

It seems that this message was not heard. Those who wrote for *Fine Works of Spring* were not afraid. Other were not afraid either. In September 1956, a new magazine, published by the Minh Đức Publishing House and edited by Phan Khôi, one of the most notable scholars, writers, poets and journalists, entitled *Nhân Văn* (Humanism), which was clearly inspired by Hu Feng, appeared. This tabloid-sized magazine was published five times (on September 20 and 30; October 15; November 5 and 20, 1956). The sixth issue was banned and seized at the printer's even before it was set.⁴⁴ The Minh Đức Publishing House also re-printed the first issue of *Giai Phẩm Mùa Xuân*, and went on to publish four more: *Giai Phẩm Mùa Thu* tập 1 (Fine Works of Autumn, volume 1) on 29 September 1956; *Giai Phẩm Mùa Thu* tập 2 (Fine Works of Autumn, volume 2) on 30 September 1956; *Giai Phẩm Mùa Thu* tập 3 (Fine Works of Autumn, volume 3) on 30 October 1956; and *Giai Phẩm Mùa Đông* tập 1 (Fine Works of Winter, volume 1) on 28 November 1956. Clearly, it was from these two magazines, that the name of the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair stemmed. However, it should not be forgotten that, apart from these two magazines, there were other magazines which also raised dissident voices, for example, *Trăm Hoa* (Hundred Flowers), whose name itself was an echo of China's A Hundred Flowers Campaign launched by Mao Zedong, published by the poet Nguyễn Bính, consisting of ten issues between October and

⁴² Quoted in Kim N.B. Ninh (2002), *ibid.*, p. 140.

⁴³ Hoài Thanh, "Tôi đã sai lầm như thế nào trong việc phê bình bài 'Nhất Định Thắng' của anh Trần Dần", *Văn Nghệ* magazine, no. 139 (September 20-26, 1956).

⁴⁴ Georges Boudarel (1990), *op. cit.*, p. 161.

December, 1956; *Đất Mới* (New Land), a forum for tertiary students; *Nói Thật* (Speaking Openly), published by the writer Hoàng Công Khanh; and *Tập San Phê Bình* (Critical Review), which lasted until the end of 1957. Some other magazines which were strictly controlled by the Party and government were also more or less influenced by the Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm view, such as *Văn* (Literature), which was established as the first magazine of the Writers' Association, published in thirty-seven issues; *Văn Nghệ* (Literature and Art), published by the Union of Literature and Art; *Hà Nội Mới* (New Hanoi) and *Thời Mới* (New Times).

Overall, those who participated in the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair can be divided into four main categories. The first comprised young writers, most of whom were in their thirties, beginning to devote themselves to literature or becoming famous after 1945, such as Trần Dần (1926-1997), Hoàng Cầm (1922 -), Lê Đạt (1929 -), Phùng Quán (1932 – 1995), Hữu Loan (1916 -), Phùng Cung (1928-1997), and Đặng Đình Hưng (1924-1990). The second comprised the older generation of writers, who gained their reputation before 1945, such as Phan Khôi (1887-1959), Văn Cao (1923-1995), Trương Tửu Nguyễn Bách Khoa (1913-1999), Thụy An (? - ?), and Nguyễn Sáng (1923-1988). The third category included several well-known intellectuals such as Đào Duy Anh (1904-1988), who was widely regarded as the father of Vietnamese lexicography and anthropology, Nguyễn Mạnh Tường, who had acquired two doctorates in France while still in his twenties, and the internationally known philosopher Trần Đức Thảo (1917-1993), a former Husserlian and later Marxist, who joined the group around Jean-Paul Sartre and Merleau-Ponty's *Les temps modernes*, and whose works, originally written in French, were widely translated into several languages, such as English, Italian, and Japanese.⁴⁵ Finally, the fourth category included several literary activists such as Nguyễn Hữu Đang (1912 -), who became well known after organizing the independence memorial when Hồ Chí Minh proclaimed Vietnamese independence in 1945, and Trần Thiếu Bảo, an experienced publisher, who owned the Minh Đức Publishing House, which published most of the dissident works in the mid-1950s. Among these names, with the exception of Thụy An

⁴⁵ Shawn McHale, op. cit., pp. 7-31.

and Trần Thiều Bảo, who had stayed in Hanoi during the French war, all returned from the resistance areas where they had spent nine years in struggling against the French under the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party. Not only were they involved in the colonial struggle, some of them had also enthusiastically embraced the process of transforming themselves into the ‘new men’ as Đặng Thai Mai noted

[f]rom the very beginning, they applied themselves with enthusiasm and energy to whatever activity their country demanded of them in time of war. They fought alongside ordinary coolies, resisted their country’s enemies side by side with the peasants. They shared with these men the terrible privations of life in the jungle and, like them, they lived and worked in an atmosphere of the most fervent patriotism.⁴⁶

Of these people, Trần Đức Thảo was quite typical. After returning from France where he had been studying for ten years, Trần Đức Thảo sincerely desired to immerse himself in Vietnam. In Tô Hoài’s memoir, *Cát bụi chân ai* (Dust on Whose Feet), published in Hanoi in 1992, Trần Đức Thảo “abandoned his Western clothing and eagerly adopted a peasant’s plain brown shirt and pants”. Furthermore,

At night he slept without a mosquito net, even though we were in the jungle at the head of the Lo River, and at nightfall, mosquitoes came out in droves. “I returned late [to Vietnam], I have to train for hardship for times with you”. Trần Đức Thảo spoke seriously. Not long after, Trần Đức Thảo collapsed with malaria.⁴⁷

Phan Khôi was another example. Born in 1887, Phan Khôi was fifty-nine years old when the French war broke out, but he was still involved in the resistance. In 1949, when the Association of Literature and Art launched the campaign for enlisting writers and artists in the army (*phong trào văn nghệ sĩ đầu quân*), Phan Khôi, at the age of sixty-two, volunteered to join the soldiers in their military activities. Phan Khôi’s image, shown in the excerpt below, was regarded as the most beautiful image in the launch of this campaign:

When he stepped up to the stage, a military cadre wanted to give him some help.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Zachary Abuza (2001), *op. cit.*, p. 44.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Shawn McHale, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

But he refused. It seems from his heart that he did not want to receive any privileges because of his age. His eyes were a little bit dazed, but there was an apparent smile on his stern face.

“[...] What is my goal in this campaign? It is to observe reality in order to write. Apart from this, I am not sure that I can complete other duties and the rigid discipline in the army.”

His eyes sparkled and his voices became stronger:

“But I want to try.”

Carrying his cane, he returned to his place. The sound of applause burst out like a tide. Thousands of eyes looked at him. The military band played the song “Lên đường lập chiến công”.⁴⁸

Despite their different backgrounds, these writers, artists, intellectuals and activists nonetheless had two common goals: politically, they all attacked authoritarianism, dogmatism and bureaucratism; and artistically, they all opposed the theory of socialist realism. However, most critics and researchers have concentrated mainly on the political goal. For example, in the eyes of the Vietnamese Communist Party, the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm was first of all a political revolt by several counter-revolutionary intellectuals. Hoàng Văn Chí, whose pen-name is Mạc Đình, the author of *Tâm trạng của giới văn nghệ ở miền Bắc* (The Disposition of the Intellectual Circle in the North), and *Trăm hoa đua nở trên đất Bắc* (Hundreds of Flowers Bloom in the North), the first books on the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm published outside North Vietnam, considered this movement a spontaneous insurgence of intellectuals against the communist dictatorship.⁴⁹ Ken Post, in *Revolution, Socialism and Nationalism in Vietnam*, volume one, also emphasized mainly the political aspects. For him, the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair was one of the signs of unrest within the North's writers and artists who were deeply resentful of “the suffering of families of those imprisoned during the land reform and the deficiencies of the state shop”, and who “denied the

⁴⁸ Vương Trí Nhàn, “Lớp nhà nho cuối cùng và cuộc kháng chiến chống Pháp”, *Hợp Lưu*, no. 33 (February and March 1997), pp. 118-120.

⁴⁹ Hoàng Văn Chí (1956), *Tâm trạng của giới văn nghệ ở miền Bắc*, Saigon: N.p.; and *Trăm hoa đua nở trên đất Bắc*, Saigon: Mặt Trận Bảo Vệ Tự Do Văn Hoá, 1959, reprinted in Paris by Quê Mẹ in 1983.

Party a monopoly on patriotism” and made demands “for more freedom, for guarantees of legality, for democratic controls over the Party and government or at least over their cadres.”⁵⁰ Others, while recognizing the two aspects of the movement in their analysis, still placed greater emphasis on the political dimension, where, generally speaking, a consensus was more easily reached. For Zachary Abuza, the main focus of Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm was “the lack of democracy, the monopolization of power in the hands of a few, and the stagnation of politics in general”.⁵¹ For Georges Boudarel, they raised two critical problems in politics the solutions to which the Communist leadership was to postpone *sine die*: (a) freedom and democracy; and (b) legality, human rights, and the strengthening of institutions.⁵² For Kim N. B. Ninh, they spoke of “the concern with the contraction of private space and the establishment of a ‘Party-governed regime’ (chế độ Đảng trị).”⁵³

In relation to the artistic dimension of the movement, greater differences can be discerned in the views of writers and researchers. The aim of Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm, according to Georges Boudarel, was to open up all fields of thought and research;⁵⁴ to Patricia M. Pelley, the aim was to “reclaim their creative independence”;⁵⁵ according to Zachary Abuza, it was to concentrate on “the issue of ‘truth’ and the legality of alternative and independent sources of information”;⁵⁶ and finally, according to Kim N. B. Ninh, it was to argue “for more freedom within the intellectual sphere and demanded changes in the current leadership of art and literature.”⁵⁷ However, it can be

⁵⁰ Ken Post (1989), *Revolution, Socialism and Nationalism in Vietnam*, vol. 1, Aldershot (England): Dartmouth, pp. 286-288.

⁵¹ Zachary Abula (2001), op. cit., pp. 48-50.

⁵² Georges Boudarel (1990), op. cit., p. 165.

⁵³ Kim N.B. Ninh (2002), op. cit., p. 144.

⁵⁴ Georges Boudarel (1990), *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Patricia M. Pelley (2002), *Postcolonial Vietnam, New Histories of the National Past*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, p. 120.

⁵⁶ Zachary Abuza (2001), *ibid.*

⁵⁷ Kim N. B. Ninh (2002), *ibid.*

argued that, with respect to literature and art, the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm mainly constituted an attack on the theory of socialist realism.

This view was first suggested by Nguyễn Hữu Đang, one of the leaders, if not *the* leader of the movement, who was also sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment, in an interview broadcasted on the RFI. His statement was recorded as follows:

In respect of politics, Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm was substantially the struggle of a number of intellectuals, writers, artists and members of the Vietnamese communist Party against Stalinism and Maoism. The importation of Stalinism and Maoism resulted in many phenomena which could be called dictatorship, or more accurately, strict totalitarianism.

[...]

The common attitude among those who were involved in the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm was that none of them accepted the extremist and totalitarian regime which was a result of the proletarian dictatorship. But what was the manifestation of this struggle against Maoism and Stalinism?

In the final analysis, the essential issue for them was creative freedom. [Writers and artists] did not accept the socialist realism launched by Stalin and Zhdanov, but wanted to return to the nineteenth century critical realism of the West, that of Balzac, Flaubert, Maupassant, Hugo, and Stendhal.⁵⁸

Nguyễn Hữu Đang's view makes two main points: firstly, socialist realism was regarded as a major manifestation of Stalinism and Maoism in the field of literature and art; and secondly, Vietnamese writers at that time were basically disciples of realism, and they wanted to continue to use the realist techniques which had been popular in nineteenth-century France and even in Vietnam prior to the Second World War.

It should be noted that in the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair, Vietnamese writers did not oppose realism as a whole. This can be seen in the proposal, written by Trần Dần on behalf of a group of writers and artists in the army, sent to the army's General Political Department and the Party's Department of Propaganda and Political

⁵⁸ Thuy Khuê, "Phỏng vấn Nguyễn Hữu Đang", *Tivi Tuần San*, no. 510 (3 January 1996), pp. 56-60.

Education in February 1955, which was never published, and which has been known only through a few passages quoted in attacks on its author:

The highest expression of a writer's responsibility is his respect for, and his faithfulness to, truth. That is the supreme measures by which one appraises a writer and his works... To respect truth and abide by it is both the responsibility – the platform – and the method of an author's work... Truth, with its breadth and scope, transcends all directives, all theories... If it goes against a program or an order, writers should conform to it and not distort and force it into the framework of politics... Revolution needs no apostle to burn incense and praise programs and has even less use for shamans who celebrate its cult as they clap cymbals and intone litanies... Today one finds in our literature much artifice (and even hypocrisy). To call it by its right name, it's a hackneyed, simplistic, elementary literature. The writer sets up a frame and then crams reality into it.⁵⁹

Trần Dần did not write anything new in the first three sentences quoted above. This is what realism advocates: literature is a mirror of reality in which the vital quality of descriptions and narratives is faithfulness. This is also how socialist realism is understood through its official definition given by the Union of Soviet Writers in 1934: "Socialist realism [...] requires from the artists a truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development."⁶⁰ However, from the fourth sentence, starting with "If it goes against..", he is opposed to orthodox socialist realism which interprets the concept "faithful" quite vaguely, not based on reality as it is or as the individual perceives it, but on the Party's understanding of "reality", its "revolutionary development" and the needs of the masses. In the socialist realist hierarchy, "faithfulness" is put under three basic principles, namely, "narodnost" (people-ness), klásovost" (class-ness) and partiinost (party-ness), in which, as C. Vaughan James emphasizes at the beginning of his treatise *Soviet Socialist Realism, Origins and Theory*, the last element is dominant.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Georges Boudarel (1990), op. cit., p. 157.

⁶⁰ Marc Slonim (1977), *Soviet Russian Literature, Writers and Problems, 1917-1977*, second revised edition, London and Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 165.

⁶¹ C. Vaughan James (1973), *Soviet Socialist Realism, Origins and Theory*, London: Macmillan, p. 1.

Refusing to “distort” and “force” reality into the framework of politics means to refuse the “partiinost” principle, which is also understood as refusing the Party’s policies and orders. This is one of the reasons why the Party’s and government’s leaders became so incensed with the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm group and, as a result, the event quickly became political. It is also a reason why the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm writers requested freedom as the first and most vital condition of artistic creation, and of realism as well:

[A] writer must be allowed quasi-absolute freedom in the choice of his subject, of his characters, of his style to express attitudes and feelings. All hindrances and restraints must be proscribed as enemies of realism.⁶²

In order to avoid being accused of being anarchists, they carefully limited their understanding of “freedom” in choosing “subjects”, “characters” and “styles to express attitudes and feelings”. In this context, “freedom” is understood as having the right to be sincere, and furthermore, innovative. Not surprisingly, “sincerity” and “innovation” became two of the most popular themes in the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm literature, particularly in poetry.

Phùng Quán, one of the youngest members of the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm group, had a poem which was widely considered as a manifesto of the righteous writers and poets of all times:

*... a man, sincere and true,
will laugh when, happy, he wants to laugh,
will cry, when, sad, he wants to cry.
If you love someone, say you love.
If you hate someone, say you hate.
Someone may not talk sweet and flatter you –
still, don't say hate when you feel love.
Someone may grab a knife and threaten you –
still, don't say love when you feel hate.⁶³*

⁶² Quoted in Zachary Abuza (2001), op. cit., pp. 46-47.

⁶³ Translated from the Vietnamese by Huỳnh Sanh Thông, *The Vietnam Forum*, no. 13 (1990), pp. 175-76.

In a poem entitled “New” published in *Fine Works of Spring*, Lê Đạt regarded those who refused to innovate as old lime pots that had been used by betel nut chewers and now were being thrown away:

*There are several people who manage to live a hundred years
Like lime pots
The longer they live, the more mediocre they become
The longer they live, the smaller they become.*⁶⁴

Being tired of such a fate, Lê Đạt appealed to “make it new” as the Western modernists did in the 1920s and 1930s:

*New! New!
Always new!
Fly high
Fly far
Above the signs of the old
Above the deteriorating sidewalks
Surpassing today
Surpassing tomorrow, the day after,
Always surpassing...*⁶⁵

Carefully, in another poem, which was printed on the first pages of the collection, Lê Đạt confirmed:

*I carry my pen, following the Party
And charge straight into the forefront.*⁶⁶

But later, in another poem, Lê Đạt criticized the Party for

*Placing police stations and machinery in the centre of the human heart,
Forcing feelings to be expressed according to a set of rules promulgated by
the government.*⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Lê Đạt, “Mới”, *Giai Phẩm Mùa Xuân* (1956), p. 29.

⁶⁵ Ibid. Translated by Kim N.B. Ninh (2002), op. cit., p. 138.

⁶⁶ Lê Đạt, “Làm thơ”, *Giai Phẩm Mùa Xuân* (1956), p. 4.

⁶⁷ Neil L. Jamieson (1995), *Understanding Vietnam*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 259.

Clearly, it is almost impossible for writers and poets to be sincere and innovative without struggle against totalitarianism. This may be among the reasons why Phan Khôi, based on the above quatrain on the lime pots, wrote a short essay, entitled “Mr. Lime Pot”, describing and analysing several facts around the custom of chewing betel, and, linked with this custom, the pots which were used as lime containers. These lime pots, after long use, filled up with hard, dry lime so that they became unusable and had to be replaced by new ones. Phan Khôi concluded his essay as follows:

In summation, people show their reverence and respect to a lime pot by calling it “Mister” because it has lived a long time, filled up hard and dry inside, its mouth covered over, sitting in melancholy on an altar or up on a wall, like an earthen or wooden statue, speechless, motionless.⁶⁸

From Hoàng Văn Chí in the mid-1950s to Zachary Abuza in the early twenty-first century, almost all scholars have interpreted this essay as an implicit allusion to Hồ Chí Minh and several leaders who were old-aged at that time. In Neil L. Jamieson’s words:

Hồ Chí Minh had been the leading Vietnamese Communist since the late 1920s when he organized the Youth League among young political exiles in Canton. Phạm Văn Đồng, Võ Nguyên Giáp, Trường Chinh, and almost all the other important leaders had played an important role in the party for decades. The implication was that these men might have grown too rigid, too closed, that like lime pots they had lost their usefulness after long use. Perhaps it was time to put Hồ Chí Minh and his grey-haired cronies on the shelf; to venerate them, to give them titles showing reverence and respect, but to get new leaders to conduct the affairs of government.⁶⁹

Not surprisingly, Phan Khôi was immediately perceived as reactionary and revisionist, an ungrateful person and a senile old man, unable to overcome his ingrained bourgeois mentality and who wanted to cause controversy for its own sake. It

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 261.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

seems that Phan Khôi accepted this challenge not because of his political ideology but, more reliably, because of his own vision of intellectual and literary ethics: for him, a righteous and gifted writer can be compared with the thorny roses whose best quality lay not only in their talent but also in their stubbornness:

*What sort of rose is without thorns?
Just let it not be a rose without blossoms.
If it is to be a rose, it must have blossoms.
Who would tend a rose with only thorns and no blossoms?
O rose, I love you very much.
You have thorns, but a fragrant scent as well.⁷⁰*

In order to be roses which had both “thorns” and “fragrant scent” in literature and art, the duties of writers and artists were twofold: firstly, they had to break down the system which restrained their freedom, and therefore their capacity for creation; and secondly, they had to attack several literary and artistic canons which aimed at limiting the horizon of aesthetics. The first task resulted in requests to restructure the literary mechanism in which the proposals most often mentioned were those to abandon censorship and the political commissars’ grip on artistic creation. In completing this task, a theoretical issue had to be solved: the relationship between literature and politics. This issue was first raised by Phan Khôi in his article “Phê bình lãnh đạo văn nghệ” (A criticism of leadership in the field of literature and art) published in the *Fine Works of Autumn*, volume 1, and further discussed by Trương Tửu in his three successive essays: “Bệnh sùng bái cá nhân trong giới lãnh đạo văn nghệ” (The sickness of the personality cult within the leadership of literature and art), published in the *Fine Works of Autumn*, volume 2; “Văn nghệ và chính trị” (Literature and Politics) published in the *Fine Works of Autumn* volume 3; and “Tự do tư tưởng của văn nghệ sĩ và sự lãnh đạo của Đảng Cộng Sản Bôn-sê-vích” (Freedom of thought of intellectuals and the leadership of the Bolshevik Communist Party), published in the *Fine Works of Winter*, volume 1.

⁷⁰ Zachary Abuza’s translation in Zachary Abuza (2001), *ibid.*

In “A criticism of the leadership in the field of literature and art”, Phan Khôi pointed out that there were two opposite classes in the Vietnamese literary circles: the literary leaders (lãnh đạo văn nghệ) and the literary masses (quần chúng văn nghệ). In his opinion, firstly, such an opposition between these two “classes” only began to appear after the French war; and secondly, while this opposition was quite normal under capitalism, it was clearly a bad symptom in a socialist society: it showed mistakes in leadership. Then, after criticizing some of these wrongs, he went further by insisting that what writers and artists longed for most was freedom. He emphasized that this was not anarchic and unprincipled freedom, but a freedom in the field of literature and art only. To support such a notion of freedom, Phan Khôi discussed the so-called “unwritten contract” between the state and writers:

It is obvious that literature and art must serve politics, and as a result, politics must lead literature and art. But we must ask: if politics wants to achieve its goal, can it use slogans, banners, notices and decrees without literature and art? Sincerely answering, perhaps politics must tap literature and art on the shoulder and say: I am attached to you because I want to use your art. Once that is out in the open, literature and art agree. But this artistic area is a separate area of literature and art, where it cannot be covered by politics, and where literature and art must demand freedom. As such, I think politics has no reason to disagree. “Both sides win”, such a principle is applicable for any cooperative situation today.⁷¹

For Phan Khôi, in the field of literature and art, the “personality” of the writers and artists was the most valuable element with which the aesthetic values were created:

Each of us possesses his own art and reflects his own personality in it. Only this kind of art and personality can create the spectacle of a hundred flowers rivalling each other in charm. On the contrary, if one compels all writers to write in the same style, there may come a day when all the flowers will be changed into chrysanthemums.⁷²

⁷¹ Phan Khôi, “Phê bình lãnh đạo văn nghệ”, *Giai Phẩm Mùa Thu* 1 (1956), pp. 8-9.

⁷² Neil L. Jamieson’s translation in Neil J. Jamieson (1993), op. cit., p. 258.

Apparently, in supporting and developing Phan Khôi's ideas, Trương Tửu published in *Fine Works of Autumn 2* a long essay about the sickness of the cult of personality in the leaders of literature and art. For him, this cult of personality was a real "disease" which was very popular and harmful in Vietnam. However, he emphasized that

I do not say that this is a sickness of Vietnamese writers and artists, because in the past and at present as well, no self-esteeming writers and artists have ever accepted the personality cult. Art is creative and free. The personality cult is a blind obedience and slavery. These two things are like water and fire, which cannot be in co-existence.⁷³

But why did the "sickness" of personality appear? In Trương Tửu's opinion, it appeared when a number of people in the Party monopolized the leadership in the field of literature and art. At first these people believed that the Party had never made mistakes, then they went on to believe, or try to make other people believe, that the leaders of the Party had never made mistakes, and finally, as a result of these disbeliefs, the cult of personality came into being. In his view, it was the very leaders, with their bureaucratic and authoritarian mode of leadership, who prevented the development of a revolutionary literature and art after the end of the French war. It was time all of these leaders were dismissed, given that the "literary masses" (quần chúng văn nghệ) could democratically manage their professional activities themselves. He asserted that leadership in the field of literature and art had to be returned to professional writers and artists, regardless of whether or not they were members of the Vietnamese Communist Party. In making this request, writers and artists did not want to divorce literature and art from politics. They agreed that all works, even professional ones, had to serve politics, serve a common policy for the benefit of the masses. However, this service could only be completely done if professionals were in control of their own activities.⁷⁴

⁷³ *Giai Phẩm Mùa Thu 2* (1956), p. 5.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-14.

This view was supported by Đào Duy Anh, one of the pioneers and most prestigious scholars of Vietnamese lexicography and anthropology. In his article “Muốn phát triển học thuật” (To foster scholarship), published in the *Fine Works of Autumn*, volume 3, Đào Duy Anh admitted that Vietnamese scholarship was very low and backward. The reason for this, in his opinion, was the total distrust of intellectuals and of professionalism which was very common in Vietnam. He pointed out that

It is not unusual to see cadres without any experience outside of politics, or who pretend to be specialists, put in charge of a cultural or academic journal ⁷⁵ ... Their narrow-mindedness leads to a loss of professionalism which engenders superficial research; and only those ideas which conform to classical Marxist themes or to the speeches of our leaders have the right to be cited.⁷⁶

Also in the *Fine Works of Autumn*, volume 3, in his essay “Văn nghệ và chính trị” (Literature and Politics), Trương Tửu continued to delve into these questions. He started his long argument by emphasizing that the most basic and crucial issue in the course of establishing a theory of socialist literature was the relationship between literature and politics. In his opinion, once this issue was properly solved, several other issues, such as the relationship between creative freedom and the Party’s leadership, between the need to serve political purposes temporally and the achievement of eternally aesthetic values, and between art and propaganda, would also be solved accordingly.⁷⁷ In searching for answers to this fundamental question, Trương Tửu looked back on the whole history of literature and art. In the final analysis, he reached the conclusion that

In order to create a distinguished world, writers and artists must have a distinguished view, a distinguished perception of reality, a distinguished imagination, and a distinguished method of expression. They must maintain, secure and develop this distinguishedness so that no outer force can harm or

⁷⁵ In the original Vietnamese, Đào Duy Anh used the word “tổ chức” (văn hoá hay học thuật) (*Fine Works of Autumn* 3, p. 37), so it should be translated as “institution” instead of “journal” as in Georges Boudarel and Nguyễn Văn Ký (2002), op. cit., p. 123.

⁷⁶ Quoted in Georges Boudarel and Nguyễn Văn Ký (2002), op. cit., p. 123.

⁷⁷ Trương Tửu, “Văn nghệ và chính trị”, *Giai Phẩm Mùa Thu*, vol. 3, p. 4.

destroy it. They must have freedom to observe reality, to feel, think, imagine, and use language to reflect reality truthfully. “Freedom” here means: struggle against all kinds of suppression in thinking, all orders, all formulas, all authorities which force us to speak what we do not want to speak, to think what we do not want to think, accept as correct what we regard as wrong, to love what we hate, praise what we protest against. Without this freedom, creation will become false. Falsehood is an enemy of art. Falsehood will terminate art. A work of art which is not crystallized from sincere emotions and deep thoughts of the very author will be a pale reflection of reality. It will be parched because of its lifelessness. It is not art, and therefore it cannot be touching.

The reason why classical works have had great impact on readers is that their creators had the bravery to be themselves in social conditions which did not allow people to be themselves. They were free to see, feel, think, and speak their minds in a society where they were compelled to see, feel, think and speak in accordance with the dominant formulas. They had overcome the fetters of the exploiting class in order to tell the truth, to have the freedom to speak truthfully. They satisfied those who needed to know the truth, those who were oppressed and wanted to be liberated. Thanks to this characteristic, their works have been loved, respected, appraised by the masses of people although they had not belonged to the masses and did not completely escape from ruling class ideologies. That is the very great value of the classical writers.⁷⁸

It can be said that Trương Tửu is the critic who went furthest in challenging the orthodox Marxists in Vietnam by attacking one of the most fundamental tenets of socialist realist theory: the relationship between literature and politics. His views, which have been almost ignored by the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm experts in the West, who are inclined to pay more attention to the political rather than the artistic aspects of the movement, were regarded as most provocative and dangerous thoughts. In counter-attacking his views, apart from a number of articles published on various newspapers, magazines, and anthologies, such as *Bọn Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm trước tòa án dư luận*, there was an entire book of 102 pages, written by two historians, Văn Tân and Nguyễn Hồng Phong, entitled *Chống quan điểm phi vô sản về văn nghệ và chính trị* (Oppose

⁷⁸ *Giai Phẩm Mùa Thu* 3 (1956), p. 9.

non-proletarian views on literature and politics) with a subtitle as follows: “Nhân những ý kiến của ông Trương Tửu về văn nghệ và chính trị đã đăng trên báo *Nhân Văn* và *Giai Phẩm* mùa thu và mùa đông” (On the occasion of the publication of Mr. Trương Tửu’s opinions on literature and politics in the *Nhân Văn* magazine and *Fine Works of Autumn and Winter*). This book was published in 1957 by Sự Thật, the official publishing house of the Vietnamese Communist Party.

Apart from criticizing the literary mechanism whose major goal was to restrict writers’ and artists’ creative freedom, the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm group concentrated their harsh criticism on several literary canons which were systematically established by the Party and government through various means and under multiple forms, including criticism, propaganda, education and, in particular, literary awards. The first attempts to canonize socialist realist literature started in 1951 when Hoài Thanh published *Nói chuyện thơ kháng chiến* (Talking about resistance poetry) and Xuân Diệu published *Tiếng thơ* (Poetry’s Voice), both aimed at extolling the poems written on the resistance and by amateur poets, most of them in the army. It was also in 1951 that the first literary awards by the Association of Literature and Art were given. The Outstanding Prizes were given to reportages written on the lives and military achievements of several “heroes” and “emulation fighters” (chiến sĩ thi đua). The first prize went to *Vùng mỏ* (Mine area) by Võ Huy Tâm (1926-1996), a coal-mine worker, whose novel had been carefully edited and well refined by Huy Tường (1912-1960), one of several examiners.⁷⁹ After the Geneva Agreements, one of the first activities in the field of literature and art was to continue to canonize socialist realist aesthetics. Of these, the most noticeable event was the 1954-1955 Literary Award organized by the Vietnamese Association of Literature and Art. In the prose category, the first prizes were given to *Đất nước đứng lên* by Nguyễn Ngọc and *Truyện Tây Bắc* by Tô Hoài; the second to *Truyện anh Lục* by Nguyễn Huy Tường and *Con trâu* by Nguyễn Văn Bông; the third to *Vượt Côn Đảo* by Phùng Quán, *Cái Lu* by Trần Kim Trắc, *Lên nông trường* by Hồng Hà and *Nam Bộ mến yêu* by Hoài Thanh. For poetry, the first award

⁷⁹ Nguyễn Xuân Sanh, “Chín năm - một đoạn đường”, in Phong Lê and Lưu Khánh Thơ (eds.) (1995), *Cách mạng kháng chiến và đời sống văn học 1945-1954: Hồi ức - Kỷ niệm*, Hanoi: nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, p. 198.

was given to the collection of poems *Việt Bắc* by Tố Hữu, the second to *Ngôi sao* by Xuân Diệu, *Nụ cười chính nghĩa* by Tú Mỡ, and *Đồng tháng Tám và Dặn con* by Trần Hữu Thung; the third to *Thơ chiến sĩ* by Hồ Khải Đại.

This literary award, and closely linked with it, the attempt to canonize the new aesthetics and literature, failed to attract public support. After the winners were announced in March 1956, Hanoi's intellectual community burst out with criticism. It was revealed that at least three of the winners were also the examiners in the same competition: Xuân Diệu, Nguyễn Huy Tưởng and Hoài Thanh.⁸⁰ Furthermore, as Phan Khôi commented in his essay “Phê bình lãnh đạo văn nghệ” (A criticism of the leadership in the field of literature and art), what concerned people most was that a majority of the awarded works were regarded as worthless, even that by Xuân Diệu, one of the best-known and finest poets in the pre-war period.⁸¹

In *A World Transformed*, Kim N. B. Ninh stated that “[a]lthough Tố Hữu won first prize in the poetry category, the fiercest protest was voiced against the second and third prize winners, the collection *Ngôi sao* (Stars) by the established poet Xuân Diệu and the collection *Thơ chiến sĩ* (A soldier's poems) by the soldier Hồ Khải Đại”.⁸² If this is true, it is easily understandable. At the time, Tố Hữu, a member of the Central Committee, was in charge of cultural and intellectual activities. His collection of poems *Việt Bắc* was published with a print-run of twenty thousand copies, “a number unheard of in that period”, as Xuân Trường,⁸³ Georges Boudarel⁸⁴ and Kim N. B. Ninh⁸⁵ have remarked; this means, in Kim N. B. Ninh's words, it was “accessible to

⁸⁰ Phan Khôi, “Phê bình lãnh đạo văn nghệ”, *Giai Phẩm Mùa Thu* (1956), vol. 1, p. 16.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-16.

⁸² Kim N. B. Ninh (2003), *op. cit.*, p. 134.

⁸³ Xuân Trường, “Đọc tập thơ Việt Bắc của Tố Hữu”, reprinted in Phan Trọng Thường and Nguyễn Cừ (eds.) (1980), *Tố Hữu, Nhà thơ cách mạng*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, p. 106.

⁸⁴ Georges Boudarel (1991), *Cent fleurs écloses dans la nuit du Vietnam: Communisme et dissidence, 1954-1956*, Paris: Editions Jacques Bertoin, p. 119.

⁸⁵ Kim N. B. Ninh (2002), *op. cit.*, p. 131.

all, a tool for the propaganda effort as well as an example to intellectuals of the content and forms of the new literature.”⁸⁶ Alongside this publication, a tide of eulogy emerged in the North media regarding Tố Hữu as the “leading flag” of revolutionary poetry (ngọn cờ đầu của thi ca cách mạng). Nguyễn Đình Thi (1924-2003) alone published three articles in 1955 to analyse the greatness in Tố Hữu’s poetic style.⁸⁷ Clearly, Tố Hữu was not only a poet, but a powerful poet. Most critics were scared of him, and therefore, understandably, they shifted their criticism to those writers and poets who did not hold important positions in the government or the Party, such as Xuân Diệu and Hồ Khai Đại. However, there were still several poets who openly criticized Tố Hữu’s poetry. For example, Nguyễn Việt Lãm wrote “Những nhược điểm của tập thơ *Việt Bắc*” (The weakness of *Việt Bắc*) in the *Độc Lập* magazine no. 99, March 1955; Nguyễn Văn Phú wrote “Vài điều non yếu trong nghệ thuật tập *Việt Bắc*” (Several artistic weakness in *Việt Bắc*) in *Văn Nghệ* magazine, 30 April 1955; Hoàng Cầm wrote two articles, “Tập thơ *Việt Bắc* ít chất thực tế” (*Việt Bắc* lacks the matters of live) in *Văn Nghệ* magazine, 10 April 1955, and “Bổ sung ý kiến của tôi về tập *Việt Bắc*” (Some further opinions on *Việt Bắc*) in *Văn Nghệ*, 10 May 1955; Hoàng Yên also wrote two articles, “Đọc tập thơ *Việt Bắc* của Tố Hữu” (Reading Tố Hữu’s *Việt Bắc*) in *Nhân Dân* 3 April 1955, and “*Việt Bắc* có hiện thực không?” (Is *Việt Bắc* realistic?) in *Văn Nghệ* magazine, 20 March 1955; Lê Đạt wrote “Giai cấp tính trong thơ Tố Hữu” (The class-mindedness in To Huu’s poetry), published in *Văn Nghệ* magazine in April 1955.⁸⁸

Hoàng Cầm compared Tố Hữu’s collection to a big jar of water which had been diluted with a little bit milk.⁸⁹ Lê Đạt had a similar opinion: “In some aspects, Tố

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 131.

⁸⁷ These are: “Thơ Tố Hữu đi vào thực tế quần chúng”, *Văn Nghệ* magazine, July 14, 1955; “Lập trường giai cấp và Đảng tính, vấn đề hiện thực và lãng mạn”, *Văn Nghệ* magazine, July 21, 1955; “Nhà thơ lớn lên với thời đại”, *Văn Nghệ*, August 4, 1955.

⁸⁸ The list of these articles can be found in the bibliography of *Tố Hữu, nhà thơ cách mạng*, op. cit., pp. 635- 646; Huỳnh Lý and Trần Văn Hối (1962), *Giáo trình lịch sử văn học Việt Nam*, vol. 6, Hanoi: Nxb Giáo Dục, pp. 262-6.

⁸⁹ Quoted in Đông Hoài (1970), *Qua những chặng đường văn nghệ*, Hanoi: Văn Học, p. 146.

Hữu's poems are useful. He made a great effort to serve the political task. His poems are good lessons on policy. But good lessons on policy are neither realist, nor proletarian."⁹⁰ Trần Dần wrote a nearly 3000-word essay entitled "Cách nhìn sự vật của nhà thơ Tố Hữu" (Tố Hữu's view), finished in May 1955, but not published until after his death, in which he discussed at length the literary style of Tố Hữu. In Trần Dần's opinion, Tố Hữu's poetry had three striking characteristics. Firstly, it contained nothing new. His best poetic lines were classic, and full of clichés. In terms of aesthetics, he was a lazy poet who followed tradition and formula, but made no attempt to discover and create. Secondly, Tố Hữu's vision was very narrow. When he loved someone, these people became smaller. He was not able to recognize and present the grandeur of the revolutionary leaders and soldiers, the capital city Hanoi and the liberated areas during the resistance war against the French, his favourite topics. Thirdly, Tố Hữu's view was full of pessimism and sadness. He tried to use poetry as a weapon with which to serve politics and the masses, but he failed. In conclusion, Trần Dần agreed with Hoàng Cầm, Lê Đạt and others that Tố Hữu was basically a petty-bourgeois who devoted himself to the proletarian revolution.⁹¹

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It should be noted that between 1955 and 1957 the Vietnamese Communist Party and government in North Vietnam were reasonably tolerant of their dissidents. Both Nhân Văn and Giai Phẩm were allowed to publish five issues each before being officially banned. From 1955 to 1957, although nearly all dissidents were sternly and repeatedly criticized in the public media or at political conferences, with the exception of Trần Dần and Tử Phác, no writer or artist was arrested. Most of them remained in their professional posts. Their works were even published in some official mouthpieces of the Party or government such as *Nhân Dân* or *Tổ Quốc*.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 152.

⁹¹ Trần Dần (2001), op. cit., pp. 141-148.

There are several reasons for this initial tolerance. Firstly, it was influenced by changes in political culture in China, the Soviet Union and some Eastern European countries. Secondly, as expressed by Georges Boudarel, the “fingers” of the Vietnamese authorities “had been burned by the very harsh methods of agrarian reform”.⁹² Thirdly, as Hirohide Kurihara argues, during this period the Party actually admitted mistakes in its literary policies.⁹³ Finally and more importantly, the authorities did not believe that the dissident movement posed a threat to the regime. In *Following Hồ Chí Minh, the Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel*, Bùi Tín argues that socialist realism, in the form of Chinese or Soviet films, was “far more familiar to Vietnamese youth than the writers of the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm group”.⁹⁴ In his memory, “in those days nobody could get hold of copies of Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm to see for themselves what the fuss was all about.”⁹⁵ Zachary Abuza agrees with this remark: “The appeal of these dissidents was somewhat lost on the broader public because nearly ninety percent of the population were illiterate or semiliterate peasants.”⁹⁶

However, when the criticism in the dissident magazines and journals became increasingly more political and directly challenged the Party’s leadership, and these views began to have a deep influence on many other writers and artists, the Party hard-liners decided to launch their huge campaign of counter-attacks. Several anthologies, pamphlets, and special issues of journals were published. An anti-Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair dominated the press, including editorials, commentaries from orthodox writers and letters from readers. Among the main tactics used were: to link the Nhân

⁹² Georges Boudarel (1990), op. cit., pp. 167-68.

⁹³ Hirohide Kurihara, “Changes in the Literary Policy of the Vietnamese Workers’ Party, 1956-1958”, in Takashi Shiraishi and Moto Furuta (eds.) (1992), *Indochina in the 1940s and 1950s*, Ithaca: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, pp. 165-196.

⁹⁴ Bùi Tín (1995), *Following Hồ Chí Minh, The Memoir of a North Vietnamese Colonel*, translated from the Vietnamese and adapted by Judy Stowe and Đỗ Văn, Bathurst: Crawford House Publishing, p. 35.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Zachary Abuza (2001), op. cit., p. 52.

Văn - Giai Phẩm group to Trotskyism, or to the anti-Communist plots of the Americans and the South Vietnamese government; to use slander, depicting the dissident intellectuals as people who were extremely hypocritical and debauched. As in Shawn McHale's summation:

A reader encountering these criticisms for the first time must have come away with the sense of the complete moral and intellectual bankruptcy of the Party's critics. Allegation piled on top of allegation. "The wicked actions of the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm group are clearly in accord with the plot of the Americans and [South Vietnam's President Ngô Đình] Diệm to destroy the north," A variety of articles claimed that the accused were Trotskyists coming into the open. One stated that Nguyễn Hữu Đang was from a landlord family; was egotistical and selfish; wanted to be an emperor or general; sold materials on the black market (in [the] early 1940s); that he had gambled at night on floating gambling dens before 1945. Another article accused Phan Khôi of denouncing the anti-imperialist forces to the secret police before 1945; furthermore, this account claimed, the Việt Minh security police (công an) had caught Phan Khôi red-handed, sometime after 1946, smoking opium in the Vietnamese Nationalist Party [Việt Nam Quốc Dân Đảng] offices! Thụy An was accused of being close to the families of the French general de Lattre de Tassigny and the colonial-era Chief of the Sureté Marty; of being a lover [nhân tình] of a member of the Vietnamese Nationalist Party; and, in general, of being part of a group within the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm group that used thugs and prostitutes to debauch others (see *Nhân Dân* April 13-23, 1958).⁹⁷

On January 6, 1958 the Vietnamese Communist Party's Politburo passed a resolution accusing "saboteurs on the ideological and cultural front":

By exploiting the weaknesses of the arts and letters front and in particular the confused nature of thinking of the majority of artists and writers, the saboteurs have contrived to continue their activities and to cause very serious damage. It is clear that the anti-Socialist and anti-Party elements have profited from our laxness to continue their attacks on us in the sphere of ideas under the guise of arts and letters. The activities of these saboteurs among the artists and writers constitute a

⁹⁷ Shawn McHale, "Vietnamese Marxism, Dissent, and the Politics of Postcolonial Memory: Trần Đức Thảo, 1946-1993", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 61, no. 1 (February 2002), p. 19.

most dangerous threat and must be dealt with urgently.⁹⁸

After that, two “courses” on ideological rectification were organized, the first in February, attracting one hundred and seventy-two participants, and the second in March, three hundred and four participants. In both courses, those who participated in the Nhân Văn and Giai Phẩm were forced to make public self-criticism or apologies for their mistakes. Four people refused to attend these courses: Phan Khôi, Trương Tửu, Thụy An, and Nguyễn Hữu Đang.⁹⁹ Writers and artists were divided into teams and sent either to factories or to the rural villages to “reinforce their ideological platform”. On June 4, 1958 Tố Hữu read a long report on the struggle against the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm clique which was soon published in book form.¹⁰⁰ On the same day, the Vietnamese Union of Literature and Art issued a resolution accusing the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm of being revisionist and counter-revolutionary.¹⁰¹ A day later, more than eight hundred members of the Vietnamese Union of Literature and Art passed another resolution expressing their support for the Union’s resolution, promising to do their best to study Marxism Leninism and the Party’s policies.¹⁰² In the following month, the professional associations announced their punishment for the members of the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm group. Hoàng Cầm and Hoàng Tích Linh were expelled from the Executive Committee of the Writers’ Association; Sĩ Ngọc and Nguyễn Sáng from the Executive Committee of the Visual Artists’ Association; Văn Cao and Nguyễn Văn Tý from the Executive Committee of the Musicians’ Association. Phan Khôi, Trương Tửu and Thụy An were expelled from the Writers’ Association; and Trần Duy from the Visual Artists’ Association. Others were expelled from their professional associations for a period of three years, including: Trần Dần and Lê Đạt (from the Writers’

⁹⁸ Quote in Zachary Abuza (2001), op. cit., p. 55.

⁹⁹ Hoàng Văn Chí (1983), op. cit., p. 36.

¹⁰⁰ Tố Hữu (1958), *Qua cuộc đấu tranh chống nhóm phá hoại Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm trên mặt trận văn nghệ*, Hanoi: Sự Thật.

¹⁰¹ Nhà xuất bản Sự Thật (1959), *Bọn Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm trước tòa án dư luận*, Hanoi: Sự Thật, pp. 337-39.

¹⁰² Ibid., pp. 335-36.

Association), Tử Phác and Đặng Đình Hưng (from the Musicians' Association).¹⁰³ Apart from these, Trương Tửu, Trần Đức Thảo, and Nguyễn Mạnh Tường were forced out of their universities and even out of the public eye.¹⁰⁴

A year and a half later, in January 1960, five people participating in the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm were put on trial in the Hanoi court: cultural activist Nguyễn Hữu Đang and novelist Thụy An (real name Lưu Thị Yến) were sentenced to fifteen years in prison, publisher Minh Đức to ten years, and two of their collaborators to six and five years.¹⁰⁵

This trial officially ended the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair. However, two important things should be mentioned. Firstly, the punishment suffered by the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm members was much longer and more severe than what had been announced in the North Vietnamese press, and what had been expected by the condemned writers and artists. Most of them were expelled from all forms of literary and artistic activities not only for three years but in fact ten times longer: thirty years. The membership of the Vietnamese Writers' Association of Trần Dần, Lê Đạt, Hoàng Cầm, Phùng Quán and Hoàng Tích Linh was not restored until February 1, 1988.¹⁰⁶ During these thirty years, they were not allowed to publish anything except a number of translations that they were ordered to write, and even then their names were not acknowledged. They were also expunged from all kinds of historical records except those relating to the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair. Secondly, after suppressing the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm group, the Vietnamese authorities vigorously promoted socialist realism as the only theory of literature and art, starting one of the darkest periods in modern Vietnamese history. This Maoist-style socialist realism was only challenged

¹⁰³ Ibid., pp. 310-11.

¹⁰⁴ See Nguyễn Mạnh Tường (1992), *Un excommunié: Hanoi, 1954-1991, Procès d'un intellectuel*, Paris: Quê Mẹ; Phạm Trọng Chánh, "Tiểu sử triết gia Trần Đức Thảo (1917-1993)", *Trăm Con* (Toronto), no. 12 (June 1993), p. 36; and Phạm Trọng Chánh, "Triết gia Trần Đức Thảo và vụ án Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm", *Trăm Con*, no. 13 (August 1993), pp. 17-20.

¹⁰⁵ Georges Boudarel and Nguyễn Văn Ký (2002), op. cit., p. 126.

¹⁰⁶ *Văn Nghệ*, no. 8 (February 20, 1988).

again in the *đổi mới* (renovation) movement which was launched in 1987 under the impact of the Russian *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Đổi Mới and the End of Socialist Realism

If the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair in the 1950s has been remembered as a tragic crisis for socialist realism, the *đổi mới* (renovation) movement, which occurred in the second half of the 1980s, will be remembered as a “happy ending” of this theory.

While the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair, attached closely with the Chinese Hundred Flowers Bloom campaign, was limited to the field of literature and art, and was basically a cultural phenomenon, the *đổi mới* movement emerged from the broader context of re-directing the Party’s fundamental policies on the economy, politics and culture, which have changed the nature of the socialist regime. While Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm appeared in a very closed-door society where the voices of dissent were rarely heard outside the literary circles, the *đổi mới* writers and artists have lived in a globalized era in which they can easily and quickly make contact with the international community, including the community of approximately three million overseas Vietnamese. However, both Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm and *đổi mới* movements were politically constructed: they were both products of, and responses to, certain conditions of national and international politics.

The *đổi mới* policy, which was officially adopted by the Vietnamese Communist Party at its Sixth National Congress in December 1986,¹ was on the one hand a response to the failure of the state-controlled economy, and, more particularly,

¹ On the “*đổi mới*” policy, more information can be found in Dean K. Forbes, Terence H. Hull, David G. Marr, and Brian Brogan (eds.) (1991), *Đổi Mới, Vietnam’s Renovation Policy and Performance*, Canberra: Department of Political and Social Change, ANU; Irene Norlund, Carolyn L. Gates and Vũ Cao Đàm (eds.) (1995), *Vietnam in a Changing World*, Richmond

to the collectivism in which most people refused to work in large, state-governed agricultural institutions;² and on the other hand, an echo of Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* programs in the former Soviet Union. While *glasnost* and *perestroika* began, first of all, with political and cultural reform, Vietnamese *đổi mới* favoured political stability over radical changes and favoured economic restructuring as its ultimate priority. While *glasnost* and *perestroika* resulted in the collapse of socialism, the Vietnamese *đổi mới* aimed at building a "market economy with a socialist direction" which "opened the way to new forms of ownership and management, including a resurgent private sector and market, decentralization of management, and expansion of economic ties with the non-socialist world."³ At the same time, it also maintained one-party rule.⁴ One year later, the Vietnamese Communist Party officially extended the *đổi mới* policy to the field of literature at a meeting between the Secretary General Nguyễn Văn Linh and about one hundred Vietnamese writers, artists and scholars in Hanoi, where Nguyễn Văn Linh publicly admitted that "the Party leadership regarding culture, art and literature was, as noted by many, undemocratic, authoritarian, and high-handed."⁵ Most important, he urged writers not to "bend their pens" and distort their writing, but instead to be courageous in attacking all "negative" manifestations in society, even from the high-ranking cadres. He rectified the former situation by announcing that writers were now "untied" (*cởi trói*) and freed from the previous censorships and restraints.⁶ This announcement from the top leader of the

(England): Curzon Press.

² Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, "Rural Society and State Relations", in Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet and Doug J. Porter (eds.) (1995), *Vietnam's Rural Transformation*, Boulder: Westview Press, pp. 65-96.

³ William S. Turley and Mark Selden (eds.) (1993), *Reinventing Vietnamese Socialism, Đổi Mới in Comparative Perspective*, Boulder: Westview Press, p. 1.

⁴ Eero Palmujoki (1997), *Vietnam and the World, Marxist-Leninist Doctrine and the Changes in International Relations, 1975-93*, London: Macmillan, p. 180.

⁵ Nguyễn Văn Linh, "Let Writers and Artists Actively Contribute to Renovation", *Vietnam Courier*, no. 1 (1988), p. 11.

⁶ This meeting was reported in *Văn Nghệ* magazine, 17 October 1987. The text of Nguyễn Văn Linh's speech was printed in *Tuổi Trẻ*, 17 October 1987, reprinted in Nguyễn Văn Linh (1988), *Đổi mới để tiến lên*, vol. 1, Hanoi: Sự Thật, pp. 160-168; and Nguyễn Duy Bắc (ed.) (2001), *Về lãnh đạo, quản lý văn học nghệ thuật trong công cuộc đổi mới*, Hanoi: Nxb Chính Trị Quốc

Party had an immediate liberating effect on literary production in Vietnam. It opened a movement of *đổi mới* literature which lasted from roughly 1987 until 1990.

However, it should be noted that the *đổi mới* literature was not only a product of the Vietnamese Communist Party's changed policy but also, more importantly a consequence of a long and complex struggle on the part of writers who wanted the truth to be told in high quality works of arts. This struggle had started with the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair in the 1950s, and was continued a few years after the 1975 victory of the North over the South by a group of writers and theorists who were of a generation entirely educated under the socialist regimes in North Vietnam, the Soviet Union or Eastern European countries.

It can be said that after the 1975 victory, with the exception of those who had been evacuated, those arrested, and those who adopted a firm stand against communism, most Vietnamese writers, in both North and South, began dreaming of works of greatness, along the lines of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or Henri Barbusse's *Fire*. In 1976, Viễn Phương, one of the writers of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, wrote zealously:

We must write, write about the battlefields in Saigon and Gia Định, about Củ Chi, a bulwark [of revolution]. We must write not for us but for those who are dead and those who are still living and also for the next generations. We must pay our debts to history. There are many topics and characters that have passed through my mind.⁷

With the same enthusiasm, another writer, Phan Tứ, wrote:

In my novels I used to take a relatively short portion of real life, from a few months to a year. Now I wish to write a work that would directly reflect the changes in a number of different characters, representatives of different social classes, who all originate from the South but whose activities have been constantly spreading, from the beginning of the August Revolution to the day our

Gia, pp. 79-87.

⁷ *Tạp chí Văn Học*, no. 5 (1976). Quoted in Viện Văn Học (1979), *Văn học Việt Nam chống Mỹ cứu nước*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, p. 98.

country was entirely liberated.⁸

Such zeal and hope can be seen even in the titles of collections of poetry or essays published after 30 April 1975: *Ngày vĩ đại* (The Great Day) (1975) and *Bay theo đường dân tộc đang bay* (Following the Flight of the People) (1977) by Chế Lan Viên; *Hồn tôi đôi cánh* (My Soul on Two Wings) (1976) by Xuân Diệu; *Chân dung người chiến thắng* (The Portrait of a Victor) (1977) by Phan Thị Thanh Nhàn; *Như đi trong mơ* (As Walking in a Dream) (1977) by Hoàng Trung Thông, and *Hạnh phúc từ đây* (Happiness Henceforth) (1978) by Giang Nam, and so forth.

As time passed, this tide of fervour veered towards complete extinction. Until 1986, when the *đổi mới* policy was adopted, very few writers in the former Saigon made their appearance in the communist-controlled magazines and journals. Even those who had worked clandestinely in Saigon for the communists before 1975 such as Vũ Hạnh and Sơn Nam wrote sporadically. Furthermore, those from the North, after a short period of enthusiasm and emulation, also showed signs of being stalled, running around in circles. In his article “Tâm sự sáng tác” (Confidence about Creative Writing), written in 1980, Nguyễn Văn Bổng wondered:

With an illustrious and victorious revolution, with two holy and sacred resistances, with a heroic people, a glorious Party, and an army radiant with its feats of arms, we thought we would have created great literary works wherever we touched our pens. Indeed, during the resistance, with so much hardship, with our blood even staining the pages we wrote, we were able to build a literature which our Party valued highly. Why don't we have any great work now that the resistance has been successful and all conditions are favourable to us?⁹

With introspection, he continued:

From the day our country was totally liberated and unified from North to South, that is, for more than four years now, I have published two diaries, written three or

⁸ Ibid. Hoài An's translation in Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, “Vietnamese Communist Literature”, translated from the Vietnamese by Hoài An, in Nguyễn Xuân Thu (ed.) (1994), *Vietnamese Studies in a Multicultural World*, Melbourne: Vietnamese Language and Culture Publications, pp. 125-26.

⁹ Nguyễn Văn Bổng (1982), *Bên lề những trang sách*, Hanoi: Tác Phẩm Mới, p. 158. Hoài An's translation in Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, “Vietnamese Communist Literature”, op. cit., p. 127.

four short stories and a number of other articles for newspapers. My friends have found most of my writings acceptable. There have been expressions of great liking as well as warm and severe criticism. It seems to me, however, that I haven't achieved much.¹⁰

Nguyễn Văn Bông is nevertheless one of the lucky people. Indeed, in the same period, Anh Đức published only a modest collection of short stories, *Miền sóng vỗ* (Region of Rolling Waves), in 1982; Phan Tứ only a thin volume of memoirs, *Trong mưa núi* (In the Mountain Rain), in 1985; and Nguyễn Quang Sáng turned to writing for children and for film, whilst Nguyễn Ngọc stopped writing for good. It is obvious that there was a big crisis in the socialist realist writers' innermost world, especially for those people who had been sent to the South to fight among the soldiers, who had spilled their own blood on the pages they wrote in order to build up what was called "the liberation literature of the South".

The crisis was above all a crisis of faith and trust which was recognised even by many conservative writers and critics.¹¹ With the South occupied and the country unified, the people of both regions could mix freely, and consequently the propaganda of the communist government about the paradise in the socialist regime of the North versus hellish poverty of the South was revealed to be false. One of these people was Dương Thu Hương, who later became the most provocative and most famous writer in Vietnam. Born in 1947, at the age of twenty Dương Thu Hương volunteered to spend ten years in the tunnels and air-raid shelters of central Vietnam, where much of the heaviest bombing took place, as a member, and later a leader, of an artistic troupe and youth brigade whose missions were to "sing louder than the bombs", boost soldiers' morale with theatrical performances, care for the wounded and bury the dead.¹² When

¹⁰ Nguyễn Văn Bông (1982), op. cit., p. 156. Hoài An's translation in Nguyễn Hưng Quốc, "Vietnamese Communist Literature", *ibid.*

¹¹ For example, poet Bằng Việt, in a speech at a conference of the Executive Committee of the Writers' Association in 1988, stated: "There have been symptoms of serious crisis of faith. People do not believe that our regime can be quickly renovated. People do not believe that we can change the economic situation." Quote in Nguyễn Trọng Nghĩa, "Tình đồng bộ và siêu tốc đổi mới trong văn nghệ", *Đoàn Kết* (Paris), no. 5 (1989), p. 28.

¹² Brian Eads, "Dương Thu Hương – She dares to live free", *Reader's Digest*, October 1998; re-

the war ended in 1975, as one of three lucky survivors of the group of forty, she hitched a ride to Saigon to see relatives who had moved to the South in 1954, after the Geneva Agreements, and who, in her imagination, had been living miserably under the American-controlled regime. However, reality was completely different from her expectation. She was struck by their wealth, and elegance and especially by their freedom. In an interview for ABC Radio, conducted by Peter Mares, she said:

My first impression was the sight of books being sold everywhere on the sidewalks. [...] I stared in amazement at those books, whose authors I had only heard about, like Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Balzac, Stendhal, Anatole France and so on. And there were so many books by American authors. That really stunned me. I was also amazed that there were lots of radios and cassette players on sale in Saigon. Because at that time in the north, people could only use a very rudimentary kind of radio. Those having radios that could pick up foreign broadcasts had to have a permit from the police.

That was when I started to realise something was wrong with a regime that forces people to listen to only one system of radio, which effectively blocks out all other sources of information, that confines knowledge to a dark corner.¹³

Duong Thu Huong's disillusionment was shared by many writers and intellectuals in Vietnam. This disillusionment became more serious as the years passed by, when their destitution did not seem to be abating. After the war, Vietnam became one of the poorest countries in the world; Vietnamese people were in danger of starvation several times; living conditions were even worse than before 1975.¹⁴ There are several possible explanations for these facts: the legacy of a long and devastating war, the new wars between Vietnam and Kampuchea (1978-1988), and then between Vietnam and China (1979); the United States of America's economic embargo on

produced at <http://www.insight.org/1998news/092.htm>.

¹³ Peter Mares, "Breaking the surface", *The Australian's Review of Books*, December 1997 and January 1998, p. 20. A similar statement can be found in Robert Templer (1998), *Shadows and Wind*, London: Little, Brown and Company, p. 185.

¹⁴ See, for example, Võ Nhân Trí (1990), *Vietnam's Economic Policy since 1975*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 106-7; David M. Finkelstein, "Vietnam: a Revolution in Crisis", *Asian Survey*, vol. 27, no. 9 (September 1987), pp. 973-990.

Vietnam, which not only deprived Vietnam of multilateral loans and assistance but also cut off her commercial ties with Western countries. However, more and more people had come to believe that it was the Vietnamese Communist Party that was responsible for the post-war economic failure in Vietnam.¹⁵ It should be noted that, almost immediately after 1975, following Stalin and Mao Zedong, Vietnamese leaders believed that Vietnam could be modernized via socialist industrialization and the collectivisation of agriculture.¹⁶ This belief was clearly an illusion. For the socialist industrialization plan, Vietnam was dreadfully short of capital, technology and technicians; for the agricultural collectivisation plan, the Vietnamese government was completely lacking in support from the farmers, who lost their cultivated lands and therefore their motivation for working.¹⁷ All of these resulted in food shortages and an overall stagnation of living conditions for millions of Vietnamese.¹⁸ This situation was depicted by Trần Vàng Sao, who joined the National Liberation Front in 1965, in a poem entitled “Hearsays”, which was written in 1982 but was not published until the launch of the *đổi mới* movement:

*this one croaked
named Nguyen Van He
eight years old
cassava poisoning
dead three days before his mother knew
rites performed by neighbours*

Tran Van Ha

¹⁵ David G. Marr and Christine P. White (eds.) (1988), *Postwar Vietnam: Dilemmas in Socialist Development*, Ithaca: Cornell University, p. 3.

¹⁶ Võ Nhân Trí (1990), op. cit., pp. 58-180; Christine Pelzer White, “Alternative Approaches to the Socialist Transformation of Agriculture in Postwar Vietnam”, in David G. Marr and Christine P. White (eds.) (1988), op. cit., pp. 133-146.

¹⁷ See Ngô Vĩnh Long, “Some Aspects of Cooperativization in the Mekong Delta”, in David G. Marr and Christine P. White (eds.) (1988), op. cit., pp. 163-173; Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, “Village-State Relations in Vietnam: the Effect of Everyday Politics on Decollectivization”, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54, no. 2 (May 1995), pp. 396-418.

¹⁸ Võ Nhân Trí (1990), op. cit., pp. 106-107.

*forty years old
four children
hoeing in the mountain
hand grenade blew up
died
wife and children could not get there in time for funeral*

*person lying here
a man without known
name age home village
died wearing a Puppet-Army shirt
a pair of brown woman's pants
lain face down five meters from railroad tracks
face beaten flat no eyes nose hands or feet*

*dead person here
twenty six years old
shot
a bullet through the head
first and last name: Pham Van Te
reason: committed a robbery then ran
did not stop when called*

*Nguyen Han
thirty nine years old
stabbed self in throat
with a broken bottle of orange soda
some said because of madness
did say before death
nowadays
there's not even shit to eat*

*Nguyen Thi Lun
thirty four years old
Le Van E thirteen years old
Le Thi Muon ten years old*

*Le Van Thuoc six years old
Le Thi Ly two years old
suicide by pills
in kitchen
nearby a few warm worm-eaten sweet potatoes
were found inside a rimless woven basket
note left behind said
too much hardship can't stand it
me and my kids must die*

*Tran Thi Lan
two and a half years old
sick with no medicine
died*

*Nguyen Van Lon
forty five years old
starved for too long then ate too much
died
no close relatives*

*Nguyen Van Thu
twenty six years old
died shirtless on a pile of garbage
in the middle of the market*

*Nguyen Huu Thuc
fifty years old
died at a banquet table
could not be rushed to hospital
more than a thousand people at funeral*

*Phan Ngoc The
died during cholera epidemic of 19..
lived to be forty two years old*

*buried here are four children
approximately six to nine years old
dengue fever
lain dead in market*

*Pham Huynh Thuong
died at fifty six years old
popped blood vessel
while reading a speech
near the end¹⁹*

Unquestionably, it was these living conditions which caused an explosion of scepticism and dissatisfaction among the population, particularly in artistic and literary circles. The most typical manifestation of this scepticism and dissatisfaction was the indifference of the artists and writers concerning the exhortations of the Party when the wars with the Khmer Rouge and with China broke out in 1978 and 1979. In literary circles, little attention was paid to the Party's recommendation to turn each poem, each fiction, and each essay into a bullet shooting at the enemy. Most of writers and poets acted as though nothing had happened at the borders.²⁰ No piece of poetry or prose connected to these wars attained fame. If the fighting against the French left a number of excellent poems from Hoàng Cầm (1922-), Quang Dũng (1921-1988), Hữu Loan (1916-), Hồng Nguyên (1924-1951), Nguyễn Đình Thi (1924-2003) and Tố Hữu (1920-2002), and if the war against the South and the Americans also left many remarkable poems and novels by Chế Lan Viên (1920-1989), Phạm Tiến Duật (1941-) Nguyễn Ngọc (1932-), and others, the last two wars against China and Cambodia, on the contrary, did not leave any work – either in prose or poetry – that had some resonance in the readers heart and soul.

¹⁹ Translated by Dinh Linh in *The Deluge, New Vietnamese Poetry*, unpublished.

²⁰ Nguyễn Ngọc, “Đề cương đề dẫn thảo luận ở hội nghị đảng viên bàn về sáng tác văn hội Hội Nhà Văn Việt Nam”, re-printed in *Trăm hoa vẫn nở trên quê hương*, published by Lê Trần (California) 1990, p. 130.

Not only indifferent to the Party's appeal to use literary works to support the fighting, writers, in a kind of uproar, were expressing opinions which stood more or less squarely against the Party's orthodox viewpoint. This opposition movement, started in 1978, was repressed in 1980 and 1981. It broke out again in 1987 when the Secretary General Nguyễn Văn Linh opened the floodgates of criticism.

The person who inaugurated the opposition movement was Nguyễn Minh Châu (1930-1989), a colonel in the North Vietnamese army, a loyal member of the Vietnamese Communist Party and a well-known writer. In his short article "Viết về chiến tranh" (Writing about War) published in *Văn Nghệ Quân Đội* (Army's Arts and Letters) in November 1978, Nguyễn Minh Châu stated that writers who had often written about war all wished to improve the quality of their creative writing. But as he confessed, while looking back at those works written on the wars against the French and the Americans, he and his friends were displeased with them, and their readers were not quite satisfied with them either. The main reason, in his opinion, was that in their works, the human characters merely played "the role of threads on which to string the various events": they tended to be "portrayed one-dimensionally – usually as too virtuous and yet lacking in truth". Going further, he found another reason which lay in the underground of the Vietnamese wars:

In both wars of resistance, we were always a weak party fighting against overwhelmingly powerful enemies, and that forced us to seek victory at any cost for the sake of national survival. That peculiarity perhaps compelled us to set aside and shelve heart-breaking truth, untruths, and such aspects of each person's character as not directly conducive to victory.

Finally, Nguyễn Minh Châu concludes:

In the deepest recesses of our minds as Vietnamese, reality in literature seems at times not the actual reality but the reality that everyone is hoping for, is dreaming of. Perhaps there are few peoples on earth as prone to dreams as we are. We writers quite empathize with our people, but does it stand to reason that we'll succeed in reassuring everybody with our portrayal of the dreamed reality?

All the above points to this: along the road to realism, we must at times declare

war on own beautiful, long-cherished concepts.²¹

Nguyễn Minh Châu's article was received quietly. It did not stir any exclamations of agreement or disagreement. However, one of the most respected theorists in Vietnam, Hoàng Ngọc Hiến (1930-), caught his ideas and developed them in an essay entitled "Về một đặc điểm của văn học nghệ thuật ở ta trong giai đoạn vừa qua" (On a characteristic of our literature and art in the period just passed) which was published in *Văn Nghệ* weekly in 1979.²² In agreement with Nguyễn Minh Châu, Hoàng Ngọc Hiến said that socialist realism in Vietnam in the recent past was obsessed too much by the concept of "sublimity" (cái cao cả), which resulted in several consequences: in aesthetics, what should exist encroached upon what did exist; in the artistic mode of description, rationality superseded feeling; in the structure of works, content took precedence over form; in the image of new human beings, reason replaced sentiment; in imagery, essence took over appearance. These consequences, in their turn, had a great impact on Vietnamese literature, which had become unrealistic because it represented only what should be instead of what is. Furthermore, under the stringent leadership and censorship of the Party, writers did not write what they saw, felt or thought, they wrote according to general formulas imposed on them by their superiors. Hoàng Ngọc Hiến concluded his essay by labelling the so-called "socialist realism" as "doctrinaire realism" (chủ nghĩa hiện thực phái đạo).

Unlike Nguyễn Minh Châu's article, Hoàng Ngọc Hiến's essay stirred up writers and artists throughout the entire nation, causing concern and anger in the Party, which, as a result, reacted strongly. Hoàng Ngọc Hiến was forced to suspend his teaching position at the School of Creative Writing for about four years, from 1979 to 1983.²³ The Party mobilized a considerable number of writers, including Trần Độ,²⁴ Hà

²¹ Nguyễn Minh Châu (1978), "Viết về chiến tranh", *Văn Nghệ Quân Đội* (Hanoi), November 1978, reprinted in Nguyễn Minh Châu (2002), *Trang giấy trước đèn*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, pp. 50-63, translated into English by Huỳnh Sanh Thông, published in *The Vietnam Review*, no. 3 (Autumn-Winter 1997), pp. 438-446.

²² Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, "Về một đặc điểm của văn học nghệ thuật ở ta trong giai đoạn vừa qua", *Văn Nghệ* magazine, no. 23 (June 9, 1979).

²³ See in Hoàng Ngọc Hiến's biography at the William Joiner Centre website:

Xuân Trường,²⁵ Kiều Vân,²⁶ Tô Hoài,²⁷ and others²⁸ to criticize Hoàng Ngọc Hiến's viewpoint throughout all forms of media. Furthermore, in June 1979, the Party organised a conference among those writers who were also Party members in order to consolidate the Marxist stand. Ironically, Nguyễn Ngọc, the then deputy general secretary of the Vietnamese Writers' Association and editor-in-chief of the *Văn Nghệ* magazine, who was responsible for that conference, shared the anxiety and doubt expressed by Nguyễn Minh Châu and Hoàng Ngọc Hiến. In the "Outline for Discussion" prepared for the conference, Nguyễn Ngọc admitted that

(a) the realistic values in the post-war Vietnamese literature were very limited because, in his words, "the fate of the whole nation, the whole people, is very obvious, but the fate of each person, of each member in the community, is very brief and simplistic. The patriotic inspiration is dominant but the social struggles are not very clear. The poetic idealism of the fighting is strongly represented but the prosaic complexity of life is weaker."

(b) the post-war literature was problematic. This problem can be seen in the literary quality of publication: "There are a lot of books but no works of literature"; in the relationship between authors and readers: it is "very indifferent"; in the readers' attitude: "Readers are lukewarm towards the books that they are reading"; and in the writers' attitude: they are lukewarm towards life, the nation and the socialist revolution. In Nguyễn Ngọc's observation, in the socialist reorganization of agriculture

http://www.joinercenter.umb.edu/Programs/Education%20Programs/Rockefeller%20Fellowship/Rockefeller%20Fellows%202000_2001%20Bios.htm

²⁴ Trần Độ (1982), *Văn Nghệ, Vũ Khí của Cách Mạng*, Hanoi: Sự Thật.

²⁵ "Sự nghiệp của Đảng sự nghiệp của văn nghệ", *Tạp chí Cộng Sản*, no. 3 (1980); "Một số vấn đề văn nghệ đang đặt ra", *Nghiên Cứu Nghệ Thuật* magazine, no. 36 (January 1981); and "Quan hệ văn nghệ và chính trị", *Nghiên Cứu Nghệ Thuật* magazine, no. 43 (February.1982).

²⁶ *Nghiên Cứu Nghệ Thuật* magazine, no. 30 (January 1980).

²⁷ *Văn Nghệ* magazine, no. 42 (October 20, 1979).

²⁸ See Nguyễn Mộng Giác, "Nguyễn Minh Châu và Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, những người cầm bút trung thực", in *Trăm hoa văn nở trên quê hương*, published by Lê Trần in California, 1990, pp. 80-95.

and industry, and in the battlefields between Vietnam and the Khmer Rouge and between Vietnam and China, “writers are almost completely absent, even those who had been traditionally very active and involved in the past wars.”

(c) Finally, Nguyễn Ngọc maintained that there was no such phenomenon as “reactionary” or “anti-Party” thought in Vietnamese literature as several people had wrongly believed. However, he still admitted that Vietnamese writers were obviously vacillating. “It is not uncommonly that writers don’t really believe in what they have written.”²⁹

Nguyễn Ngọc’s view was echoed by another famous writer, Anh Đức. In his report, read at the Third Congress of the Vietnamese Writers’ Association, and later printed in the daily *Nhân Dân*, Anh Đức made known the situation, after 1975, of many writers who, having spent almost their whole lives for communism, suddenly became confused, losing their own confidence and their trust in their comrades, denying their past revolutionary experience, which had no small influence on the steadfastness of their ideal, on their way of thinking and on their viewpoint.³⁰

As a result of this vacillation and disbelief, Vietnamese literature after 1975 was quite different from what it had been before 1975. The differences lay essentially in the image of characters and the main themes of the works.

Almost all central characters of the novels and poetry before 1975 were ideal characters. Sứ, Út Tịch, Cao Bá Tuyết, Nguyễn Văn Trỗi, Tnú, Trần Thị Lý in the works of Anh Đức, Nguyễn Thi, Bùi Hiển, Trần Đình Vân, Nguyễn Ngọc, and Tố Hữu, were extraordinary human beings who knew only victories, never defeats. Even when they died, their deaths were described as a victory of revolutionary heroism, which fostered more than ever the fighting spirit of the revolution. Those characters were rather monolithic and simple, very much like a straight line, having no doubt or

²⁹ Nguyễn Ngọc’s “Đề cương đề dẫn thảo luận ở hội nghị đảng viên bàn về sáng tác văn học Hội Nhà Văn Việt Nam”, published in *Trăm hoa vẫn nở trên quê hương*, op. cit., pp. 127-133.

³⁰ *Nhân Dân*, December 28, 1983.

perplexity, and knowing no internal struggle. Their ideals and faith were chosen once and for all. It seemed they had no personal lives, no sleepless nights of their own. Their lives were all tied up with various stages of the revolution.

Literary works after 1975 were different. In Nguyễn Minh Châu's *Lửa từ những ngôi nhà* (Fire from Those Houses), Lê Lựu's *Mở rừng* (Forest Opening), Nguyễn Trí Huân's *Năm 1975, họ đã sống như thế* (They Lived that Way in 1975), Nguyễn Trọng Oánh's *Đất trắng* (White Earth), Nam Hà's *Đất miền đông* (The Eastern Region Land), Chu Lai's *Nắng đồng bằng* (Sunlight on the Plain), and similarly in the poetry of Nguyễn Duy, Thanh Thảo and others, the ideal characters, which had been very typical with traditional socialist realism, were absent. Instead, we find what were known as positive characters ("nhân vật tích cực" in Vietnamese). They were in the process of struggling in order to improve themselves, to elevate themselves, but were always facing the danger of corruption and sometimes they were indeed corrupted.

With the replacement of ideal characters by positive ones, the voice of post-1975 literature differed from that of the previous period. Before, the dominant voice was epic and one-way eulogy. After, that same voice continued to exist, but there appeared already another voice which was relatively tragic. The authors began to talk about losses and sacrifices, cowardice and treason: in an act of heroism, there were moments of weakness and discouragement; battlefields were full of blood; and blood was flowing not only on the other side, the side of the enemies. It can be said that, in the pre-1975 literature, victory was something natural, a matter of fact; after 1975, victories had to be exchanged with the lives of many people across generations.

The tendency of change could be found also in works dealing with present topics which focused on the building of socialism. In *Hạt mùa sau* (Seeds for the Next Season) by Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Tú, *Đứng trước biển* (Standing before the Sea) and *Cù lao tràm* (The Eucalyptus Island) by Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn, *Giấy trắng* (White Paper) by Triệu Xuân, *Chân dung một quản đốc* (Portrait of a Manager) by Nguyễn Hữu Trường, among others, one could find a great number of characters who, the day

before, had been war heroes, and now, in time of peace, became incompetent cadres, immoral and greedy.

The above changes were, nevertheless, halfway changes only. Writers still tried to avoid depicting tragic realities in the war and the dead-end situation of socialist building during the post-war period. Critics and theorists still thought within the rigid frame of dogma and formulas: literature had to serve politics and was put under the leadership and control of politics. No one dared to question the policy of the Party.

A real change started only in October 1987, when the Communist Party chief, Nguyễn Văn Linh, in his meeting with a group of about one hundred writers and intellectuals in Hanoi, gave his official approval to critical writing. Nguyễn Văn Linh, after complaining that the literature written since the end of war had been poor, confessed that the Party was in part to blame. In his opinion, in the past, the Party had made several serious mistakes in its policies and its management. It had undervalued the role of literature and arts in society. It had fettered writers and artists with dogmatism and formalism. He then urged writers to tell the truth, even the ruthless truth.³¹

Two months after this memorable meeting and frank dialogue, in early December 1987, the Vietnamese Communist Party's Political Bureau proclaimed Resolution number 05, entitled "To renovate and upgrade standards of leadership and management in literary, artistic and cultural activities, and stimulate creative capacity, in order to lead literature, arts and culture to a new stage of development". This resolution states:

Freedom of creativity is the vital condition for producing genuine values in culture and arts, and for developing talents. All artistic works that do not violate the law, are not reactionary (anti-national, anti-socialist, anti-peace) and are not degenerate (propagating crimes, diffusing licentiousness, destroying human dignity), have the right to be freely circulated and placed under the assessment

³¹ See *Văn Nghệ* magazine, 17 October 1987; *Tuổi Trẻ*, 17 October 1987; Nguyễn Văn Linh (1988), op. cit., pp. 160-168; and Nguyễn Duy Bắc (ed.) (2001), op. cit., pp. 79-87.

and judgement of public opinion and criticism. The Party and the State encourage public discussion and debate in order to search for the truth. It is necessary to make a gleeful atmosphere for creative activities, which invokes much inspiration, and gives rise to the development of new genres and forms of expression.³²

It can be said that the *đổi mới* movement in Vietnamese literature was officially launched by Nguyễn Văn Linh's speech in October and legalized by the Political Bureau's Resolution no. 05 in December 1987. This movement can be seen in three aspects: creative, critical and theoretical writing.

In the realm of creative writing, the list of authors who have been widely regarded as innovative is quite long. Of them, the most famous are Nguyễn Minh Châu, Ma Văn Kháng, Lê Lựu, Dương Thu Hương, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Phạm Thị Hoài, Bảo Ninh and Phùng Gia Lộc in prose; and Nguyễn Duy, Thanh Thảo, Ý Nhi and Trần Vàng Sao in poetry.

These prose writers and poets were very diverse in style but they had at least one point in common: they all recognized antagonistic contradictions between members of the proletariat, and as a result of this they all recognized tragedy in socialism. In the Maoist view, which strongly influenced the Vietnamese communists, "there were two types of social contradictions: those between ourselves and the enemy and those among the people themselves." While the first contradiction was antagonistic, the second, in ordinary circumstances, was not. The reason for that, in Mao Zedong's explanation, is that in socialist society, "the system of exploitation of man by man has been abolished and the interests of the people are basically the same."³³ In North Vietnam, according to Trường Chinh, one of the Party's leaders, "all the classes of exploiters have been abolished", and "the imperialists and feudal landlords have been overthrown, the people of the various nationalities are bound

³² Full text of this resolution was published in *Nhân Dân*, December 5, 1987, and *Sài Gòn Giải Phóng* daily in Hồ Chí Minh City, December 6, 1987, reprinted in Nguyễn Duy Bắc (ed.) (2001), *Về lãnh đạo, quản lý văn học nghệ thuật trong công cuộc đổi mới*, Hanoi: Nxb Chính Trị Quốc Gia, pp. 12-26.

³³ *Selected Readings from the Works of Mao Zedong*, Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1967, p. 356-57.

together by mutual affection, have discarded racial prejudices and united ever more closely within the Vietnam Fatherland Front to fight the US imperialists and their flunkys and build a new life.”³⁴ In such a united society, everyone loved each other. In socialist realist fiction before the *đổi mới* movement, it is impossible to find any negative character who belonged to the working class or the so-called progressive forces. Although they could indeed make several mistakes in their thoughts or in their behaviours, nevertheless, (i) these mistakes, in the Vietnamese communists’ oft-quoted words, were only “phenomena”, and not the “nature” of the new socialist people; (ii) these mistakes did not lead to antagonistic contradictions among themselves; and (iii) in the end, thanks to the patient and effective education of the Party, they always overcame their shortcomings to become good citizens or cadres.

Several *đổi mới* writers recognized that this view was too simplistic and artificial. In front of Nguyễn Văn Linh in his historical meeting with writers and artists, Nguyễn Ngọc, then editor of *Văn Nghệ* magazine, “talked of a ‘lost generation’ of artists and writers who had been forced to ‘talk only about success, never failure; about achievements, never losses; about correct decisions, never mistaken ones.’”³⁵ In the same vein, in an interview published in 1988, Nguyễn Minh Châu stated:

As gentle and harmless writers, in our whole lives we have not harmed anyone nor committed any crimes; we have only praised. However, the greatest mistake of each of us was that we were afraid of evil and cruelty. And because we thought that we could do nothing, day-by-day we pretended that such evil and cruelty did not exist, that life was free from evil and cruelty, that human fate was free from grievances and injustice.³⁶

Nguyễn Văn Bông (1921-) was excited to hear that the depiction of the bad which had been prohibited for a very long time, was now permitted:

It is unknown when and by whom there has existed an order: Don’t write about

³⁴ Trường Chinh (1994), *Selected Writings*, Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, pp. 705-706.

³⁵ Robert Templer (1998), *op. cit.*, p. 179.

³⁶ *Văn Nghệ*, no. 50, December 3, 1988, reprinted in Nguyễn Minh Châu (2002), *op. cit.*, pp. 152-157.

the bad! Or if you write, just write to some extent, in this aspect but not that one, at this level and not that one, of this person but not others, etc. There have been various arguments which were given: good is nature, whereas bad is just a phenomenon; there should not be confusion between the good and the bad; when the class struggle is decisive, “don’t wash one’s dirty linen in public” and “don’t bring grist to somebody’s mill”.

As a result, the bad which had existed in the old societies and which appeared in the process of establishing the new society is not openly criticized. [...] Now, we are given the right to write about the bad, and we are encouraged and urged to do so. [...] This is new: literature recovers its responsibility and its influence. Literature is able to contribute its voice in the course of social democratisation.³⁷

As a result of this recognition, as Greg Lockhart observes, in 1987 and 1988 "detailed accounts of rural poverty and the maladministration of official 'bullies' (cường hào) suddenly became typical of the new wave reportage in the major journal of the National Writers Association, *Văn Nghệ*. Some of the journal's most cogent pieces were even republished in a popular anthology called *The Women Kneel* (Báo *Văn Nghệ*, 1988)."³⁸ Both reporters and creative writers dug deep into the most sickening and disgusting side of socialist society. They revealed a cruel tyrannical regime which trod on peasants³⁹, trampled on workers⁴⁰, crushed intellectuals and domineered writers and artists,⁴¹ those very members that should be considered the foundation on which socialism was to be built.⁴² A number of other writers such as Dương Thu Hương in her *Paradise of the Blind*, and Ninh Đức Định in his “Oh! What a Bitter Orange” published in *Văn Nghệ* magazine on February 18, 1989, turned

³⁷ Nguyễn Văn Bông, “Nghĩ về cái mới trong tiểu thuyết của ta hiện nay”, *Nhân Dân*, 22 May 1988.

³⁸ Greg Lockhart and Monique Lockhart (translated with an introduction) (1996), *The Light of the Capital, Three Modern Vietnamese Classics*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, pp. 3-4.

³⁹ For example, “Tiếng đất” by Hoàng Hữu Các in *Văn Nghệ*, June 11, 1988, and “Cái đêm hôm ấy đêm gì?” by Phùng Gia Lộc, *Văn Nghệ*, August 6, 1988.

⁴⁰ “Lời khai của bị can” by Trần Huy Quang, in *Văn Nghệ*, September 12, 1987.

⁴¹ “Sự nghiệt ngã của nghề nghiệp”, by Hà Văn Thủy in *Văn Nghệ*, August 20, 1988.

⁴² See Hoàng Ngọc Hiến (1990), *Văn học - Học văn*, Ho Chi Minh City: Trường Cao Đẳng Sư Phạm thành phố HCM and Trường Viết Văn Nguyễn Du, pp. 106-107.

towards the past and revealed some of the savage crimes the communists had committed during their campaign of land reform in the mid-1950s in North Vietnam, in Dan Duffy's words, "a shameful period that sounds horrid even in Hy V. Luong's sympathetic *Revolution in the Village Tradition and Transformation in North Vietnam, 1925-1988* (University of Hawaii Press, 1992)".⁴³

Under the pens of several *đổi mới* writers, the history of the Vietnamese Communist Party became a history of crimes and the socialist society became a wicked, vulgar, mean-spirited and lustful society. They abandoned socialist realism for critical realism. This led to two interesting phenomena: firstly, the restoration of Vũ Trọng Phụng (1911-1939), one of the best critical realist writers of the 1930-45 generation, whose works had been banned in the North for decades;⁴⁴ and secondly, the revival of social reportage as a literary genre. Previously, communist theorists had accepted only political reportage which portrayed the "real facts and real people" as an effective propaganda for the socialist ideals. In the *đổi mới* movement, social reportage which focused on the negative sides of society flourished in Vietnamese literary magazines. Most of the works which attracted readers' attention were examples of social reportage, especially those published in *Văn Nghệ* magazine in Hanoi.⁴⁵ However, these pieces of reportage, although brave and conscience-stirring, were meaningful only in forms of journalism and social studies. They were not great achievements in the sphere of literature. The greatest literary achievements were mainly in the genres of the novel and the short story.

Among those who, by their literary works, portrayed the antagonistic contradictions among the proletariat and their allies and the tragedy within socialist

⁴³ Dan Duffy (1993), "Paradise of the Blind", *The Nation*, April 12, 1993.

⁴⁴ Vũ Trọng Phụng's works which have recently been translated into English include: "Household Servants", in Greg Lockhart and Monique Lockhart (trans. with an introduction) (1996), *The Light of the Capital, Three Modern Vietnamese Classics*, Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, pp. 121-156; *Dumb Duck*, translated by Peter Zinoman and Nguyễn Nguyệt Cẩm (2002), Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

⁴⁵ See Greg Lockhart, "Introduction, First Person Narratives from the 1930s", in Greg Lockhart and Monique Lockhart (trans. with an introduction) (1996), *op. cit.*, pp. 1-49.

society, the most prominent are Dương Thu Hương, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp and, to a lesser degree, the poet Nguyễn Duy.

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp started to publish in 1985, but in the first two years, his works were not of great significance in the aesthetic sense. Only since the short story “The General Retires”, which was published in *Văn Nghệ* magazine on June 20, 1987, has Nguyễn Huy Thiệp “enjoyed a meteoric rise to prominence in the Vietnamese literary world”, receiving within two years at least ninety favourable critical articles in major journals alone.⁴⁶ Since then, he has become well known as a new talent, and furthermore, as the best writer of his generation, the pioneer of the attack on socialist realism and “doctrinaire-ism” (chủ nghĩa phái đạo), one who generates various controversial debates among critics in Vietnam and abroad. Even those who took a conservative stand in criticizing him had to agree that his pen was smart and distinguished. Introducing the book entitled *Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, tác phẩm và dư luận* (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Works and Criticism), the editor wrote:

In contemporary literary life, there has never been a phenomenon like Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. After having appeared in literary circles for only two or three years, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp quickly attracted the attention of the reading public... it is almost as if every new story of his has provoked discussion and debate throughout the country from north to south. There are those who sing his praises until they run out of words; there are those who disparage and denounce him; and there are those who call for him to be brought to court and imprisoned.⁴⁷

One of the most important themes in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s short stories was the alienation of people under the socialist regime. With a starkly simple and chilling style, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp pitilessly unveiled all the misery, degradation and ridicule of humankind and the collapse of morals in society. Most of his characters are vulgar and mean-spirited, or, in Greg Lockhart’s words, the “murky inklings of animal-human

⁴⁶ Greg Lockhart, “Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s Writing: Post-Confucian, Post-Modern?”, in Nguyễn Xuân Thu (ed.) (1994), *Vietnamese Studies in a Multicultural World*, Melbourne: Vietnamese Language and Culture Publications, p. 158.

⁴⁷ Quote from K.W.Taylor, “Locating and Translating Boundaries in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s Short Stories”, *The Vietnam Review*, no. 1 (Autumn – Winter 1996), p. 439.

affinities”.⁴⁸ Agreeing with Lockhart, Qui-Phiet Trần adds: “I suggest that by likening humans to animals Nguyễn means to show the bestiality of humans that socialist realism refused to recognize, as well as the slough of a post-war society unequipped to face the onslaught of capitalism in the wake of economic reforms.”⁴⁹

According to Peter Mares, in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s fictional world, “money is king”.⁵⁰ This can be clearly seen in the short story “Without a King”, where there is a conversation between two brothers:

Doai said: “I’ll marry My Trinh next year, Mr Daylight has promised me one stick of gold. You think one stick’s enough to buy a house?” Kham said: “In my hands, I can multiply it into several sticks.” Doai said: “To have business skill is the best, the other skills, like art, literature etc., are all useless.”⁵¹

It can also be seen in Thiệp’s better-known “The General Retires”, which was interpreted by Qui-Phiet Tran as follows:

What drives General Thuan, who is already retired, back to the front where he is killed in action is his disillusionment with the empty ideals he was pursuing in his entire military career as well as his dissatisfaction with the moral condition of his family and his people: his son is a cuckold; his daughter-in-law is a ruthless business woman who raises her German shepherds on aborted foetuses she brings home from her maternity clinic. At his nephew’s wedding the general is shocked by the guests’ behaviour: they are cheap and rude and have eyes only for money.⁵²

It seems that, in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s world, there was no brotherhood, no fraternal feelings. There was no love, no feelings between husband and wife; only trifling and mean calculations about money. In Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s stories, the

⁴⁸ Greg Lockhart (trans.) (1992), op. cit., p. 10.

⁴⁹ Qui-Phiet Tran, “The General Retires and Other Stories” (book review), *Studies in Short Stories*, vol. 32 (Winter 1995).

⁵⁰ Peter Mares, op. cit., p. 21.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Qui-Phiet Tran, *ibid.*

characters seem to be in perpetual bargaining for profit. Mai Ngũ in his article “Cái tâm và cái tài của người viết” (The Heart and Talent of a Writer), made the following observation:

The writing of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp reflected a reality of our present society, a society that has lost its stability and balance, a society that is suffering alienation with regard to spirituality and morals, a society that is upsetting all relationships concerning human life and human dignity. Dregs at the bottom are rising fast and dominate life on the surface, causing the water container to overflow and pollution is to be found everywhere.⁵³

The three short stories by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp which stirred up public opinion most dramatically are “Vàng lửa” (Fired Gold), “Kiếm sắc” (A Sharp Sword) and “Phẩm tiết” (Chastity), which, in Greg Lockhart’s words, “gave important Vietnamese historical figures unusual and unflattering fictional lives.”⁵⁴ The trademark of these stories, as well as of all of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s historical fiction, according to K.W. Taylor, is “the nature of heroism”,⁵⁵ and according to Peter Zinoman, “is the way his depictions of well-known figures violate official assessments.”⁵⁶

One of the major characters in “Fired Gold” is Nguyễn Du (1766-1820), who is widely considered by many Vietnamese scholars to be the greatest and best-loved poet of Vietnamese literature of all time. However, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp portrayed him as a man “whose face had been crumpled by sufferings... He was better than others because of his dignity. But what value did his dignity have when in real life he lived in a corner of his small house and was always hard pressed for money? His compassion was a kind

⁵³ Mai Ngũ, “Cái tâm và cái tài của người viết”, *Quân Đội Nhân Dân*, no. 9791 (August 27, 1988), reprinted in Phạm Xuân Nguyên (ed.) (2001), *Đi tìm Nguyễn Huy Thiệp*, Hanoi: Nxb Văn Hoá Thông Tin, pp. 418-428.

⁵⁴ Nguyễn Huy Thiệp (1992), op. cit., p. 3.

⁵⁵ K.W. Taylor, “Locating and translating boundaries in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s short stories”, *The Vietnam Review*, no. 1 (Autumn-Winter 1996), p. 443.

⁵⁶ Peter Zinoman, “Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s ‘Vàng Lửa’ and the Nature of Intellectual Dissent in Contemporary Vietnam”, *Viet Nam Generation Journal & Newsletter*, vol. 3, no. 4 (January 1992).

of small compassion which could save nobody.”⁵⁷ Furthermore, in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s depiction, Nguyễn Du was a cultural hybrid, possessing no distinguished identity:

[Vietnam] is like a virgin girl raped by Chinese civilization. The girl concurrently enjoys, despises and is humiliated by the rape... Nguyễn Du is the child of this same virgin girl and the blood which flows through his veins contains allusions to the brutal man who raped his mother.⁵⁸

In conventional accounts, king Gia Long, who reigned in the early nineteenth century, has been regarded as a tyrant who suppressed hundreds of peasant rebellions, and a traitor to his country by allying with the Siamese and Chinese and relying too heavily on French advisors who later invaded Vietnam. In Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s “Fired Gold”, through the character Phăng, Gia Long is praised as “a valuable raw material making history alive. It was the generosity of a politician, generosity which not only performs charity in an isolated particular organism, but also constitutes a propelling force for the community, without which the whole community would be moss-grown or disintegrated.”⁵⁹

However, as almost all critics agree, the most provocative character in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s historical fiction is Quang Trung, not Gia Long.⁶⁰ In the story “Chastity”, king Quang Trung, who has been widely regarded by official historiography as a peasant rebel leader and one of the greatest heroes in Vietnamese history, was depicted by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp as a brutal and sexually depraved despot who spoke cruelly and acted cruelly.

Obviously, it was not Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s intention to downgrade Nguyễn Du and Quang Trung in order to deify Gia Long. As K.W. Taylor points out, Nguyễn Huy

⁵⁷ Nguyễn Huy Thiệp (1999), *Như những ngọn gió*, Hanoi: Văn Học, pp. 334-35.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 335-36.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 336-37.

⁶⁰ See, for example, K.W. Taylor, “Locating and Translating Boundaries in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s Short Stories”, in *The Vietnam Review*, no. 1 (Autumn – Winter 1996), p. 445.

Thiệp has erased the boundaries between hero and anti-hero as asserted by official historiography, but he has not given up on heroism”.⁶¹ In his stories, Đặng Phú Lân and Ngô Thị Vinh Hoa, the two persons who are powerless before “the forces of history”, obtain some supernatural quality; for example, when Lân is beheaded, he is bloodless; when Vinh Hoa’s tomb is opened nearly two centuries after her death, her corpse radiates health as if she is still alive. “The message here is that true virtue and intelligence are not to be found in the real Vietnamese world, but only among supernatural beings.”⁶²

With regard to the real Vietnamese world, by erasing the boundaries between hero and anti-hero, it seems that Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s intention was probably twofold: to destroy idols and to promote a new morality. Quang Trung was an idol, and so was Nguyễn Du. All idols are fake. Gia Long said in “Fired Gold”: “Every glory is built on dishonour”. As for promoting a new morality, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp praised all political actions that brought great result to the people. In “Fired Gold” the character Phăng said:

Backward economic activities can only offer an austere life to the people. The problem is to stand up, to stretch out and become a powerful nation. To do this, we must have the guts to bear frictions in relations with the world community. Old-fashioned scholarship and political masturbation will never create clear and healthy relationships. The time will come when world politics resembles a bowl of mixed salad, where the concept of purity would be meaningless.⁶³

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s antagonists in Vietnam concentrated their arguments on the fact that he had offended some heroes of Vietnam. The advocates of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s viewpoint argued that history is different from literature: in relating history one has to be faithful and accurate, in literature one can invent or fabricate.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 446.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Nguyễn Huy Thiệp (1999), op. cit., p. 337.

In Vietnam, both his antagonists and supporters tried to avoid one crucial point: when he advocated the destruction of idols, all idols, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp obviously had no intention of sparing Hồ Chí Minh, whom for many decades the communists had made every conceivable effort to give the image of the supreme idol. Peter Zinoman, in his critical essay on “Fired Gold” found that Nguyễn Huy Thiệp made a lot of connections to encourage readers to see his “characters and their predicaments as metaphors for their contemporary equivalent”.⁶⁴ Furthermore, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp draws connections “between his creations and the contemporary political scene by using double-edged and anachronistic language”. Peter Zinoman gave some examples, one of which was:

The story’s concluding passage uses the two meanings encoded in a single word to expand a critique of the nineteenth century Vietnamese political regime into an indictment of the present one. In its original Vietnamese, the passage reads:

Triều Nguyễn của vua Gia Long lập ra là một triều đại tệ hại. Chỉ xin lưu ý bạn đọc đây là triều đại để lại nhiều lăng. (The Nguyen Dynasty set up by King Gia Long was a great depraved dynasty. Please pay attention dear reader, for this was the dynasty that left many mausoleums / royal tombs...)

In Vietnamese, the word “lăng” has two distinct meanings. It can denote a royal tomb such as the dozen odd royal tombs built by Nguyen monarchs which today dot the landscape surrounding Huế, the old royal capital. Or “lăng” can mean mausoleum, in the specific sense of the sombre architectural monuments which house the corpses of Lenin, Mao, and Hồ Chí Minh. While the preceding sentence signifies that the “lăng” being referred to is of the nineteenth century variety, the word’s modern connotation, and thus the sentence’s implicit attack on modern “depraved” lăng builders, cannot be avoided.⁶⁵

In poetry, the counterpart of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp is Nguyễn Duy. Born in 1946, Nguyễn Duy composed poems quite early, winning a national prize in poetry in 1973. Only after 1975, however, did his poetry thrive, and since 1980 it has been truly fiery

⁶⁴ Peter Zinoman, “Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s ‘Vàng Lửa’ and the Nature of Intellectual Dissent in Contemporary Vietnam”, *Vietnam Generation Journal & Newsletter*, vol. 3, no. 4 (January 1992).

⁶⁵ Ibid.

and eminent. According to a revelation by Nguyễn Quang Sáng in the epilogue of *Mẹ và em* (My Mother and You) in 1987, many of Nguyễn Duy's poems were banned from publication.⁶⁶ The poem "Looking from afar... at the fatherland", published in *Sông Hương* magazine no. 37, May 4, 1988, represented the summit of Nguyễn Duy's frustration and opposition. Mai Quốc Liên accused him of "insulting our fatherland without restraint and so violently that he came to describe our fight against the Americans in bitter and ironical terms."⁶⁷

In fact, Nguyễn Duy has never insulted his fatherland, he has only insulted the heroes and leaders that the Party had polished carefully and put on the altar:

*Fake idols were sizzling in fat and fried onions;
Burping, they smelled bad to our heart and liver.*⁶⁸

Nguyễn Duy has only insulted the boastful words concerning the eminence of socialism:

*After the war I am still involved,
our country is rich, why so many beggars?*

Nguyễn Duy has only insulted the schemes of using false arguments in demanding institutional and thinking renovation to dodge the most urgent and indispensable issue, namely, the renovation of the regime itself:

*Is it reasonable to chew charcoal and hay again?
I beg you Mr Institution, I beg you Mrs Thought
Do you twitter please, those bird songs eternally.*

Nguyễn Duy has only insulted that "illustrative" literature of, in Dương Thu Hương's words, those "colonial public servants"⁶⁹ who proliferated in Vietnam under the communist regime:

⁶⁶ Further information about Nguyễn Duy can be found in Nguyễn Bá Chung, "Coming Full Circle: a Conversation with Nguyễn Duy", *Manoa*, 14.1 (2002), pp. 100-104.

⁶⁷ Mai Quốc Liên, "Đôi điều bàn lại", *Nhân Dân*, September 11, 1989.

⁶⁸ This poem was translated into English by Hoài An in Nguyễn Xuân Thu (ed.) (1994), *ibid.*

⁶⁹ Dương Thu Hương, "Đôi điều suy nghĩ về nhân cách của người trí thức", *Đất Nước* magazine (West

*It has become rarer and rarer
To sacrifice one's life for a good cause
What am I?
To whom am I necessary?*

But the strongest sentences are the following:

*Is it genuine renovation or just pretending?
Can we really replace contaminated blood?*

The *đổi mới* movement was not only made up of fiction and poetry but also of debates, polemics, arguments, and critical and theoretical essays. It can be said that the *đổi mới* movement opened the floodgates of criticism. Never in the history of socialist realist literature since the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm affair in the mid-1950s have Vietnamese critical activities flourished as in the *đổi mới* period. Not only critics but also creative writers wrote critical articles and participated in literary debates. The crucial point of these critical activities, as Greg Lockhart argues, was “a perception that, in the mindless wartime propaganda of socialist realism, the quality of Vietnamese literature had seriously declined.”⁷⁰ This perception was first put forward by Secretary General Nguyễn Văn Linh in his meeting with writers and artists in Hanoi in October 1987, as mentioned above, when he wondered: “It seems to me that our achievements in literature and art since liberation day have not been great. Am I right?” In response, most Vietnamese writers said: “Yes, you were”.⁷¹ In July 1988, Lê Ngọc Trà summed up: “In the end, after many hesitations and whispers, it is the first time we have had enough courage to speak out and speak publicly a truth: our revolutionary literature is still poor.”⁷²

Vietnamese socialist realist literature was not only poor, it was also un-literary. According to Mai Quốc Liên, there were several writers who declared that socialist realist literature had been a “eulogising literature” (văn học tụng ca), “royal palace

Germany), no. 54 (1988).

⁷⁰ Nguyễn Huy Thiệp (1992), op. cit., p. 5.

⁷¹ This meeting was reported in *Văn Nghệ*, October 17, 1987.

⁷² *Văn Nghệ*, July 16, 1988.

literature” (văn học cung đình), “syrup literature” (văn học xi-rô), and even “literature of petty and stinking language” (văn học tiểu ngữ và xú ngữ).⁷³ Mai Ngũ, in his article “Về một thời kỳ đã qua” (On a past period), called socialist realist literature a literature of news agency, of propaganda (văn học thông tấn / văn học tuyên truyền).⁷⁴ The literary critic Lại Nguyên Ân called it the “literature of officialdom” (văn học quan phương).⁷⁵ Writer Dương Thu Hương in “Đôi điều suy nghĩ về nhân cách của người trí thức” (Some reflections on the intellectuals’ dignity), called it the literature of “mercenaries and fake intellectuals whose real nature was that of colonial public servants”.⁷⁶ Writer Nguyễn Minh Châu, in his well-known article “Hãy đọc lời ai điếu cho một giai đoạn văn nghệ minh họa” (Let us read a funeral oration for a period of illustrative literature and art), called it the literature of cowardice and humiliation.⁷⁷

Writers not only blamed socialist realist literature, which they themselves had built up for decades under the leadership and censorship of the Vietnamese Communist Party, but they also tried to seek the causes of this failure. One of the most frequent causes lay in the Party’s policies on literature. According to Dr Nguyễn Khắc Viện, a well-known scholar of Marxism and Vietnamese culture,

In the economy, centralization and bureaucracy has hurt the daily life of the people; in the culture, it has had an even worse effect. The people have been told how many kilos of rice to eat each month; the poets have been told how many poems to write each month. Everything is decided from above – how to write, how to think. It is forbidden for writers to create or to think for themselves. In this situation, human beings lose their nature and become like machines.⁷⁸

⁷³ Mai Quốc Liên, “Đôi điều bàn lại”, *Nhân Dân*, September 9 and 11, 1989.

⁷⁴ Mai Ngũ, “Về một thời kỳ đã qua”, *Văn Nghệ Quân Đội*, no. 7 (1988).

⁷⁵ *Văn Nghệ*, no. 9 (February 27, 1988) and *Sông Hương*, no. 31 (May and June 1988).

⁷⁶ Dương Thu Hương, “Đôi điều suy nghĩ về nhân cách của người trí thức”, *Đất Nước* magazine (West Germany), no. 54 (1988).

⁷⁷ Nguyễn Minh Châu, “Hãy đọc lời ai điếu cho một giai đoạn văn nghệ minh họa”, *Văn Nghệ*, nos. 49-50 (December 5, 1987), reprinted in Nguyễn Minh Châu (2002), *op. cit.*, pp. 127-139.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Nguyen Thu Lieu (1988), “Artistic Freedom in Vietnam”, *Vietnam Update* (Winter / Spring 1988), p. 12.

According to playwright Lư Quang Vũ, in the literary field in Vietnam “there was only one person who thought for everyone, one head for all heads”, and this arbitrariness destroyed all creations, and resulted in a dry situation for literature and the arts.⁷⁹ More bitterly, critic Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh, in front of Nguyễn Văn Linh, claimed that in Vietnam “leaders despised writers and artists deeply. Writers were regarded as young boys and girls who always needed to be put under control”.⁸⁰ This idea had been written by Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh himself one month earlier: “People often said that our literature was mature, and our writers and artists were soldiers and heroes, but they treated writers and artists like young boys and girls.”⁸¹ And this idea was publicly accepted by another writer, Mai Văn Tạo, who complained that “Never before have writers and artists been scorned as [they are] these days.”⁸² It should be noted that the same complaint had been made by scholar Đào Duy Anh, a member of the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm group, who, in the mid-1950s, bitterly stated: “in the resistance, [...] intellectuals were not respected. [...] today [...] intellectuals are still disdained”, and after another few pages, “in the political cadres’ attitude can be seen their scorn for intellectuals.”⁸³

Like the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm three decades earlier, the *đổi mới* writers and critics, in fighting for their intellectual and creative freedom, could not avoid one of the crucial issues: the relationship between politics and literature. In this regard, it seems that some *đổi mới* writers went further than their predecessors: they did not need to pretend to believe that the dependence of literature on politics was something "natural" or "indispensable". For Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh, one of the main reasons for the standstill of literature was the identification of literature and politics. Politics needed propaganda, it created an illustrative literature. Consequently, a literature which aimed

⁷⁹ *Văn Nghệ*, October 17, 1987.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ *Văn Nghệ*, August 29, 1987.

⁸² Quoted in Nguyễn Trọng Tín, *Văn Nghệ*, July 3, 1988.

⁸³ Đào Duy Anh, “Muốn phát triển học thuật”, *Giai Phẩm Mùa Thu*, vol. 3 (1956), pp. 35 and 38.

at "emotionalising" political contents was not able to be great."⁸⁴ Hồ Ngọc claimed that "literature and art were independent from politics",⁸⁵ and that "culture, art and politics must be separated, not only in the thoughts of the artists but in organization and in the minds of the leadership, especially those who lead arts organizations."⁸⁶ Nguyễn Văn Hạnh believed that "literature and politics were in mutual dependence."⁸⁷ Lã Nguyên asserted that "politics was a jurisdiction, an official and orthodox mechanism, whereas literature and art were non-official consciousness, a self-consciousness of people."⁸⁸ Lại Nguyên Ân reached the conclusion that the relationship between politics and literature is by nature that between those who hold power and lead the nation and those intellectuals who create art. This is also the relationship between two hegemonies in society. The political hegemony either rejects or supports literature and art; but even when it supports literature, it can only create literary coteries who try to express the orthodox ideology of the state and consequently produce nothing new. A great writer is one who expresses the consciousness of the people and escapes from the orthodox ideology of his/her age.⁸⁹

Finally, the *đổi mới* writers and critics directly challenged the theory of socialist realism. Lê Ngọc Trà, who had been trained in literary theory in the Soviet Union, argued that "literature was not a reflection of reality but it was first of all an activity of self-understanding of writers through which literary work could become a land that fostered human emotions, a garden where human souls flowered, as a distinct form of existence and development of human beings' intellectual lives".⁹⁰ Lê Ngọc Trà

⁸⁴ Quoted in Lê Xuân Vũ (1988), "Quan hệ giữa Văn Nghệ và chính trị không phải là quan hệ giữa hai 'bá quyền' trong xã hội", *Tạp chí Cộng Sản*, no. 11 (1988), p. 7. (Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh's original comments were published in *Văn Nghệ*, August 29, 1987.)

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Nguyen Thu Lieu (1988), *ibid.*

⁸⁷ Quoted in Lê Xuân Vũ (1988), *ibid.*

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Lê Ngọc Trà (1988), "Về vấn đề văn học phản ánh hiện thực", *Văn Nghệ*, July 16, 1988.

also criticized the concept of “generality” and “typicality” in socialist realism. He wrote:

For many years now, our literature has had the task of building up an image of HISTORY, THE COUNTRY OF OUR ANCESTORS, THE PEOPLE, THE MASSES. But we are too absorbed in the "epic" form, in the collective image of people, and pay too little attention to the task of describing the destinies of people and establishing original images of individual persons and their lives. THE PERSON is usually only described by a few simple outlines sketched into a general picture of the glorious mass of the people. One of the demands made of works about war and revolution has required that writers describe the destiny of people in the whirlwind of history. Therefore, literature only reflects the person through its descriptions of history, but it needs to reflect history through descriptions of the destiny of the person.⁹¹

At the height of criticism, Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, a Soviet Union-educated theorist, bluntly stated:

Socialist realism is a fake conception which has caused a long unhappiness for writers, artists, researchers and leaders. At the beginning it was put forward as a flag whose function was to gather [writers and artists]. However, it became dangerous because people turned it from a flag to an academic perception in order to make it more noble and all-purpose. This argument is useless.⁹²

Facing such a strong criticism and fearing that the Vietnamese communist government could be collapsing as it was in Eastern Europe; at the end of 1988 the Vietnamese Communist Party decided to restrain the *đổi mới* movement in literature and art. Nguyễn Ngọc, writer and editor-in-chief of *Văn Nghệ*, the weekly organ of the Vietnamese Writers' Association, was sacked, presumably for publishing stories by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp.⁹³ Vũ Kim Hạnh, journalist and editor general of *Tuổi Trẻ*

⁹¹ Quoted by Greg Lockhart, in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp (1992), op. cit., p 6.

⁹² *Văn Nghệ*, March 5, 1988.

⁹³ *Nhân Dân*, 14 September 1988; *Sài Gòn Giải Phóng*, 4 October 1988; *Văn Nghệ*, no. 40 (October 1, 1988), *Đoàn Kết* (Paris), no. 407 (November 1988); Murray Hiebert, "One Step Backward," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, May 4, 1989, p. 15.

newspaper in Hồ Chí Minh City, was dismissed for publishing an article revealing Hồ Chí Minh's love affair when he had been in China more than half a century earlier.⁹⁴ The *Sông Hương* review was suspended for a while because of its support of *đổi mới* writers. In Zachary Abuza's summation:

The Central Committee's Culture Commission shut down eight magazines and newspapers, while the editor in chief of *Sài Gòn Giải Phóng* was fired and the editor of *Vũng Tàu Côn Đảo* arrested for his paper's outspoken and critical reportage. Numerous other editors were also purged: Bùi Minh Quốc from *Dalat Lang Bian*, Tô Hoà of *Sài Gòn Giải Phóng*, Tô Nhuận Vỹ of the literary review *Cửa Việt*, and Trường Giang of *Giáo Dục và Thời Đại*, the latter for apologizing to its readers for not publishing a critical response by Phan Đình Diệu to an article by Le Quang Vinh published first in *Sài Gòn Giải Phóng* and then in *Nhân Dân*.⁹⁵

Later, the Party dissolved its Committee of Literature and Art when its head, Trần Độ, appeared to be supporting the people asking for a renovation in these areas. General Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh called Dương Thu Hương a "dissident whore" when she published her second novel, *Paradise of the Blind*;⁹⁶ and the government arrested and detained her for seven months when she sent the manuscript of her novel, *Novel Without a Name*, to an overseas publisher in 1991. Several writers and poets were arrested, such as writer Tiêu Dao Bảo Cự and poet Bùi Minh Quốc, who were placed under house arrest for two years from September 1997 to October 1999.⁹⁷

It is clear that Vietnam is still a one-party ruled state, and the government still holds a monopoly on publishing, forbidding independent presses and journals, and trying to keep a strict control on literary life. However, while the Vietnamese Communist Party and government can maintain their dominant position in politics,

⁹⁴ Robert Templer (1998), op. cit., p.164.

⁹⁵ Zachary Abuza (2001), *Renovating Politics in Contemporary Vietnam*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, p. 138.

⁹⁶ Zachary Abura, "Loyal opposition within the VCP", a paper delivered at the conference on Vietnam in 2001: Prospects for economic and progress.

⁹⁷ "The silencing of dissident", at <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/vietnam/Viet004-02.htm>.

they are not able to rescue the theory of socialist realism. Socialist realism is menaced and annihilated not by the dissident writers or critics but mainly by the free market system which has been adopted by the Vietnamese Communist Party since 1986. Under the free market system, there are three important facts which have emerged in the field of publication. Firstly, for the first time, at least after 1975 for the South, Vietnamese culture has become a mass phenomenon: Dương Thu Hương's novel, *Paradise of the Blind*, which was banned shortly after publication, sold out at least 60,000 copies⁹⁸; *Văn Nghệ* magazine under Nguyễn Ngọc's editorship had a circulation of more than 120,000 copies;⁹⁹ Luu Quang Vũ's plays were produced across the country and attracted hundreds of thousands of viewers.¹⁰⁰ Secondly, as a consequence of the above fact, the press and publication have become an economic resource in which many local governments and government organizations want to invest. This is the main reason for the unprecedented increase of the number of publishers and magazines. According to a report by the Ministry of the Interior, by 1988 only half of the four hundred newspapers in the country were licensed and nearly forty percent of the books published that year were published illegally.¹⁰¹ Thirdly, publishers, which no longer receive endless subsidies from the state as before, must do their best to survive and to make profits.¹⁰² In doing so, one of their priorities is to publish the best-selling

⁹⁸ Henry Kamm (1996), *Dragon Ascending: Vietnam and the Vietnamese*, New York: Arcade Publishing, p. 159.

⁹⁹ *Văn* magazine (California), nos. 78 and 79 (June and July 2003), p. 7.

¹⁰⁰ Nguyễn Ngọc Giao, “Đằng sau ‘vụ án’ báo Văn Nghệ”, *Đoàn Kết* (Paris), no. 407 (November 1988), p. 28.

¹⁰¹ Zachary Abuz (2001), op. cit., p. 140; and *Tạp chí Cộng Sản*, no. 12 (1988), p. 17.

¹⁰² Bùi Công Nguyên, “Vietnamese Publications in Vietnam and Overseas”, <http://talawas.org>, March, 1, 2004, gives more details: “There are currently 59 state owned publishers in Vietnam. Most of them are located in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. [...] All publishers are self funded, except those which aim to promote national profile, such as Nxb Chính Trị Quốc Gia (National Political Publishers) which publishes political materials, or books associated with law and regulations, Nxb Thế Giới (The World Publishing House) which mainly prints books and materials in foreign languages (English, French, Russian, Chinese, etc), Nxb Văn Hoá (Culture Publishers) which specializes in producing cultural materials and Nxb Giáo Dục (Education Publishers) which produces textbooks and educational books. [...] To survive, all publishers have to compete with the others to sell their products by improving books’ quality. To be successful, publishers have to understand the market demands or what readers want to read.”

books, and in order to obtain such possible best-selling books, they must co-operate with "private agents" (đầu nậu) who are skilful in business and have a large connection within the literary circles. As a result of these activities, no one, not even the extremely conservative, continues to create or publish literature under the spell of socialist realism; and no one spends their energy to defend socialist realism. Since the early 1990s, the field of literary theory has been very calm and quiet. There has been no debate for or against socialist realism, whereas writers and poets are eagerly experimenting with their writings on symbolism, surrealism, *nouveau roman*, concrete poetry, and even postmodernism; critics and theorists are eager to study many non-Marxist theories, from New Criticism to Phenomenology, Semiotics, Hermeneutics, Receptive Aesthetics, and also postmodernism.¹⁰³ In 2001, the Vietnamese translation of an anthology of essays written by the Russian formalists, *Art as Device: Theory of Russian Formalism*, was published;¹⁰⁴ followed by two anthologies on postmodernism: *Postmodern Short Stories in the World*¹⁰⁵ and *Postmodern Literature in the World, Some Theoretical Issues*.¹⁰⁶ No one criticizes them on behalf of socialist realism. In September 20, 2003, the Politburo issued Resolution no. 81-QĐ/T.U. to establish the Committee of Theorists and Critics, whose goals are to build up the Party's policy of literature and art. However, in the resolution and some articles and interviews about it, the term "socialist realism" was never mentioned.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ See, for example, Phương Lưu (1999), *Mười trường phái lý luận phê bình văn học phương Tây đương đại*, Hanoi: Nxb Giáo Dục. The ten "schools" of literature discussed in this book are: analytical psychology, semantics, New Criticism, pragmatism, phenomenology, existentialism, semiotics, hermeneutics, receptive aesthetics, and sociology of literature.

¹⁰⁴ *Nghệ thuật như là thủ pháp: Lý thuyết chủ nghĩa hình thức Nga*, edited by Đỗ Lai Thúy, Hanoi: Nxb Hội Nhà Văn.

¹⁰⁵ *Truyện ngắn hậu hiện đại thế giới*, edited by Đoàn Tử Huyền, Lại Nguyên Ân and Lê Huy Bắc, Hanoi: nxb Hội Nhà Văn and Trung Tâm Văn Hoá Ngôn Ngữ Đông Tây, 2003.

¹⁰⁶ *Chủ nghĩa hậu hiện đại thế giới, những vấn đề lý thuyết*, edited by Đoàn Tử Huyền et al., Hanoi: Nxb Hội Nhà Văn and Trung Tâm Văn Hoá Ngôn Ngữ Đông Tây, 2003. This anthology consists of several articles written or translated by some overseas Vietnamese writers; most of which were published in *Viet Journal* (Melbourne), no. 7 (2001). This issue can be read on <http://tienve.org>.

¹⁰⁷ Ngô Phan, "Thêm nhiều tiếng nói cho Đảng", *Thể Thao và Văn Hoá*, nos. 7, 8 and 9 (January 30, 2004), p. 46; reproduced at <http://www.talawas.org> (February 2, 2004).

Unquestionably, socialist realism, both as a theory and as a movement, has died in Vietnam. A very quiet death.

CONCLUSION

Theoretically, socialist realism was built upon two cornerstones: Engels' notion of tendentiousness and Lenin's principle of *partiinost*. While Engels believed that "the more the opinions of the author remain hidden, the better for the work of art",¹ Lenin advocated a tendentiousness in the most naked sense: writers had to speak out clearly and strongly their political attitudes.² According to George Steiner, Engels and Lenin "were saying different things" and "they were pointing towards contrasting ideals."³ These contradictory views have split Marxist critics into two different camps: the orthodox group and those whom several scholars aptly called the "para-Marxists". In the early 1930s, the founders of socialist realism, including Andrei Zhdanov and Maxim Gorky, rigorously proclaimed the orthodox position. Thus, although Engels' pronouncements were still repeatedly quoted, Lenin's policy and its inheritance, Zhdanovism and Stalinist aesthetics, actually dominated socialist realism, whose ideal was, precisely, in Steiner's words, "the reduction of literature to 'a small cog and a small screw' in the mechanism of the totalitarian state."⁴

Originating as a set of demands put forward by the Communist Party, socialist realism, as Herman Ermolaev comments, is a "collection of political prescriptions rather than a literary phenomenon."⁵ Nicholas Luker agrees: "For all the forests of paper and seas of ink which have been exhausted since 1932 in attempts to define, reflect and promote the doctrine, it remains essentially a Stalinist device to enlist

¹ Marx and Engels (1978), *On Literature and Art*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, p. 91.

² Lenin (1978), *On Literature and Art*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, pp. 24-9.

³ George Steiner (1967), *Language and Silence*, London: Faber and Faber, p. 337.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

⁵ Herman Ermolaev (1977), *Soviet Literary Theories 1917-1934: The Genesis of Socialist Realism*, New York: Octagon Books, p. 159.

literature and art in the service of the Communist state. [...] Political, not literary, considerations are paramount.”⁶

Such a theory was first introduced into Vietnam by some revolutionaries whose main interest was political, not literary. All of these people had their first contact with socialist realism through the French press, but later took the relevant Chinese materials as their major references, in which Maoism had become the dominant element in their view of literature. This change was made partly by the wars, from the Second World War and the French War, which prevented the importation of the French press and literature; and partly by political choice: from 1949 when Mao Zedong seized power in mainland China, China became the closest and most important ally of Vietnam, at least until 1975 when the American War ended. However, for Vietnamese people, China and Russia were not only allies but also masters from whom they had learnt everything in building a new regime. Consequently, the para-religiousness of socialist realism in Vietnam was so strong that almost everyone was pleased with several canonical texts imported from China and Russia. From the anti-French resistance onwards, as a Vietnamese researcher remarks in his work on the 1945-54 period, “the theorists of Vietnamese revolutionary art and literature were Hồ Chí Minh, Trường Chinh, and Tố Hữu. That was a development that could be seen as representative of the Vietnamese situation: the leaders of the Party were all theorists of art and literature.”⁷ But these leaders did not have enough time or even knowledge to discuss any problem of literature in depth. The canonical texts of Vietnamese socialist realism, therefore, consisted only of several simple pronouncements on literature by leaders in various forms, including letters, speeches and resolutions, all of which focus on one sole aspect: the relationship between literature and politics. In this context, it is easy to understand why socialist realism is labelled as a “doctrinaire realism” by several Vietnamese writers.

⁶ Nicholas Luker (ed.) (1988), *From Furmanov to Sholokhov, an Anthology of the Classics of Socialist Realism*, Ann Arbor: Ardis, p. 34.

⁷ Quoted in Kim N.B. Ninh (2002), op. cit., pp. 84-85.

This doctrinaire realism was accepted by writers and intellectuals mainly during wartime, when a choice of literary theory was synonymous with a choice of political stand: it resulted in unity, and therefore a manifestation of patriotism. This is one of the reasons why socialist realism in Vietnam was well developed only in two periods: the French War (1946-1954), and the American War (1964-1975). In these two periods, the most favorite and most successful topic was that of military struggles against foreign invaders. This is a traditional topic in the history of Vietnamese literature, and therefore writers and particularly poets easily felt at home with it. Most of them were happy to be soldiers in the battle of literature. In other words, it can be said that the dominant inspiration during the time of war was nationalist rather than socialist.

However, when the war ended, the consensus between government and writers was challenged. Writing under political guidance and control was no longer considered a manifestation of patriotism. In the innermost soul of each writer and poet, patriotic enthusiasm was replaced by creative ambition. Between politics and literature, most of the talented writers and poets chose the latter, and as a result, for better or for worse, became challengers of the political powers. It is not accidental that both dissident movements in Vietnamese literature happened in peacetime, one immediately after the war, and one a few years later. But because communism is an international network, the dissident movements, which protest against it, are also international. The voices of Vietnamese dissent from orthodox socialist realism can only be raised in accord with the cultural changes in the communist world. Behind the Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm in the mid-1950s were the de-Stalinization movements in the Soviet Union and some Eastern European countries and the campaign of A Hundred Flowers Bloom in China. Behind the *đổi mới* movement in the mid-1980s were the policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in the Soviet Union. It is almost impossible for writers and intellectuals alone to challenge socialist realism, which is sponsored by the authoritarian state.

Socialist realism was not only an international movement but also an institutionalized literature. In the Soviet Union, as Harold Swayze has remarked: “An outstanding feature of the Soviet literary scene is the vast bureaucratic apparatus that exercises surveillance over the whole range of activities involved in the production of

literary works.”⁸ In Vietnam, the Party and government also successfully established an organizational system for controlling writers. During the *đổi mới* movement, several Vietnamese writers labelled their literature a “cadres' literature” (nền văn học cán bộ), in which all writers were government officers, receiving salaries from the state to write, and in turn, they wrote to serve the government. This system, in Miklos Haraszti's words, creates a “new aesthetic culture in which censors and artists are entangled in a mutual embrace.”⁹

What writers have lost in such an institutionalized literature is surely their independence and their individual identity. But theoretically speaking, these losses might not be causes of the failure of socialist realism. History reveals a great number of writers who could write well under autocratic systems, which occupy the longest part of human history. Writing an introduction to *Perspectives on Literature and Society in Eastern and Western Europe*, Geoffrey A. Hosking argues that “it is usual for good literature to be published only with great difficulty, and with risks for author and publisher alike.”¹⁰ However, Vietnamese writers still believe that lack of freedom is one of the main reasons for the decline of the quality of literature. In his article “Let us read a funeral oration for a period of illustrative literature and art”, Nguyễn Minh Châu narrates an established writer whose name is not revealed who, being drunken, was laughing and crying at the same time, and said: “Thanks to the fear, I can survive and continue to write until now.” And Nguyễn Minh Châu asks: “We are cowardly, very cowardly, aren't we? Is there any Vietnamese writer who, in his/her heart, does not think he/she is cowardly? The fear makes us cowardly.” And he continues: this cowardice makes Vietnamese literature an illustrative literature, which has no

⁸ Harold Swayze (1962), *Political Control of Literature in the USSR, 1946-1959*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 224.

⁹ Miklos Haraszti (1987), *The Velvet Prison: Artists under State Socialism*, translated by Katalin and Stephen Landesman, New York: Basic Books, p. 5.

¹⁰ Geoffrey A. Hosking and George F. Cushing (eds.), *Perspectives on Literature and Society in Eastern and Western Europe*, New York: St. Martin's Press, p. 1.

significant value.¹¹

It is not surprising that Vietnamese literature has been known to the world only by the works written by the *đổi mới* authors such as Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Dương Thu Hương, Bảo Ninh, and Phạm Thị Hoài, among others. However, most of these writers are still obsessed with politics. Being suppressed by an authoritarian state for a long time, when they spoke out, the first thing was often a criticism of authoritarianism and bureaucratism. In other words, most of writers who were dissenting from socialist realism became critical realists who also use literature as a weapon to fight against “negative elements” in society. Both movements of literary dissidence in Vietnam were associated with certain similar facts: a revival of Vũ Trọng Phụng (1912-39), one of the masters of Vietnamese realism who lived and worked in the pre-revolutionary period; the priority of reportage as a genre; the dominance of critical inspiration towards bureaucratism and authoritarianism. Besides, after being suppressed for a long time, people had a passionate need to express themselves in terms of their innermost being. These phenomena made dissident movements more progressive in terms of politics than in aesthetics: people rejected socialist realism in order to return to critical realism and romanticism. Experiments in style and language often came into being quite late, when most social and political concerns and excitements had quietened down.

However, historians can be pleased with the story of socialist realism not only in Vietnam but also around the world: it has a happy ending. As Irina Gutkin notes in *The Cultural Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic 1890-1934*: “In the decade since the beginning of perestroika, characterized by the revolutionary changes that brought down the Soviet Union itself, socialist realism, as a worldview and a social contract regulating the relations between art and society, has died.”¹² In Vietnam, the one-party

¹¹ Nguyễn Minh Châu, “Hãy đọc lời ai điếu cho một giai đoạn văn nghệ minh họa”, *Văn Nghệ* magazine nos. 49-50 (December 5, 1987), reprinted in Nguyễn Minh Châu (2002), *Trang giấy trước đèn*, Hanoi: Nxb Khoa Học Xã Hội, pp. 127-139

¹² Irina Gutkin (1999), *The Cultural Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic 1890-1934*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, p. 151.

rule has not collapsed. But since the application of the free market system in the late 1980s, even in the field of culture, including the press and publication generally, socialist realism has quietly been abandoned, not only by writers, poets, critics and theorists, but also by publishers and, reluctantly, politicians. In this respect, one of the Marxist views is proved: “literature [...] ultimately is determined by the economic base.”¹³

¹³ In a letter to W. Borgius of January 25, 1894, Engels wrote: “Political, juridical, philosophical, religious, literary, artistic, etc., development is based on economic development.” A part of this letter was reprinted in Marx and Engel (1978), *On Literature and Art*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, p. 58.

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