

Impacts of Market Economy and Global Digital Communication Network on Vietnamese Literature of Renovation Period

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Abstract: During Vietnam's middle ages, its Confucians composed works of prose and poetry primarily for entertainment, interaction or education of ethics, so they never considered the works to be commodities. It was early in the 20th century, when a new view on the occupation of writing as a means to earn living was started with Tan Da (1889-1939), that writers got aware that the works were also goods, which were governed by the market mechanism. During Vietnam's *đổi mới*, or renovation, the market economy and the global digital communication network, or the internet, have both exerted strong impacts on literature, thus ushering in a new development period of the country's literature.

Keywords: Market economy, Vietnamese literature, renovation.

1. Introduction

In the first decades of the 20th century, the lovelorn poet Tan Da left his homeland for the city. The urban life at that time had a strong influence on Tan Da's thought, emotions and attitude towards life, which made him change his conception of literature. At first, Tan Da just considered literature a form of pleasure – a game at the disposal of the player. Thus, while discussing the beauty of literary works, he usually attached more importance to the beauty of words, which are seen by him as the true beauty of literature, rather than the contents of social character

mentioned in the works. Stepping into a new life, Tan Da was the first writer who courageously changed his conception of the writing career. Considering writing a way to earn living just like many other jobs, he decided to pull himself into the career and of course, "to bring literature to the streets for sale" (*Hầu trời – Serving the [God of] Heaven*). In other words, Tan Da was the first man of letters who acknowledged that literature was also a real commodity. Following him, other Vietnamese writers got more aware of that role of literature.

Phan Quy Bich wrote that, having contemplated major construction works such as the Opera House, the Governor-General's

Palace and Long Bien Bridge, many Confucians decided to “break their brush pens to learn how to use [Western] iron pens”. That somewhat revealed the major impacts of the market economy on writers of that time.

2. Impacts of the market economy on Vietnamese writers

Nguyen Ngoc, a writer, has commented that the Vietnamese literature in the pre-renovation period was moving along the old inertia and that was the reason why there was a big gap between the readers’ demands and the contemporary literature. Consequently, instead of reading the books they would not welcome, readers searched among translated foreign literary works or domestic classics to find what they would read. What is called “the old inertia” in Nguyen Ngoc’s opinion is the fact that Vietnamese literature was still staying outside the rules of the market economy, and writers still deemed that its aim was propaganda, which was a significant political task during the wartime. After 1986, Vietnam entered the period of renovation. The market economy, with its dynamism and pragmatism, forced the Vietnamese to give up their pure “epic” view as in the wartime period. The old measurements of value and old standards, colliding with the complexity of the contemporary worldly life, could not remain intact. “During the wartime, both human and social relationships are compressed and shrank into only a single relation of life-and-death (...). The fire of war burned down the pettiness and complexity of the daily life. In peace, everything would be changed. Living in peace also means facing with the ordinariness of everyday life (...)”[6].

That exerts direct impacts not only on the life of the society in general, but also on the literary activities in particular, in all of its sections and aspects - from writing to publishing. When penmen witness the intense changes of values of life, they themselves have to find out the way of renewing their writing style to be in line with the times. Writer Nguyen Khai stated: “Previously, we were talking with one another about *đạo* (morality); now we talk about *đời* (life) when encountering one another” [3]. Living in the period of the market economy and international integration requires writers to make changes in the subjects of their depiction as well as in their discourses to meet readers’ demands, tastes and satisfy the latter’s mentality nowadays. At the same time, the situation brings the optimal conditions for writers to bring their writing capacities into full play: “Our era is that of openness which inspires us to write. I love today, which is (...) the blend of red and black, full of changes and unexpectedness that is really the fertile soil for writer to reclaim.” [3]. The enthronement of “the daily ordinariness” can be seen as a push that changes the thought of men of letters, helping them avoid the past “one-colour”, one-sided view of idealisation. That also laid the foundation of viewpoints of the “non-epic” features and “desacralisation” which are usually mentioned in literary criticism today, depicting the image of the hero in a more “human” and real way than in the past. There is also a new conception of war, deeming that it means death and destruction, an indeterminate place that makes people “wander unceasingly but cannot find their own shelters” (*Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* - *The Sorrow of War*, by Bao Ninh). One can hear an honest voice from the bottom of the heart

of Ngoan, a battalion commander, expressing what he thought about the relation between devotion and benefiting: “No matter what happens, it is time to come back to Han. How can one’s contributions to the country and the army be measured? For me, my time of military service has been long enough. Now the conditions of my housing and my family, with my wife and my kids, are just like that. Who cares for me if I myself do not?” (*Thượng Đức* – Nguyen Bao). “Normalising” the image of heroes, not canonising historical figures, is the way in which contemporary writers narrow the gap between literature and life, and connect the elite literature to popular literature. In his historical novel *Hội thề* (*Oath Taking Festival*), Nguyen Quang Than describes meticulously a rustic, even loutish, image of King Le Loi on his victory day: “Nguyen Han saw the King taking the chicken’s thigh to chew, drinking liquor with the soldiers, with his garment not fully buttoned, revealing the navel... That made Nguyen Han turn his face away and leave.” In *Phẩm tiết* (*Chastity*), Nguyen Huy Thiep does not let King Quang Trung appear in the context of glorious feats of arms. Instead, the hero “is seen through the eyes of Vinh Hoa..., or rather, through his relationship with the woman”. The “world renowned talented” hero, upon meeting Vinh Hoa, who “possesses a beauty as fresh as a springtime sprout”, “suddenly trembled, got dazzled and dropped the glass of precious liquor”. Then, after hearing the news of her father’s execution, the king, “with untied hair and bare feet, runs frantically, stumbling incessantly, to Vinh Hoa to tell her about Khai’s death.” When such literary works as *The Sorrow of War*, *Chastity* and *Oath Taking Festival* were published, there were many fierce debates in which critics

expressed a lot of contradictory opinions: some appreciated Thiep’s writing, some resolutely opposed. The reactions can be seen as vivid evidence of the profound impacts of the market economy on the Vietnamese literature. After all, the main issue lies in the taste of the recipient of literary works.

The aesthetics of reception is a concept of the literary theory used to refer to the relation among writers, works, and readers. Reception is also the key issue in the era of the market economy. Any product that is refused (not received/welcome) in the market will be removed. Fierce reactions have arrived from people who respect and worship the traditional values that they consider eternal and sacred. Meanwhile, other comments, which account for the majority, are of the view that “we are writing/reading literary works, not recording/reading history”. The progressive spirit and thoughts of renewal among contemporary writers and readers are also revealed via the opinions that the way the works mentioned above depict life is really truthful and dialectic, which demonstrates the spirit of democracy that can only be realised in the era of international integration. That is also what has made the difference in and renovated the Vietnamese literature. The reality of the Vietnamese contemporary literature shows that, if a writer can meet the requirements of life timely, his works will be favourably received by readers. A typical example is the case of Nguyen Nhat Anh, a writer of children’s literature. There have been many critiques decoding the attraction of his works. Though each person has his/her own interpretation of the phenomenon, a common view is shared on what makes his works appealing - the harmonious combination of the two elements: the functions of education and of entertainment. The wonderful

combination is a “master key” that helps Nguyen Nhat Anh’s works conquer readers, including not only the young, but also the elder readers. Reading his works, children (and also the adults) are educated of the love for their homeland and country, the respect for friendship, the attachment to their families and the neighbourhood. Especially, readers learn the lessons not via imposing precepts or commands embedded in literary works, but by being immersed in the depicted actions, words, and games imbued with the nativity and fun of the childhood. It is possible to say that, for children, Nguyen Nhat Anh’s works help them experience the life of a true childhood and, for adults, they bring back the nostalgic childhood memories.

3. Impacts of the market economy on literary language

If words are the basic material of a literary work, then, in that aspect, changes which are quite radical have been made in the contemporary literature under the impacts of the market economy.

If in the period of Vietnam’s revolutionary literature, the solemn words and praising voices were used, compatibly with the dominant tone of the epic times, such a language style has become so out of tune that it cannot reflect on a society, the values of which have been incessantly changing. In many contemporary works of prose, we could see the appearance of a new layer of language which is worldlier and with more imprints of the daily [conversational] language. The informal and flippant manners of speaking, as in the use of the pronouns of such characteristics - “*mày*”, “*tao*”, or even the use of impolite words and phrases such as

“You are such a dog!”², “A male whore!”, etc. appear densely in compositions of Nguyen Huy Thiep, Pham Thi Hoai, Ta Duy Anh, Ho Anh Thai, Thuan, Nguyen Binh Phuong, etc., are accepted by the readers just because the language style can describe honestly the complex daily life and multi-dimensional relationships of the contemporary humans. For example, in *Ngồi (Sitting)*, Nguyen Binh Phuong wrote: “Khan said: If you hate someone’s guts, he will be the worst [...]. Tan scratched his neck while denouncing Cau as an envious man who has a really bad-smelling personality”. Or in *Paris 11 tháng 8 (Paris 11st August)*, Thuan wrote: “Mai Lan said: You are juvenile. If he dares to touch you, I will sue him, and he will go broke. My³ replied: You do know I have already slept with him.” Reading the dialogues, we could see the chaos in the life of man in the contemporary times. It is not by accident that in a number of works by Nguyen Huy Thiep, Nguyen Thi Hoai, Nguyen Binh Phuong, Ta Duy Anh, Nguyen Dinh Tu, etc., there is a high frequency of vulgar sentences and swears by all types of person. By this manner of using language, writers not only wish to show that literature is a truthful copy of real life, but also express their worries about the poor and degrading human dignity, the situation that has been taking place among people of all ages and in every part of the living space.

Apart from using the vulgar and flippant manners of speaking, the contemporary literature is also full of what is called “erotic language” (lit. language of sex). The appearance of the language results from the intense impacts on literature by the modern life of the society. The beauty of the human body, especially that of the female body,

which, in the past, was something that must be covered or described metaphorically, is now always admired as the perfect beauty of the individual. In today's Vietnamese literature, the beauty has become a subject for the depiction by writers, who are not hesitant in describing in detail the erotic organs such as the breasts, bottom, thighs and tongue. In novels by Thuan, there are a large number of descriptions such as "sprouting young breasts", "hard rounded buttocks" or "long slender thighs". In *Ngồi (Sitting)*, a novel by Nguyen Binh Phuong, the woman's beauty is described in relation to fertility and arousal of desire: "Underneath that roof are women of slim waists, (...), untied hair, spreading short legs and pinky nipples resembling two burning pieces of charcoal situated straight on top of the light brown bare chest"; "Minh's body is still well-proportioned with round and hard breasts". Similarly, in *Mẫu thượng ngàn (Mother Goddess of Mountains)*, a historical novel by Nguyen Xuan Khanh, the beauty of female characters is described in relation to fertility with "fair skin, a plump body, chubby cheeks, and big breasts resembling the *ám giỗ tích*".⁴ In addition to the beauty of fertility, women's sexual instinct is also boldly depicted: "Xuan cannot hear anything else, her lips are stuck to his. She is now deeply immersed in desire" (*Xuân Từ Chiều – Y Ban*); "Tiep could feel her audacity and adeptness, feeling her own sweet and appealing body" (*Gia đình bé mọn – A little family*, Da Ngan). Undeniably, sexual desire is one of the most natural needs of humans, which is an aspect of the life instinct that was hardly openly depicted in the Vietnamese literature in the past. In other words, the spirit of democracy in the renovation period has helped Vietnamese writers speak frankly of what they actually think of.

4. Impacts of the market economy on "receivers" of literature

The market economy exerts an impact on not only writers, but also on "receivers", or the audience. Apart from the negative impacts caused by the degrading reading culture, the market economy has had also positive impacts, given the law of supply and demand, with the increasingly high demands of the readers. Writers are thus urged to find out the way to renew their writing style. The way books are published is also renovated. In Nguyen Huy Thiep's words, "Where does a writer's work start? In my opinion, he needs to start from researching readers' taste, or, specifically, analysing his people's mentality, over a long period. That is the basis for the writer to prepare the spiritual food for his times on" [10]. Today's readers require a literary work to be good not only as regards its contents, but also its form. For example, books need to be with nice and eye-catching layouts, and made from white and light paper and printed with sharp and easy-to-read fonts. In relation to the content, the reputable prizes of literature awarded by prestigious literature and arts associations have contributed significantly to orientating readers' tastes. Several years ago, when *Một mình một ngựa (Riding Alone on Horseback)*, a novel by Ma Van Khang, was published, it was initially very easy to find the book in various bookshops. However, immediately after it won an award by the Vietnam Writers' Association, the book became a best-seller and got reprinted unceasingly. Another example is Nguyen Xuan Khanh's *Đội gạo lên chùa (Bringing Rice to the Pagoda)*. An 800-plus page novel, it was sold in a record number of copies.

5. Impacts of the global digital communication network on the development of Vietnamese literature

In today's era of communication and the digital technology, one needs also to mention the role of the mass media and information technology that exert impacts on literature.

Being no exception to the common trend of the world, Vietnam has also witnessed the booming of information technology that made important contributions to changing the looks of many disciplines of science, including literature. The internet has not only contributed a no small part to the dissemination and updating of the latest information, which exert impacts on both the writers' and readers' ways of feeling and thinking, but also become one of the effective means of promoting literary works in a quickest manner. Many works by writers, especially young ones, have been posted on websites well before published. The life of freedom and democracy coupled with the mushrooming of fora, websites and millions of blogs, "each of which is the sublimation of individual feelings", not only shows us the diversity in the ways of feeling and thinking, but also helps writers with more opportunities to promote their products to the public, as well as facilitates the surveys by publishers before the latter decide on the number of copies to be printed. Many young authors have been known by the readers via the worldwide web even before their works are published. That is why readers rush to find and buy the books immediately after the launch. Young writers such as Anh Khang, Duong Thuy, Gao, Nguyen Ngoc Thach, etc. have shot to become "phenomena of the publishing industry" thanks to their thoroughly prepared PR strategy which

develops such attractive individual images of their own, just like those of movie characters who have been idolised via the communication channels on internet. Many books by Nguyen The Hoang Linh, Gao, Anh Khang, Phong Viet, Iris Cao, Hamlet Truong, etc. had appeared in the form of Facebook statuses or on their blogs before gathered and printed in books to publish. One also finds the way of thinking of the digital age in literary works – from the ways the stories are made, which are in the forms of emails, blogs, and the jargons that are connected to the high-level development of information technology, as expressed in the writings by Ho Anh Thai, Dang Than, Phong Diep, Nguyen Dinh Tu, Nguyen Xuan Thuy, Duong Thuy, Nguyen The Hoang Linh, Vu Phuong Nghi, Tran Thu Trang, Anh Khang, Gao, etc. The young Phong Diep wrote a novel titled *Blogger*, in which the internet is the main material of the work, from the form to the contents. Via the image of the heroine, who is truly a hot blogger, the author depicted the profound changes of the Vietnamese society, especially the youngsters, in the era of the internet culture. That has brought fresh and unfamiliar ways of expression to the literary work, and specific contours to the contemporary literary language, and created new aesthetic effects for the reception of the work.

6. Conclusion

The market economy in Vietnam's period of renovation and integration as from 1986, as well as the global network of digital communication – the internet, has been the catalysts that laid major impacts, both positive and negative, on the existence and development of the contemporary

Vietnamese literature. Being led by the market economy has given a number of writers the misled and coarse viewpoint on life, but it is the very market economy that is the material for them to acquire a more “mundane” (“earthly”) view, so that they can author works which are closer to and reflecting more truthfully the life. For its part, the digital worldwide network is one of the effective tools to promote the works and connects the literature and cultures of regions and nations. Such interactions have made no small contributions to the development of the Vietnamese literature in the new period, so as to both meet the demands of the market economy and truthfully reflect on the life of the contemporary Vietnamese person.

Notes

² Calling someone “a dog” is derogatory in Vietnamese.

³ The name of Lan’s daughter.

⁴ Traditional Vietnamese tea cosy, covering all around the big teapot, to keep it warm.

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