

APPLYING CULTURAL STUDIES IN STUDYING BIOGRAPHICAL GENRE

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Abstract. The acknowledgment of several nonfiction genres as literature along with the claim that genres are not pre-determined but socially constructed by cultural materialists suggests an approach to study biographical genres in general and Vietnamese *kí* in particular from the perspectives of cultural studies, a historical approach to genre. In this article, I will summarize the international and domestic scholarship of historical approach to biographical genre and *kí* to show the potential of applying this approach to conduct further research on this genre.

Keywords: *kí*, non-fiction, biographical genre, cultural studies, Vietnamese twentieth century literature.

1. Introduction

In several dictionaries of literary terms which were published before 2000, literary nonfiction is left out. For example, in the second edition of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (first published in 1990, 2nd edition in 2001 by Oxford University Press), Chris Baldick only mentions drama, fiction and poetry as three basic literary genres. But, in recently dictionaries, literary nonfiction genres have been listed along with the three mentioned genres. J. A. Cuddon, in *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (5th edition, 2013) acknowledges the emergence of “a number of non-fiction genres, notably autobiography, biography and the essay” as literary genres [1, p. 299]. The acknowledgment of several nonfiction genres as literature along with the claim that genres are not pre-determined but socially constructed by cultural materialists suggests an approach to study biographical genres in general and Vietnamese *kí* in particular from the perspectives of cultural studies, a historical approach to genre. In this article, I will summarize the international and domestic scholarship of historical approach to biographical genre and *kí* to show the potential of applying this approach to conduct further research on this genre.

2. Content

2.1 Cultural studies' approach to genre

In *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research and Pedagogy* (2010), Anis

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S. Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff distinguish two basic approaches to genres in literary tradition: the theoretical and the historical approaches. Typical for the theoretical approaches, Neo-classicalists develop a theoretical, trans-historical set of categories to “classify and describe relations between literary texts, rather than examine how genres emerge from and are codified by users within actual contexts of use” [2, p. 15]; Structuralists, Frederic Jameson for example, understand genres as “literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact” [2, p.18]. Romanticists and Post-Romanticists such as Freidrich Schlegel, Benedetto Croce, and Maurice Blanchot began to turn from theoretical to historical approaches with their “denial of genre”, contributing to a dynamic understanding of the relationship between texts and genres, which left a deep influence on post-structuralists such as Jacques Derrida. Doubting that genre is a property of a text, Derrida argues that there is no genreless text but texts do not belong to a specific genre because texts participate in a genre, or more accurately, several genres at once: “genres are the preconditions for textual performances” [3, p. 21]. Reader response approaches recognize genre not as a property of a texts but a performance of a reader, particularly the literary critic, upon a text.

Reacting against theoretical approaches which study literature in isolation from its social and political contexts, cultural studies approaches to genre were a product of the historical approach to culture. These approaches explore the dynamic relationship between genres, literary texts, and socio-culture, especially “the way genres organize, generate, normalize, and help reproduce literary as well as non-literary social actions in dynamic, ongoing, culturally defined and defining ways” [3; p. 23]. For example, David Quint, in *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton*, points out that epic belongs to the victor as the victors experience history as coherent, end-directed story told by their own power, while romance belongs to the losers as they are powerless to shape their own ends; or Peter Hitchcock argues that the urge to codify the novel as a genre in the 1960s and 70s was connected to a decolonizing process in which postcolonial states asserted their autonomy and difference [3, p. 25].

Both new historicism and cultural materialism, two branches of cultural studies, which build on Marxist and historicist approaches to literary texts, emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s: new historicism in the USA and cultural materialism in Britain. Although they agree that literature can be used to legitimize power, and focus on exploring “the role of historical context in interpreting literary texts and the role of literary rhetoric in interpreting history” [4, p. 4], while “new historicists believe that the challenge literature poses for power is ultimately contained, cultural materialists believe that literature has the potential to subvert it” [5, p. 43]. The limit of both these approaches is that they neglect to consider the author’s subjectivity and creativeness while considering all works no more than a struggle between dominant and subordinate readings. As a result, the artistic and linguistic aspects of the texts are mostly left out of concerns in these kinds of study.

2.2 International studies of biographical genre from the perspectives of cultural studies

While the tradition of theoretical approaches failed to explain the complexity of *kí* due to seeing it as a fixed genre, cultural studies has the potential to solve this problem

by looking at this genre as a historical phenomenon. Believing that “[g]enre formations and transformations are linked to social formations and transformations in ideological, powerful ways”, cultural studies has contributed to genre studies by examining “how genres reflect and participate in legitimizing social practices and recognizing how generic distinctions maintain hierarchies of power, value, and culture” [2, p. 25].

Cultural studies make use of memory studies in order to analyse the interactions between individual memory and collective memory hidden under texts, media, memorials, commemoration. It seems that auto/biographical nonfiction (life-writing) is one of the areas where cultural studies and memory studies meet the most often. There have been a number of scholarly works which examine the connection between this genre and collective memory at some level: examples include Linda Anderson’s *Autobiography* (2001), Victoria Stewart’s *Women’s Autobiography: War and Trauma* (2004), and David Huddart’s *Postcolonial Theory and Autobiography* (2008).

Over the past two decades, cultural memory studies, a research trend which studies the relationship between culture and memory, has become a key issue of interdisciplinary research which has attracted the attention of many international scholars. It has been applied in numerous areas: history, translation studies, film and media studies, journalism, museum and memorial studies, psychology, and politics. It also covers a wide range of topics: gender, postcoloniality, nationalism, immigration, war and the self, among others. One of the key concepts of cultural memory studies is “collective memory” (alternative terms include social memory, institutionalized memory, public memory and cultural memory) which was coined by Maurice Halbwachs in 1920s. Halbwachs argued that individuals remember not individually but as a member of a group. The group contexts are the social frameworks of individual memory: “It is in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” [6, p. 38]. The concept of “collective memory” opened a new path for memory studies, as reviewed in *The Collective Memory Reader*: memory now is understood as “at once situated in social frameworks (e.g. family and nation), enabled by changing media technologies (e.g. the Internet and digital recording), confronted with cultural institutions (e.g., memorials and museums), and shaped by political circumstances (e.g. wars and catastrophes)” [7, pp.3-62]. Therefore, studying memory helps us to understand “what categories people, groups, and cultures employ to make sense of their lives, their social, cultural, and political attachments, and the concomitant ideals that are validated – in short, the political, cultural and social theories that command normative attention [7, p. 34].

Since the 1970s, along with the memory boom (the publication of many auto/biographical writings in different countries, especially European ones) and the linguistic/cultural turn, which approaches culture as a symbolic, linguistic and representational system [8], cultural memory studies has witnessed a veritable boom in various countries and disciplines. Scholars of memory studies have been enriching its legacy with various approaches to memory: while Halbwachs (1920s) considers remembering as a collective action, Paul Ricoeur in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2003) reminds us not to forget the role of the individual in that process. Aleida Assmann divides collective memory into social memory, political memory and cultural memory, in which “canon” and “archive” are the sources creating cultural memory [9]. Inspired

by the theory of collective memory, Paul Fussell, in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) explored how the new experience of World War I and its literature reshaped the memories of an entire generation. Jay Winter in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (1995) has also shown how commemorations of World War I transform individual grief into public mourning.

From the angle of trauma studies, Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992), Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992) andr Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) all claim that forgetting is as important as remembering, and a fallible memory (mistakes or amnesiac elements) may speak to a historical truth: how the traumatic person is shocked and changed by the horror incident, or how collective amnesia reflects the way the group or nation dealt with the traumatic past. Kalii Tal, in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996) suggests to consider the specific effects of trauma on the process of narration. For example, in ‘Speaking the Language of Pain: Vietnam War Literature in the Context of a Literature of Trauma,’ she shows how traumatized soldiers use narratives to gather scattered personal myths in order to undermine the American myth of the war [10].

International scholars recently have paid more attention to the relationship between literary nonfiction genres, especially, autobiography, and historical situations from the angle of cultural studies. Connecting autobiography to the expression of gender, post-coloniality and wartime, scholars of autobiographical studies have shown the problematic nature of autobiography due to the essence of memory and language as well as the act of writing. Linda Anderson’s *Autobiography* (2001) provides an overview of different approaches to autobiography, ranging from the poststructuralist Paul de Man’s claims regarding the death of autobiography as well as more positive views of the genre from critics such as Jacques Derrida, Fredric Jameson and Alastair Fowler. While analysing postcolonial and female autobiographical texts, Anderson asks how autobiography “can be used or read as a mode of political questioning at the very juncture of contradictory and dissonant discourses” [11; p. 13]. Following Anderson, Victoria Stewart in *Women’s Autobiography: War and Trauma* (2004) explores selected female writers’ autobiographies around the time of World War I and World War II in terms of dealing with trauma and resisting a collective romanticized view of war as well as questioning the act of writing autobiography. David Huddart, in his book *Postcolonial Theory and Autobiography* (2008), challenges the conception that autobiography is narrowly ethnocentric and paternalist and suggests that autobiography constitutes a general philosophical resistance to universal concepts and theories. While these scholars emphasize the democratic nature of the genre, there are other scholars who dig deep into the relationship between autobiography and the politics of memory, an approach to genre which was inspired by such critical works as Maurice Halbwachs’s *The Collective Memory* (first published in 1939, translated into English in 1980), Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on The Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) as well as Michel Foucault’s ideas on truth as rhetorically constructed and the relationship between literature and politics, counter-memory and popular memory.

The recent international conference on *The Cultural Politics of Memory* at Cardiff University (14 to 16 May 2014) is an example of how cultural memory studies is still at the heart of research concerns gathers scholars from various disciplines. Among literary texts, auto/biographical nonfiction has been credited as one of the most popular sources, due to its unique generic trait: individual, nonfictional reflection of the past, which is based on a witness narrator with sincerity and authentic experience. What a study of life-writing texts seeks, as Saunders points out, is not historical fact but modes of writing, not actual memories but memories as representations, and representations as memories. More specifically, such approaches search for “interpretations of the ways in which memory was produced, constructed, written, and circulated” [12, pp. 321-332].

2.3 Vietnamese scholarship on studying *kí* from the perspectives of cultural studies

Kí, since 1945 up to present, has been in a serious relationship with the Vietnam history. The above insights into memory studies will have a lot to do with exploring the politics of this genre, in other words, they help to make sense the way *kí* has been utilized as collective remembrance as well as how it has resisted against that institutionalization as individual approaches to history. To investigate the cultural politics of memory in *kí* means to explore how institutions and writers transformed the genre to either conform, establish or resist institutionalized memory. Since 1945, the theory and performance of *kí* were influenced by socialist realism, a theory which put much importance on “truthfulness” and “sincerity”.

Kí is a special genre in Vietnamese literature which embraces many subgenres of nonfiction which are classified in Western literature under such headings as diary, memoir, travelogue, biography, autobiography, and reportage. It also shares many similarities to Chinese *baogao wenxue* (reportage) and Soviet *oçerk* (sketch/reportage). If so, why it is impossible to describe *kí* simply as literary nonfiction? First, *kí* does not contain all subgenres of literary nonfiction (for example, literary essays, satirical essays, letters, food writing and other hybridized essays). Secondly, I wish to retain the word *kí* because it has a particular history in Vietnam. That is the reason why I prefer to reserve the name *kí* in this research.

In this article, I use the term *kí* to refer to any literary nonfiction text that describes a factual event, person, social phenomenon or historical period, using literary styles and technique and written in the form of prose. However, in Vietnamese literary history, there have been many different opinions on what is *kí* and how many subgenres it embraces. In Vietnam before 1945, *kí* normally refers to nonfictional genre which are *phóng sự* (investigative reportage), *kí sự* (historical reportage), *truyện kí* (biography), *du kí* (travelogue), *hồi kí* (memoir), and *nhật kí* (diary) [13]. In Vietnam from 1945–1986, socialist critics tended to broaden the category of *kí* by including *bút kí* (a flexible combination of travelogue, reportage and literary essays) and *tùy bút* (literary essays) into the genre. Also in this period in Vietnam, *truyện kí* (biography) turned into a loose combination of autobiography/biography and fiction which praises the socialist heroes. However, after the Renovation in 1986, *bút kí*, *tùy bút*, and especially the socialist *truyện kí* have gradually been removed from the category of *kí*, which means that recent *kí* scholars and readers have come back to the definition of *kí* before 1945.

Among others, *kí* plays an important and unique role in Vietnamese literature.

Firstly, it is one of the genres which had the most to do with the modernization of Vietnamese literature in the first half of the twentieth century (1900–1945). It also fuelled two influential debates among Vietnamese literary circles, which were the pen war over art–for–art’s sake or art–for–life’s sake (1935–1939) [14] and the debate over the fictional elements in *kí* in the 1960s. Secondly, during the Vietnam War, *kí* plays an important role in Vietnamese literature. And lastly, this is also the genre which has produced many contested and socially influential works at each point in Vietnamese modern literary history. However, the study of *kí* has not matched its important position in Vietnamese literature. One of the main reasons for this lack of attention is that the theory and practice of *kí* vary a great deal between historical periods. Many previous studies of *kí* have been based on the traditional literary criticism which is influenced by socialist realism criticism. To the international critics and readers, this Vietnamese literary genre is still largely an unknown area though its subgenres are not unfamiliar in Western literary tradition. Recently, Charles A. Laughlin’s *Chinese Reportage: The Aesthetics of Historical Experience* (2002) which investigates the performance of Chinese *baogao wenxue* (reportage), a close relative of Vietnamese *kí*, has a lot to do with filling this gap. However, this is not enough to help understand this special genre in Vietnamese literature.

Since the 1930s, critics and writers have tried to form a theory of *kí* using theoretical approaches. Narrator, themes, plot, literary styles, spatial – temporal typology, typicality, allowances of literary techniques, among others, are of the most interest in *kí* criticism. However, these theoretical approaches fail to explain the position changes among *kí* subgenres as well as between *kí* and other literary genres in Vietnamese literary history, not to mention the changes in poetics inside this genre in every period. Meanwhile, *kí* proves that it has a special relationship to Vietnamese historical changes such as the National Front (1936 – 1939), the Vietnam War (1945 – 1975) and the Renovation which started in 1986. This relationship suggests that a historical approach to the genre might be a fruitful one.

There are a few Vietnamese researchers who have investigated the genre or one of its subgenres from the angle of cultural studies. Trịnh Bích Liên’s PhD dissertation *Vietnamese Investigative reportage in the Renovation Culture* (2008) approaches investigative reportage as a democratic voice which contributes to the social change in Vietnamese society. However, the main content of the research is in fact based on a rather traditional critical approach which focuses on realist values and techniques as well as literary styles. The dissertation remains unclear about the historical and generic connections between investigative reportage and other *kí* subgenres as a whole and therefore fails to explain the changes in this genre over time [15]. In such a situation, Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Minh’s PhD dissertation *Kí as Discourse* (2013), which combines discourse theory and cultural semiotics to set up a theory of *kí*, is a significant development in the study of this genre. She argues that there are two basic codes which form a *kí* text: the generic code (which includes two individual codes: the truth code and the artistic code) and the ideological code. Whereas the generic code sets the stable, fixed form of a *kí* text, the ideological code is the unstable one which makes this genre change over time. For example, because in the medieval time, magic and extraordinary creatures were believed to exist, medieval *kí* also includes stories about them and counts

them as facts. Minh spends one third of her dissertation investigating the performance of *kí* in the Vietnamese literature produced during the Vietnam War, showing how socialist realism “ritualizes” the structure of *kí*.

The theory and performance of *kí* in the twentieth century emerged under the influence of socialist realism since 1943 to the Renovation in 1986. Socialist realism took an importance role in the construction of such theory of *kí* in North Vietnam (1945–1986), whereas in Vietnamese Renovation literature (1986–present), writers and critics have tended to come back to the conception of *kí* before 1945. Besides, a new attitude toward the “truthfulness” and “sincerity” of *kí* has emerged. The form of a metafiction in *The Sorrow of War*, in one hand, reflects an effort to escape and challenge the vulgar reading of *kí*. Since 1986, there are several historical fictions, for example, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s historical fictions, which were accused of distorting historical figures and events by adding fictional details which secularized the heroes or changed the accuracy of historical events. This literary strategy reflects a subjective, individual and more humane approach to history. On the other hand, the metafiction form shows Ninh’s postmodern view in the sense that he sees language and writing as opaque and not simply referential. However, the doubt of the credibility of autobiography and other subgenres of *kí* has been not clearly shown in the book. This task has been performed by recent Vietnamese writers: for example, in *Chinatown*, Thuận uses the autobiographical elements to make a fake autobiography which does not aim at tricking readers but is intended for dynamic readers who may create different versions of the text [16]. Thuận’s work reflects a new and more playful attitude towards autobiographical genre, which is typical for postmodern perspective, as stated in *Narrative and Genre*: “there was no longer a biographical self capable of reflection, or a biographical reality upon which to reflect. Hence reflection itself was merely ideology; and autobiography totally fictional” [17].

3. Conclusions

The study of the theory and performance of *kí* in Vietnam shows the potential of applying cultural studies in examining biographical genres in particular and genres in general. The mentioned scholarship on autobiography and reportage have approach all subgenres of *kí* as a whole from the point of view of cultural studies, which considers genres as socially constructed. However, to understand *kí* requires additional research which investigates this genre as a unique phenomenon in Vietnamese literature, putting it in the Vietnamese historical, political and cultural situations since the 1930s as well as exploring its connections to its sibling genres in other countries’ literature.

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