

Dynamic Features of Vietnamese Historical Novel in the Early Twentieth-first Century: Through the Trio of Novels by Nguyen Xuan Khanh

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Abstract

Historical novel is a particular genre that requires writers to handle the dialectical relationship between historical factors (facts) and elements of fiction (fiction). At the beginning of the twentieth-first century, Vietnamese historical novels became new and interesting, demonstrating the genre's dynamism in the new era. My article focuses on explaining this through the trio of highly successful historical novels written by Nguyen Xuan Khanh.

Keywords: genre's dynamism, Vietnamese historical novels in the early twentieth-first century, a trio of novels by Nguyen Xuan Khanh.

1. Introduction

Historical novel is a genre with a long tradition in the literature world. In Vietnamese literature, this genre emerged in the period of medieval literature and continuously developed at later stages of the modern literary period. At the beginning of the twentieth-first century, this genre became appealing and developed dynamically with prominent innovations in the art of tackling historical materials in which Nguyen Xuan Khanh found outstanding success. Through the trio of historical novels "Ho Quy Ly", "Mau Thuong Ngan", "Doi gao len chua" of Nguyen Xuan Khanh, we intend to explain the characteristics and dynamism of Vietnamese historical novel in the early twentieth-first century.

2. Typical characteristics of historical novel

Historical novel takes historical materials as its main content. It requires the writer to manage the dialectical relationship between historical factors (facts) and elements of fiction (fiction). This is a complicated matter and still derives much debate. To clarify this matter is to be aware of the historical novel genre's characteristics with its advantages and limitations. As Che Lan Vien once stated, a historical novel writer must "jump through two rings of fire, the ring of history and the ring of novel". "The ring of fire" means that the writer needs to rely on historical materials and ensure the accuracy of the language, outfits, customs, time, space, events... Such accuracy makes the genre's characteristics more persuasive. When it comes to history and returning to the distant ages, writers are not witnesses nor participants of direct creation. They only have a few fragments of a lost world: historical records, archaeological documents, folk tales..., among them, not every piece is feasible, credible and definite. Moreover, the job of recording history in Vietnam in the medieval period was not well-developed. There were only a few history books and in general, only the history of the dynasties was covered. Little attention was paid to the life of the people, so inevitably, many colorful aspects were overlooked. This caused writers constant difficulties regarding materials. Even so, since Vietnamese history is well-known by the community (more or

less) and considering the tradition of honoring the past, the act of diverging from history is not likely to be well-received.

With “the ring of novel”, the writer needs to create fictional factors to strengthen the appeal of the work, as the novel genre is “the only genre being formed and unfinished” (Bakhtin, 1992). A novel is capable of large storage and vividly conveys the feeling of life and concerns about the world that people become more aware of with age. This is also a free, open and flexible genre for expressing one’s creative personality.

Normally, when writing historical novels, writers can freely choose the characters, details, historical events, but they are also regulated by these factors. Besides talent, writing historical novels requires writers to be rich not only in terms of life experience but also in knowledge on history, geography, customs, culture, language... in order to describe the historical atmosphere with accuracy. Just one wrong detail can affect this accuracy. Though challenging, this genre is still captivating to writers: Writers are able to create a world from certain points in history using their life experience and knowledge. The writer will imagine and add fiction to complement the numerous “white spots” that historians leave open: personal life, personality and psychology of characters... This is a wide open horizon for writers. After all, the historical novelist is not the one who illustrates history books, nor the one to write vividly on what historians wrote dryly. They have to exploit lost potentials, what was left out in history, to express their new thoughts and dreams. Their novels must be a perspective, a possible voice that helps readers understand more about history, not only the old history, but also the present and the future.

Due to the aforementioned characteristics of the genre, in historical novels, writers mainly use historical materials as decorative borders and do not (and cannot) faithfully reflect a specific historical period. As the writer Alexandre Dumas once said, history is only a nail hammered into a wall so that writers can hang their own paintings. The writer will restore with historical philosophy. History is then built on a subjective model. Individuals become the center of narrative. Writers are interested in the possibilities of history that make history present in constant and open movements. At this time, literature will supplement and dig deeper into the back of the sediment of the past, hoping to find useful lessons for the present. History is considered the material

that reflects human issues at the most universal level. The writer both revives history and gives it a new vitality so that history can go with the present. It is the unique appeal of historical novels compared to book pages. Historical novels are essentially possible interpretations and personal reflections on historical issues. Past experiences constantly enrich the people’s spiritual life. Tonxtoi also affirmed: “The main purpose of art is to manifest, to tell the truth about the human soul, to speak of mysteries that can never be said in simple words” [5].

It should be seen that, in historical novels, the truth information and aesthetic information are always harmonious. The truth is the premise that gives value to a literary work, but it is not the whole value of a literary work. If you read a historical novel just to seek the truth of the past, you should read a history book or historical record instead, since they will provide more accurate information. But if the writer only focuses on fiction and ignores historical facts, his work is no longer a historical novel. Therefore, fiction in historical novels requires specific characteristics, and must be based on historical events and figures, and should have a certain threshold to avoid being in conflict with historical facts. Historical novels require writers to link historical truth with fiction. This inevitably leads readers to the notion: “reading literature is different from reading history” [2]. Literary writing works on history, even famous ones such as “Tam Quoc Dien Nghia” (La Quan Trung), “Thuy Hu” (Thi Nai Am)..., cannot substitute for history books. On the other hand, there is no denying the historical awareness of certain works. A “true” reader should not confuse a literary work written on a historical subject with historical works. This is a very unique relationship between literature and history. On the one hand, history provides material for literature, but on the other hand, thanks to literature, history has a new vitality and is widely promoted to the public. It also means literature has supplemented and contributed to clarifying history and connecting the next generations to history.

3. The dynamic feature of the historical novel genre through the novels of Nguyen Xuan Khanh

In the first 10 years of the twentieth-first century, writer Nguyen Xuan Khanh released three massive historical novels: “Ho Quy Ly” (2000, 834 pages), “Mau Thuong Ngan” (2006, 807 pages), “Doi gao len chua” (2011, 866 pages). His trio of novels

received prestigious awards from the Vietnam Writers' Association and Hanoi Writers' Association. This trio of novels also made him one of the leading historical novel writers of contemporary Vietnamese prose, and it also demonstrated the dynamism of the historical novel genre in the new era.

The novel "Ho Quy Ly" focuses on the Ho Dynasty, one of the shortest dynasties in history, but also a dynasty that enforced bold reform policies and caused important changes in Vietnamese society. In particular, historical figure Ho Quy Ly was a major reformer but his tragedy lies in his lack of popularity with the people. So far, debates about this character's historical role have yet to decrease. Here, reconstructing history is the first requirement that Nguyen Xuan Khanh must meet. The second requirement, more importantly, history is only a means for the writer to continue to interpret and talk about open issues of the times. On the one hand, "Ho Quy Ly" has the accuracy of historical documents: "This is a very serious novel, sticking to history, respecting the main events of history" [3], and if "Ho Quy Ly" is set next to the "Dai Viet su ki toan thu" history book, we can see that the author placed a lot of thoughts into the remaining historical details to incorporate them into the novel" [2]. On the other hand, the work has freedom in creative fiction, with fictional elements in terms of space and historical figures being the most notable. Particularly, the historical figure Ho Quy Ly was sharply depicted by the writer. Feudal history condemned Ho Quy Ly as "loạn thần tắc tử" (someone who is insubordinate and rebellious) [4] who caused the country to fall into the hands of the Ming invaders. Broader and deeper than that, Nguyen Xuan Khanh as a novelist had placed the character in many complex relationships of family and society, exploring the character in many ways: an important figure, both a scholar and a warrior, refined, profound; a father; a husband; an ambitious, assertive person, bold to the point of cruelty... In a way, he is "a villain", but looking at another way, he is an intellectual completely devoted to reforming the country. The Tran at the end of the dynasty lacked a great king to revive the country. What Ho Quy Ly did was to reform to be stronger, but he did not receive the necessary support and so his tragedy turned into the country's? Would the Tran still be on the throne, prevent the country's loss? Ho Quy Ly was convicted of the country's ruin but should a question be raised: Is the ruin due to the country being weak, stagnant and unable to gain strength for itself? In

addition, the work also raises many other issues that people today care about: Innovation to develop or stagnation to maintain societal stability? The role of intellectuals before the turning points of history?... Readers cannot pass a simple judgment about historical events over 600 years ago.

Clearly, "Ho Quy Ly" is Nguyen Xuan Khanh's interpretation and reflection on historical issues. Here, history is not a story that has been completed; on the contrary, history has always been a repository of experience in which the people of the present and the future can discover valuable lessons. History is provided with new vitality, becoming close and important to people today. This helps the work feel more open and rich in dialogue.

If in "Ho Quy Ly", the historical material has quite a large capacity, allowing the work to possess all the characteristics of a historical novel, "Thuong Ngan Mau" and "Doi gao len chua" have lighter materials. There is a mix of cultural, customary and religious materials. The writer consciously escaped the cramped shirt of historical novel to expand the genre's core towards culture and customs. At this time, the historical novel genre frame becomes flexible, containing in it the issues of culture, customs and beliefs. This is a test to refresh the genre, demonstrating the writer's creative way of handling historical materials. When culture and customs are present in history, the historical story is expanded, flexible and richer; the genre structure maximizes its function. At the same time, in the context of integration, multi-dimensional cultural exchanges today, the issue of cultural identity becomes really important for each country, the work of Nguyen Xuan Khanh still has more news. Continuing from the inter-textual perspective, Nguyen Xuan Khanh's novel describes in detail the culture, customs, religion, beliefs... and also creates favorable conditions for his work to possibly be adapted cinema and theater.

The novel "Mau Thuong Ngan" takes place during the East-West cultural conflict in the history of Vietnamese society in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. It was at this time that the French completed the pacification process in Vietnam, Buddhism was in decline, Christianity expanded. In this context, people express the spirit of patriotism and love of the same culture by returning to indigenous beliefs: Đạo Mẫu (the worship of mother goddesses). The historical element in this work is just a decorative border for the writer to

discover the culture and vitality of Vietnam. The pages writing about the custom, the traditional culture, the beauty of the old days captivate the readers, proving that when writing this work, Nguyen Xuan Khanh had a profound grasp of the history and culture. There were times when he became intoxicated with stories of festivals, customs, beliefs, going far from historical issues, but then when it came to certain key points, he still focused on history. The diverse female character full of life were impressively portrayed in order to explain the core of Vietnamese character. The cultural depth of Vietnamese soul originates from the agricultural culture of solidarity, love and respect for the community and for women. The core of Vietnamese culture attaches great importance to love, tolerance, harmony, and helping others: Mother's principles. It is also the national cultural identity in the goal of "building an advanced culture imbued with national identity" nowadays. It is this source of the culture that explains the persuasive and resilient vigor for the Vietnamese people to fight and win throughout several thousand years of history, not only during the French colonial period. Deep in culture, but the ultimate purpose of the work is still to interpret history: Vietnamese cultural vitality makes the history of the Vietnamese nation.

"Doi gao len chua" continues the culture-religious-historical narrative. Nguyen Xuan Khanh continues to explain Vietnamese vitality through culture. Culture is the essence of psychology and history. A sense of culture is also a sense of origin. Cultural identity will interpret the source of the past, present and future of a nation. The novel explains how Vietnamese village Buddhism spreads throughout the long history of the modern times with many events: the battles against French, peace in the North, battles against America, unification of the country... A religion with a high following, Buddhism entered Vietnam very early. Right from the second century, our country had had a Buddhist center called Luy Lau (Bac Ninh). Nowadays, Buddhism has become the largest religion in our country. But what is important is that Buddhism in Vietnam is not only a religion, but a story of "religion" that is really a story of "life". Buddhism is no longer primitive but quickly resonates in the spiritual life, nurtured alongside the indigenous beliefs of the Vietnamese people. Characteristics of Vietnamese culture which are flexible and open to fusion to create a fusion of faith. Under the temple roof, Vietnamese people worship Buddha, worship Deities and worship

Mother Goddesses. The So temple in the novel, like other temples, has become familiar to every Vietnamese village. Vietnamese people not only worship Buddha in the temple but also worship Buddha in their own thoughts - "Buddha nature". The Vietnamese still remind themselves: "The first is to cultivate at home, secondly to cultivate the market; the third is to cultivate a temple". It is a strange transformation between religion and life, which is also the spread of strong vitality of Vietnamese Buddhist culture. It is the righteous and compassionate quality that creates the persistent vitality of Vietnamese culture, which is the basis for the longevity of the people. This explains that despite a thousand years of domination, the Vietnamese still retain their cultural identity. Even though they borrow Chinese characters, deep in each of them is still the national soul and the national essence of Vietnam. Elaborating on Vietnamese village Buddhism, Nguyen Xuan Khanh continues to affirm the vitality of the Vietnamese culture and history.

4. Conclusion

The trio of Nguyen Xuan Khanh's novels show the dynamism of the genre of historical novel in the new context of the era. This proves that, under the pen of talented writers, genre is not a constant closed frame. On the contrary, the genre framework opens up the possibilities and capacities to experiment and create. Nguyen Xuan Khanh proved that the historical novel genre can expand its capacity to the maximum extent to accommodate not only historical issues but also matters of culture, customs, religion, beliefs... This helps the work avoid the dryness of the material, and become flexible. It is also a way for writers to bring history and culture closer to the public.

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