

Humanitarianism in Vietnamese Literature from 18th Century to First Half of 19th Century

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Abstract: In the period from the 18th century to the first half of the 19th century, there were various movements in Vietnamese literature, including: moralism, patriotism, realism, and humanitarianism. Of those movements, the humanitarian one was really new and the most outstanding with a rich diversity of content, containing many values considered as the artistic pinnacle of the era, contributing significantly to the formation of characteristics and particular values of the literature in the period, and reflecting great progress in the history of national literature.

Keywords: Literature, medieval Vietnam, humanitarianism.

Subject classification: Literature

1. Introduction

Vietnamese literature in the period from the 18th century to the first half of the 19th century played an especially significant role in the history of national literature. It was when Vietnamese literature most developed, crystallising all literary achievements from eight medieval centuries. It is called the classical literature that opened a new development period in literary and cultural life. It can be seen as the biggest collection of artistic values in various aspects of Vietnamese medieval literature. During that period, all literary genres reached the pinnacle, creating particular genres with the greatest works and writers in the history of

Vietnamese literature, reflecting significant events of the country, and referring to in-depth issues of the human condition. An outstanding feature of Vietnamese literature in the period is the emergence and development of humanitarianism, which was shown variously in many literary works.

2. Humanitarianism in the literature from the 18th century to the first half of the 19th century

Humanitarianism and humanism were reflected in the early works of Vietnamese medieval literature. In the literary works in

prose and verse under the Ly and Tran dynasties, Zen Buddhist monks expressed the love and trust in secular life, showing the aspiration to get out of the rigid tenets in order to live in harmony with people and nature. In Nguyen Trai's works (the first half of the 15th century), humanitarianism was considered as a reason for being and a national goal as well... Such literary works, however, were not sufficient enough to form a prominent movement as those in the period from the 18th century to the first half of the 19th century. The content of the humanitarian literary movement during the above-mentioned period is mainly shown in some fundamental aspects as follows:

2.1. Condemning and denouncing the feudal regime, the ruling class, and the feudal wars from the humane standpoint of protecting the right to life as well as showing love and sympathy for miserable lives

The inspiration to criticise the feudal regime, the ruling class, and the feudal wars was found in the literary works in the previous centuries, especially in the poems written by Nguyen Binh Khiem and "Collection of Strange Tales" (Vietnamese: *Truyện kỳ mạn lục*) composed by Nguyen Du (Vietnamese: *Nguyễn Dữ*) in the 16th century. The criticism was, however, mainly based on the moral viewpoints. In essence, it was an aspect of the exaltation of orthodox ethics. Writers and poets censured the contemporary moral degradation, thereby dignifying indirectly the Confucian ethical principles and practices. Objectively, the exposure of the moral issues revealed in more detail ulcers of the regime and shortcomings of the contemporary codes

of ethics. This is shown clearly in some short stories written by Nguyen Du, the author of the "Collection of Strange Tale". He wrote them from the humane standpoint of someone who raised the social criticism to protect the rights and interests of common people. In his stories, many characters, particularly female ones, inspired readers with the good conscience and he was, consequently, considered by some researchers to be "the writer who made a start of the humanitarianism in Vietnamese medieval literature" [6, p.190].

In the period from the 18th to the first half of the 19th century, an important stride was made in the humanitarian literature in Vietnam. The humanitarian and democratic thinking was promoted in cultural and literary activities, due to various historical and socio-cultural conditions, such as: the crisis of ideology, morality, and social order; the rise of democratic folklore; the development of commodity; and, the establishment of urban areas. Via literary images, writers and poets directly or indirectly condemned the feudal regime, the ruling class, and the feudal wars from the humane standpoint, aiming at protecting the right to life. Dang Tran Con, who is the author of a Nom-script poem titled "Lament of the Soldier's Wife" (Vietnamese: *Chinh phụ ngâm khúc*; Chinese: 征婦吟曲), accused the feudal factions of launching civil wars, which deprived people of happiness and youth, breaking families, and pushing people into misery and separation. Meanwhile, with a poem titled "Lament of a Royal Concubine" (Vietnamese: *Cung oán ngâm khúc*; Chinese: 宮怨吟曲), Nguyen Gia

Thieu demonstrated that the very polygamous and monarchic system forced life of many women into unhappiness and loneliness. In an epic poem titled “New Cry from a Broken Heart” (Vietnamese: *Đoạn trường tân thanh*), also called “the Tale of Kieu” (Vietnamese: *Truyện Kiều*), Nguyen Du expressed the strong discontent with the wicked society, where the feudal authorities and those who had power were the very undignified and crafty daylight robbers that mercilessly trampled on life of innocent people.

In the previous period, *Nguyễn Dữ* just started to mention issues related to human beings and the humanitarianism was limited to a certain extent. In the period from the 18th to the first half of the 19th century, however, the human destiny became a burning topic mentioned critically in literary works. Human beings with a rich soul, profound and complicated thinking, and tragic conditions were disclosed and explored deeply in the works. Particularly, writers and poets paid special attention to life of the women, who were dropped at the bottom of the social heap and strongly despised by others, such as geisha girls, prostitutes, songstresses, concubines, poor women, and those who got pregnant out of wedlock. It is not incidental that women became the most typical and central image in Vietnamese literature during the period. In reality, they symbolised those who were pushed into the misery and the destitution in a male-dominated society with a wide range of social norms applied strictly to women specifically and common people generally. The feminism was an aspect of the

rehabilitation of local culture, in which women’s values were highly respected. In a literary work titled “New Collection of Legendary Tales” (Vietnamese: *Truyện kỳ tân phả*; Chinese: 傳奇新譜), Doan Thi Diem praised highly women’s talent, beauty, tenacity, and sacredness. Most of female characters in the work are goddesses, who have a hard but splendid life. Meanwhile, the female characters in Nguyen Du’s literary works are those who have an unfortunate destiny, despite their extraordinary talent, like Kieu in “the Tale of Kieu”. His poems written in Chinese characters in form of the epics [13, p.235]² (Vietnamese: *thi sử*; lit. historical poetry; i.e. the poems that narrate historical events and real facts in life) are seen as realistic pictures describing real life. For example, the poem titled “What You See” (Vietnamese: *Sở kiến hành*; Chinese: 所見行) relates the plight of a female beggar and her three children, who were about to die of starvation. The poem titled “Reading the Tale of Xiaoqing” (Vietnamese: *Độc Tiểu Thanh ký*; Chinese: 讀小青記) tells about the short life of a beautiful and talented girl who was forced to be a concubine and persecuted to death by the first wife of her husband. The poem titled “Song about a Musician in Thang Long Citadel” (Vietnamese: *Long thành cầm giả ca*; Chinese: 龍城琴者歌) tells about the ups and downs in life of a songstress named sensitively “Ms. Cầm” (i.e. Ms. Musician)... Human’s destiny and sufferings were reflected typically in women’s life. Dang Tran Con shared his thinking about the contemporary situation via the image of a young wife waiting in

vain for the return of her husband who was taking part in the army. At the same time, Nguyen Gia Thieu expressed the grievances and loyalty via the image of an imperial maid experiencing interminable years of loneliness and emptiness in her life. The feelings, loneliness, and sufferings that Thuy Kieu experienced in her life somewhat showed Nguyen Du's thinking, opinions, lonesome, and aspirations as well as the pains and sorrows in the way of the world.

As one of very few female poets among a large number of male ones, Ho Xuan Huong used a female voice to express her feelings and opinions about various issues of women. She was so prominent as a particular and unfathomable phenomenon in Vietnamese medieval literature. The information about her personal background and actual life as well as the authentic author of the orally transmitted Nom poems still remains unknown. In addition to the fact that she was one of very few female poets in Vietnamese medieval literature and wrote only about women, which was considered an unorthodox subject, she applied a poetry method that none of the contemporary Confucian scholars dared to use. Her poems show deep sympathies on the common sufferings and particular tragedies borne by women in the patriarchal society. Those tragedies are related to the faithless behaviour, the out-of-wedlock pregnancy, the husband sharing, the widowhood, and the plight of those who passed the marriageable age, etc. Obviously, they are spiritual and emotional tragedies. Ho Xuan Huong condemned and accused the cruel, violent, and theocratic forces of trampling on

women's rights to life and happiness. Her poems aims at toppling deities as well as those who were considered as idols or supreme figures in society, demonstrating that they were trivial and even more mediocre than ordinary people. This is a sphere, in which Ho Xuan Huong was by far more successful than any other poets and writers.

2.2. Affirming and highly appreciating human's talent, dignity, and legitimate aspirations, while highlighting the significance of secular life

In addition to discovering and reflecting life and the spiritual world, seeing human beings as the central character, the writers and poets of the humanitarian literary movement condemned and accused the feudal regime as well as the ruling class and the feudal wars of violating the right to life. They showed love and sympathy for miserable and unhappy people. Moreover, they affirmed and highly appreciated the human's talent, dignity, and legitimate aspirations, while highlighting the significance of secular life and asserting the existence of individual human being as an equal entity in society. This is a very profound aspect of the humanitarianism in Vietnamese literature during the period from the 18th century to the first half of the 19th century.

Besides fighting for women's interests and rights, Ho Xuan Huong was quite aware of the talent and dignity of women, who were always disadvantaged in this aspect. The spiritual beauty and traditional dignity of Vietnamese women are shown clearly in her poems, such as "Inviting to

chew betel” (Vietnamese: *Mời trầu*) and “Floating cake” (Vietnamese: *Bánh trôi nước*) etc. In “the Tale of Kieu” by Nguyen Du, Kieu was not only irresistibly beautiful, but also very talented. It was a really new subject in Vietnamese literature, since women’s talent was rarely mentioned in the literary works during the earlier periods. What they had referred to were just the housewifely or other domestic skills. They had never talked about women’s poetry and literary abilities. Particularly, the artistic talent had been seen as a taboo, as shown by a Vietnamese previous stereotype “Singers and musicians do not deserve to belong to any orthodox social strata” (Vietnamese: *Xướng ca vô loài*). The female characters, who were talented singers in “Collection of Strange Tales”, such as Ghost Nhi Khanh in “Tale of Bombax Ceiba” (Vietnamese: *Chuyện cây gạo*) and Dao Han Than in “Injustice of a Songstress Whose Family Name is Dao” (Vietnamese: *Nghiệp oan của Đào thị*) all had a grievous fate; after passing away, they became harmful ghosts. This illustrates the critical and discriminatory attitude of the Confucian writers, although they expressed some sympathy for the characters. In “New Collection of Legendary Tales” by Doan Thi Diem, the female saints were talented in the country governance and social assistance, which was highly appreciated by Confucian scholars. On the contrary, Nguyen Du wrote a lot about talented women and praised them for their special abilities, which were not accepted in society; instead, they were despised and maltreated. Kieu was not only talented in making poems, but also very excellent in

singing and playing music. For example, “She excelled in poetry, chanting, and painting/ Well versed in pitches and fine tones of music” (Vietnamese: *Cung thương lầu bạc ngũ âm/ Nghề riêng ăn đứt hồ cầm một chương*). According to the traditional conceptions and Confucian stereotypes, those who earned a living by singing and playing music often had a dissolute lifestyle; they did not care about the human dignity, resulting in breaking the constant obligations of morality. As demonstrated by Nguyen Du, however, Kieu had beautiful personality and knew how to maintain her dignity even in very intricate and gloomy situations, when she was experiencing a disgraceful period, working as a prostitute. Kieu always felt ashamed of being a prostitute, since it was considered to be “as a wife of men everywhere” (Vietnamese: *sống làm vợ khắp người ta*). She thirsted for a peaceful and pure life. During the period from the 18th to the first half of the 19th century, the writers of the humanitarian literary movement, of which Nguyen Du was one of the representatives, had very new conceptions about the “virginity” and human dignity, which were partly different from the Confucian ethical norms. The talents, particularly the outstanding artistic abilities, were seen as a criterion for the beauty and aesthetics. The beauty was, therefore, conceptualised to consist of not only the physical attractiveness shown by the beautiful appearances such as a pretty face or an excellent figure (as described in the “Tale of Kieu”, for example, “Her face is like a full moon and her eyebrows two long arcs” (Vietnamese: *Khuôn trăng đầy đặn, nét ngài nở nang*); or, “What a statue

of crystal and ivory! Her nude body is really a masterpiece of nature” (Vietnamese: *Rõ ràng trong ngọc trắng ngà/ Dày dày đúc sẵn một toà thiên nhiên*), but also the virtue, intelligence, and talents. The poems written by Nguyen Du, Cao Ba Quat, and Nguyen Cong Tru contributed to the struggle for protecting and praising the talents of women.

The struggle for legitimate aspirations is another outstanding subject of the humanitarian literary movement during the period. Firstly, it is the aspiration for emotional freedom, of which the top is free love. This is a sphere restrained strongly by the Confucian principles. The aspiration for free love was mentioned drastically in some scholarly stories written in Nom script, such as “Story of the Flower-letter” (Vietnamese: *Hoa tiên ký*; Chinese: 花箋記) by Nguyen Huy Tu, “The Tale of Kieu” by Nguyen Du, and “New Story about the Mirror and the Comb” (Vietnamese: *Sơ kính tân trang*) by Pham Thai. The image of Kieu, when she was going to see Kim Trong, is a symbol of the aspiration for legitimate free love, as described in the following lines of verse: “In a rush, she lowered the door’s silk curtain, and hastened her pace across the garden at night” (Vietnamese: *Cửa ngoài vội rủ rèm the/ Bãng bãng rẽ lối vườn khuya một mình*). Especially, love was shown boldly by young girls such as Dao Tien in “Story of the Flower-letter”, Thuy Kieu in “The Tale of Kieu”, and Quynh Thu in “New Story about the Mirror and the Comb”... In the literary work of Nguyen Du, the determined action in getting free love was also seen as a way to overcome the obsession by Ghost Dam Tien. It was considered as an anti-fate love. In “New

Story about the Mirror and the Comb”, the female character eventually committed suicide as the deliverance, because she had decided to pursue free love. This drastic activity raised a protest against the restraints in society and objected to the marriage without love. The authors of popular stories written in Nom script also praised audaciously the loves that escaped from the restrictions imposed by the feudal ethical behaviour. After falling in love, the characters in those stories often had to make every effort to be allowed to live with lovers. They struggled to overcome a number of obstacles relating to the social differentiation and suffered many hardships as well. They sometimes decided to commit suicide in the hope of being together. Thus, a common characteristic of both scholarly and popular stories written in Nom script during the period is that all the writers and poets sang the praise of free love. Particular stories about love in the literary work titled “Lanchi Seeing and Hearing Records” (Vietnamese: *Lan Trì kiến văn lục*; Chinese: 蘭池見聞) written by Vu Trinh are also in praise of love and humanity. Different from the affected Confucian conceptions, the writers and poets used their literary works to show that love could convert people to more humane behaviour. In the harshest and the most sorrowful moments of life, Thuy Kieu in “The Tale of Kieu” by Nguyen Du always thought about her first love with Kim Trong. It helped her to avoid committing suicide so as to keep alive and preserve her dignity. After falling into the trap set by “skintraders”, she felt regretted, as illustrated by the following lines of verse: “Had I known my

fate to be downed to this fall, I'd rather have given virginity to my faithful lover" (Vietnamese: *Biết thân đến bước lạc loài, Nhị đào thà bẻ cho người tình chung*). She wholeheartedly fell in love with three men in three different periods of her life. This was a new conception, which was very alike to what actually happened in life and marriage. Similarly, Kim Trong tried to have more humane and responsible behaviour, owing to his love with Thuy Kieu. In "Story of the Flower-letter" by Nguyen Huy Tu and other popular stories in Nom script such as "Favour-repaying Stupa" (Vietnamese: *Tháp Báo Ân*) and "Love in Thanh Tri" (Vietnamese: *Cuộc tình ở Thanh Tri*) written by Vu Trinh, the characters had a better soul, after falling in love. Love really resulted in the good. In the paragraphs describing love in "The Tale of Kieu", "Story of the Flower-letter", and "New Story about the Mirror and the Comb", the scenery was very magnificent due to the mood of love. When Kieu was seeing off Thuc Sinh, who was about to go back to his wife, for example, the scenery was also extraordinarily beautiful, although she had experienced painful periods with gross injustice.

In addition to the aspiration for free love, the literary works also demonstrated the aspiration for happy marriage and the desire for lovemaking... Those aspirations were described comprehensively in the laments such as "Lament of the Soldier's Wife" and "Lament of a Royal Concubine". The humanity was expressed profoundly in the fact that the poets were fully aware of the significance of the youth and the true happiness in life. They realised that the time of life when one was

young was quite short. In their opinions, happiness should not be sought in some faraway place such as Nirvana or paradise, but it could be found in the real world; and, everyone had the right to enjoy it without waiting in vain for being granted by some deity in the other world. For the literature from the 18th century to the first half of the 19th century, it is a very humane conception, contrary to the limitations on the religious duties and self-improvement, which were imposed by Confucianism and Buddhism and prevented people from pursuing happiness. It demonstrates that Vietnamese literature had changed to a new period, when literary works not only mentioned human beings, but also explored the lively and extremely complicated emotional world. They were addressed to actual issues in the secular life, emphasising the legitimate joys and benefits that one must have. It was really a great function of the literature to reflect deeply the emotional world.

The following lines of verse show the emotion of a warrior's wife, when she saw the charming scenery and felt the loneliness and the desire for love with her husband: "Flowers are blooming in the moonlight and the moon is reflected in the flowers/ As the moon comes inside the flowers, each of the flowers becomes more passionate/ The moon and the flowers are found everywhere/ Seeing the flowers in the moonlight/ I feel sorrowful in my heart" (Vietnamese: *Hoa giải nguyệt, nguyệt in một tâm/ Nguyệt lồng hoa, hoa thấm tình bông/ Nguyệt hoa, hoa nguyệt trùng trùng/ Trước hoa dưới nguyệt trong lòng xiết đau*). In the regretful mood, thus, she helplessly sent her message to her husband: "I am

begging for the fact that you will not be old with grey hair/ I also will keep my youth, waiting for your coming back” (Vietnamese: *Thiếp xin chàng chớ bạc đầu/ Thiếp thì giữ mãi lấy màu trẻ trung*).

The imperial royal concubine had a more tragic fate, as she always waited in vain for future. When her hair became grey, she wanted to rise up to escape from the dark situation, but it was completely desperate. “Wanting to stretch out hands to break the marriage tie/ Fretting, I want to bang on the door of the peppery chamber to get out” (Vietnamese: *Dang tay muốn dứt tơ hồng/ Bực mình muốn đập tiêu phòng mà ra*).

During the period, obviously, an important subject of Vietnamese literary works is to describe the aspiration to experience a secular life, encouraging people to enjoy real happiness of marriage and love, and expressing opposition to severe principles of asceticism imposed by Confucianism and local customs.

Humanitarianism infused a fresh spirit and the sense of rehabilitating traditional values. This is shown clearly in the poems written by Ho Xuan Huong, who is considered as “the Queen of Nom poetry”. Contrary to the “exotic” and patriarchal conceptions of Confucianism, for example, the essential content of her poems is to heighten the traditional cultural values that dignify women and fertility beliefs in the wet rice civilisation. In “the Tale of Kieu”, it is not accidental that Nguyen Du did not write his work in prose in Chinese language, although he relied on the plot of “The Tale of Jin, Yun and Qiao” (Chinese: 金雲翹傳) written by Qingxin Cairen (Chinese 青心才人). Instead, his work was made in “*lục bát*”, a traditional Vietnamese

verse form that consists of verses of six (*lục*) and eight (*bát*) words/syllables (Vietnamese is a monosyllabic language) and bears implicitly a lot of national cultural values.

In fact, humanitarianism brought a unique and new feature to Vietnamese literature in the period. Remarkably, it was the sense of democracy and openness, which motivated development of national literature, changed the conceptions of literary creation and genres, and promoted the creativity, making literary works closer to practice.

The aspirations for freedom, justice, and legitimacy are important subjects of Vietnamese literature during the period from the 18th century to the first half of the 19th century. Those aspirations were expressed boldly in “The Tale of Kieu” by Nguyen Du, particularly via two characters: Tu Hai and Thuy Kieu. Living in an intricate situation of slavery under control of the skintraders, Kieu was always thirsty for a free life with justice and righteousness. Pursuing the legitimate aspirations, she had to suffer great hardship and were duped many times. Luckily, she eventually met a hero of her life, who saved her from the miserable and shameful situation. It was Tu Hai, who always considered freedom most significant, as described in the following lines of verse: “I’ll scrape heaven and stir ocean at free will/ Having none above my head as superior!” (Vietnamese: *Chọc trời khuấy nước mặc dầu/ Dọc ngang nào biết trên đầu có ai*). The requital ceremony held by Tu Hai for Thuy Kieu is the actualisation of the aspirations, which seemed impossible to come true in life of hers and other miserable people in society as well.

3. Conclusion

Talking about humanitarianism in Vietnamese literature in the period, it is necessary to mention the participation of a large number of writers and poets with their prominent literary works. It is an undeniable fact. The humanitarian spirit is not only reflected outstandingly in the literary works of Nguyen Du, Dang Tran Con, Doan Thi Diem, Nguyen Gia Thieu, Ho Xuan Huong, and Vu Trinh, etc. but also expressed in various aspects of the works written by other authors such as Pham Thai, Pham Nguyen Du, Ninh Ton, Ngoc Han Princess, Cao Ba Quat, Nguyen Van Sieu, Phan Thuc Truc, Dang Huy Tru etc. as well as popular stories in Nom script.

All of them contributed significantly to the formation of a new appearance of national literature in the period, making Vietnamese literature reach its pinnacle of development.

Notes

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² “Epic” or “Historical poetry” (Vietnamese: *thi sử*) is a term used by Nguyen Tai in the foreword of the book titled “Collection of Truc Hien’s Poems” (Vietnamese: *Trúc Hiên thi tập*).

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