

Study on ideological aspects of The Tale of Kiều by Nguyễn Du

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Abstract: *In the history, all values have to stand the tough challenge of time, and everything without value will gradually be forgotten. Following this rule, distinctive authors and works have been constantly studied, discussed actively over the periods. The Tale of Kiều by Nguyễn Du is such a phenomenon. The reason why this masterpiece is discussed, studied actively by numerous readers and scholars over the periods is that it hides many values and accumulates many ideologies which have not been discussed completely over the time. Over the past two hundred years, the Tale of Kiều have been always awoken, questioned, delved. The more studies and contemplation there are, the more hidden ideologies, values consistent with each era they find, of which the researchers have revealed to engage in the current life. When learning the process of studying ideologies in the Tale of Kiều, we have found that the studies are increasingly profound, comprehensive, convincing and the works itself are increasingly opening new depths.*

Key words: The Tale of Kiều, Study on the Tale of Kiều, Ideology in the Tale of Kiều, Nguyễn Du

1. Studies on the Tale of Kiều in the 19th century were mainly articles of Confucian scholars, expressing empathy, compassion, sharing with Nguyễn Du's inspiration on the "fate of the ingenious", especially those beautiful, talented but ill-fated women.

The majority of researchers explored the aspect of conflict between talent and fate in the Tale of Kiều such as Phạm Quý Thích, Thập Thanh Thị, Mộng Liên Đường... For example, in *Bài tựa Truyện Kiều* by Mộng Liên Đường, the author wrote: In human existence, if there

are ingenious talents there will be misadventures. Their talent is not empathized, their love is not satisfied, and these are the root cause of “pains”. Emphasizing the heartaches for the ingenious of the work is a major study direction of many Confucian scholars in this period. In *Tổng vịnh Truyện Kiều*, Phạm Quý Thích wrote:

*Nửa gỏi đoạn trường tan giấc điệp
Một giây bạc mệnh đứt cầm loan
Cho hay những kẻ tài tình lắm
Trời bắt làm gương để thế gian*

(Lê Xuân Lít, 2005, p.397).

Chu Mạnh Trinh also had deep sympathy with beautiful but ill-fated Kiều, deeply empathizing and compassionating with those in the same boat: “The creator is originally in favor of ingenious and beautiful woman, do you know? Blush-cheek lady, don’t be sulky about the old moon, that’s my advice”.

2. In the 20th century, it can be asserted that scholar Phạm Quỳnh was the first to apply literary criticism to study the Tale of Kiều, from which discovered the ideas of the work was to feel the pain, the great anguish and show the compassion for the fate of women under the old social regime. However, when talking about Nguyễn Du’s ideologies in the Tale of Kiều in this period, first we have to mention *Khảo luận về Kim Vân Kiều*, in which the author Đào Duy Anh (1943) devoted a whole chapter to discuss Nguyễn Du’s ideologies in the work. Nguyễn Du’s

ideology here is the “conflict between talent and fate” which is the core of the whole story. Not only he described the ideology on talent-fate in the Tale of Kiều, Đào Duy Anh also pointed out the limitations of ideology of conflict between talent and fate: “Instead of studying on the root cause in the society, people followed the common mysterious, idealist trend to explain that there are such misadventures in the society because the Way of God naturally hates everything perfect” (Đào Duy Anh, 1958, p.399).

Furthermore, in this period, researchers started to refer to Buddhist ideologies and Confucianism in the Tale of Kiều, the most prominent work was the view of two researchers Bùi Kỷ and Trần Trọng Kim in the article *Lý thuyết Phật học trong Truyện Kiều* (1968). In this article, they asserted that The Tale of Kiều used very good wording to spread a philosophical theory. The Tale of Kiều expressed very clearly the causality theory of Buddhism, using the ordinary theory of Buddhism on causality as the guiding principle. In *Hiểu đúng đắn Truyện Kiều* (1986), Lê Đình Kỳ also analyzed the influence of Buddhism in this work through clarifying and proving that the ideology on fate in the Tale of Kiều was derived from the ideology on causality and reincarnation of Buddhism. The author argued that, the only way to escape retribution is to cultivate the mind: Nguyễn Du’s fatalism was also derived from the ideology on causality and reincarnation of Buddhism. According

to Buddhist teachings, cause (nhân) is the reason, effect (quả) is what one has to suffer in life as the result. Those who commit evil deeds will suffer bad karma. It is only by breaking the karmic circle that one can reach the nirvana. Thus, Buddhism helps people to escape retribution by cultivating the mind.

In the article *Giá trị triết học tôn giáo trong Truyện Kiều*, the author Thích Thiện Ân analyzed in the depth the significant influence of Buddhist philosophy in the Tale of Kiều, prominently the ideology of impermanence in the universe. Besides, the author also clarified the law of causality, interpreted the word “suffering” and the power of the word “heart” in this work. This is truly an article with profound overview of philosophy, highlighting the deep impact of Buddhist thought in the Tale of Kiều: In the aspect of religious philosophy, we find that the prominent religious philosophy in the Tale of Kiều is Buddhist philosophy. The unique feature of Buddhist philosophy is the explanation of the finite impermanence of the universe. In the aspect of universe, Buddhism believes that everything in this life is derived from the predestined harmony, thus the human life is impermanent and changing (Thích Thiện Ân, 1985). Based on such view of Buddhism, Nguyễn Du began the Tale of Kiều with the following verses:

*Trăm năm trong cõi người ta
Chữ tài chữ mệnh khéo là ghét nhau*

Trải qua một cuộc bể dâu

Những điều trông thấy mà đau đớn lòng
Triết lý của đạo Phật trong Truyện Kiều of Cao Huy Đình is also a very insightful article on the influence of Buddhist ideology in the Tale of Kiều which is full of contradictions and pessimism. The author said: “Buddhist philosophy itself contains a contradiction, denying human life due to loving human beings while loving human beings certainly means adherence to human life In the Tale of Kiều, Buddhist philosophy occupies the majority because its pessimism easily describes metaphysical longing of people, especially women who were the most miserable victims of feudal society and of the era in which Nguyễn Du lived” (Cao Huy Đình, 2005, p.945).

In addition to study Buddhist philosophical ideology in the Tale of Kiều in this period, there are also some views on Confucian philosophical ideologies. In *Truyện Kiều và chủ nghĩa hiện thực của Nguyễn Du*, the author Lê Đình Kỵ asserted: The Tale of Kiều’s fatalism was derived from Confucianism’s ideology on fate - Confucius said “Death and life have determined appointments. Riches and honor depend on heaven”. “One who doesn’t know fate is not a gentleman” (Lê Đình Kỵ, 1970, pp.103-104). According to the author, the influence of Confucianism in the Tale of Kiều was due to the historical context of the era in which Nguyễn Du lived and the ideology on heaven’s will was the inevitable product of feudal society in

order to maintain the feudal order. The author believed that, In Nguyễn Du's era, due to experiences of consecutive misadventures, he couldn't explain the root cause, hence Nguyễn Du had to use Confucianism's ideology on heaven's will. However, the difficulty is not to reveal harms of ideology on heaven's will but to determine properly the position and effects of ideology on heaven's will in the Tale of Kiều. Regarding to Confucianism in the Tale of Kiều, previously scholar Phạm Quỳnh mentioned The Doctrine of the Mean; some other authors discussed moral, ethical, politeness. In fact, the scope is far bigger, such as ideology on heaven's will, awareness of family preservation, benevolence, respect of compassion, conscience and life...

While previous studies on ideology in the Tale of Kiều mainly discussed issues on talent-fate, trivialized ingenious, talented but ill-fated people or Buddhist ideology, Confucianism in the work, the later period opened a new era in the history of studying ideology in the Tale of Kiều. It was when researchers started to examine the social causes for Kiều's misfortune which was the institutions of the cruel feudal society. Hence, researchers started to discover humanitarian ideologies associated with anti-feudal spirit. Two outstanding works on humanitarian thoughts in the Tale of Kiều are *Quyền sống của con người trong Truyện Kiều của Nguyễn Du* by Hoài Thanh (1949) and *Truyện Kiều và chủ nghĩa hiện thực của Nguyễn Du* by Lê Đình Kỵ (1971).

These works mention specific and profound humanitarian thoughts in the Tale of Kiều, associating them with people's desire for liberation in the feudal society: Nguyễn Du's motivation to compose was the feelings for his time, for what he saw and what touched his heart and mind. It means Nguyễn Du told a story of ebb and flow which he had witnessed, an inhuman society which buffeted people. Hence, according to the author, the key value of the work is denunciation of the dark society and humanitarianism expressed in the people's desire for liberation and boundless love for human.

Regarding to the article *Tác phẩm của Nguyễn Du sống mãi trong lòng nhân dân* in the book *Kỷ niệm hai trăm năm sinh Nguyễn Du* (1971), the author Từ Sơn mentioned the dream to eliminate grievances and injustice in the society. Especially regarding to Từ Hải's dream, the author believed that Từ Hải represented for the unfortunately failed uprising of the oppressed masses. This reflected the failure of people's uprising against feudal oppression. The author affirmed that this was the love of people, desire to eliminate all injustices and guidance to happiness.

Regarding to *Truyện Kiều trong văn hóa Việt Nam*, Xuân Diệu believed that all misfortunes of talented people were due to the feudal society. It was the decadent, reactionary society that killed the talents. The narrow feudal society couldn't accept the talents, and actually there wasn't any fate. This is a trenchant and true argument for

shortcomings in feudalism: “That feudal regime survived longer, more rottenly and severely, it couldn’t accept the talents, for example: the Đỗ Thập Nương had to become prostitutes, the Thúy Kiều had to prostitute themselves, the Giả Bảo Ngọc had to be wrathful; that society couldn’t also accept beautiful women because glorious beauty was not to obey the feudal normality, “ill-fated beautiful woman” is not only prejudice but also summarized experience from thousands of years and life under the feudal regime” (Xuân Diệu, 2013, pp.73-74).

In the article *Bản cáo trạng cuối cùng trong Truyện Kiều*, Xuân Diệu once again mentioned the desire for love, youth and passionate life through Kim-Kiều’s love. A clever and extremely humanistic finding of the author was promotion and appreciation of Kim-Kiều’ secret dreams and desires in the reunion night, however Kiều was determined to change love into friendship - it was a powerful accusation of the society which had deprived people’s happiness and freedom to love (Xuân Diệu, 1971).

Regarding to researcher Nguyễn Lộc, he summed humanitarian ideologies in The Tale of Kiều, deeply explored life of the era in which Nguyen Du lived, presented findings and detections on stark contrasts between people’s, especially women’s, right to live with the suffocating feudal society with no way out, which forced people to stand up to untie themselves, to free their

living space. “It can be said that the Tale of Kiều is a broad picture of the life in the poet’s era, in which Nguyễn Du wanted to highlight the stark contrasts between people’s especially women’s, right to live with the oppression of the decaying feudal system. It can be said that, to some extent, a high-spirited humanitarianism with its anti-feudal militancy were the concrete base of this great work” (Nguyễn Lộc, 1976, p.828).

3. In the South of Vietnam, in the 60s of the 20th century, the Tale of Kiều was studied in a different perspective. The majority of authors explored the ideology on destiny. Hà Như Chi believed: Basic philosophy of the Tale of Kiều was the belief in fate. Fate is the extremely harsh, irresistible power. Facing such extremely tremendous power, Nguyen Du only advised us to nurture kindness, to do good deeds and cultivate virtues in order to change fate and believe in the ultimate justice of heaven and earth (Refer to: Hà Như Chi, 1956). Thạch Trung Giả also had the same view, believing that the ideology on fate in the Tale of Kiều was the strongest influence on the work (Thạch Trung Giả, 1973).

Opposing the ideology of fate in the Tale of Kiều, the author Trần Bích Lan studied the work under the existentialism. According to the author, “the foundation of the Tale of Kiều is fatalism, Nguyễn Du wrote the story to illustrate such fatalism whether under the concept of Confucianism or Buddhism. However, it is only one side

of the story. People are put into life randomly but they are the results of actions they choose. J.P. Sartre denied the nature of human's fate. Human are free to create themselves, free to choose their actions". It was Kiều who chosen to leave, to return a benefaction and revenge, not to sleep with Kim Trọng. Hence, it was a series of Kiều's conscious choices rather than fateful arrangements and she was fully aware of. People can experience on such an open research direction which stands firm for the view of freedom to choose one's action and one's own decision on their fate (Trần Bích Lan, 1960).

4. The 1980s were a new era for the history of reception and studies on the Tale of Kiều with abundant, diverse forms in the context of international integration. National cultural exchanges were expanded, the capabilities to study and receive methods of literary reading expanded much more than before. As if to compensate for the shortage in the previous period due to overrating the ideological content of the Tale of Kiều, most of researches in this period focused on studying artistic form of the work and made some achievements. There were many studies on the form of the Tale of Kiều, such as prosody, style; they mainly studied wordings, i.e. studied the Tale of Kiều as a work of art in words, a whole world of art, the art of describing emotions and scenes, the art of describing moods of the characters and even the ideological themes of the work. The two outstanding works are *Thi pháp Truyện Kiều* by Trần Đình Sử (1981,

reprinted in 2002) and *Tìm hiểu phong cách Nguyễn Du trong Truyện Kiều* by Phan Ngọc (1985, reprinted in 2001).

Researcher Trần Đình Sử studied the Tale of Kiều through the categories of modern prosody such as artistic vision, space and time. The author started from asserting "in the Tale of Kiều, Nguyễn Du created a new ideological theme compared to the original, thereby creating a new storyline and totally new storytelling: Nguyễn Du's creation started from the new ideological theme, new artistic vision of human, to features of artistic space and time, portrait of author and artistic colors. Forms of writing such as interior monologue, classic references, metaphor, form of the plot, all showed Nguyễn Du's prosody" (Trần Đình Sử, 2002, p.24). Trần Đình Sử made new analysis on prosody for interesting and new artistic vision of human, artistic time in the Tale of Kiều. On the other side, he believed: the Tale of Kiều is not only the story about conflict between talent and fate but also the story about the word "heart", about the relationship between talent and heart. It was the word "heart" that made Kiều cried for Đạm Tiên, made her sell herself to redeem her father, advised Thúc Sinh to return, acquitted Hoạn Thư, completely returned a benefaction and revenged... It is clearly that the word "heart" played an important role in the storyline. Trần Đình Sử asserted, the Tale of Kiều was created to challenge the human's heart when facing misfortunes, Nguyễn Du's entire creation was mainly to make the

heart of the protagonist reveal profoundly and completely.

Continuing to prove the Tale of Kiều of Nguyễn Du is a creative work, researcher Phan Ngọc in *Tìm hiểu phong cách Nguyễn Du* pointed out: “Nguyễn Du changed the “love” and “suffering” themes into “talent” and “fate” themes. In terms of ideology, “conflict between talent and fate” is Nguyễn Du’s theory, not borrowed. In the original, it is just cliché, but here, it is an issue arising in a certain historical period but raised to an issue of all time by Nguyễn Du. The ideology on conflict between talent and fate reflects the perception of the era in which Nguyễn Du lived” (Phan Ngọc, 2001, p.35). Such notion of Phan Ngọc is a new finding with many accurate assessments based on the era in which Nguyễn Du lived. However, in the Tale of Kiều, the conflict between talent and fate is not only the reflection of the era’s perspective but also Nguyễn Du’s own perspective on life as in the beginning of the Tale of Kiều, he wrote: “Trăm năm trong cõi người ta. Chữ tài chữ mệnh khéo là ghét nhau”.

5. In recent years, the study on the Tale of Kiều has also achieved significant success. To mention, the two remarkable works have been PhD. thesis *Triết lý nhân bản Nguyễn Du* by Vũ Đình Trác and *Thả một bè lau - Truyện Kiều dưới cái nhìn thiền quán* by Thích Nhất Hạnh.

Vũ Đình Trác’s work explored Nguyễn Du’s humanism on the foundation of humanistic ideology of Confucianism

with special expressions in people’s mental life, with the desire to create a spiritual humanistic religion for the whole nation and for the East Asian region (Vũ Đình Trác, 1993).

On the other hand, Thích Nhất Hạnh’s work offers new reading of the Tale of Kiều, not to read in the usual way for a literary work but to read as a Buddhist text, from which to learn more about life. The author admitted: “In the past, I used to teach Vietnamese literature in general and the Tale of Kiều in particular. However, my mind was not like now. I taught as a professor of literature, not as a Zen master. To view as a Zen master is to look deeply, closely, look at all events by meditation exploration through perception, pain, success, failure and practice. By viewing in such way when reading the Tale of Kiều, we can find very new things” (Nhất Hạnh, 2000, p.3).

Both works do not pay much attention to the content and artistic form of the Tale of Kiều but one is based on the reference to Confucianism to draw an ethnical way to live, one analyzes in the spirit of Buddhism to contemplate life. Both works seem to complement to each other to find good way of life of Vietnamese people.

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The authors of studies on the Tale of Kiều over two hundred years have used theories such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, existentialism... Nguyễn Bách Khoa even used scientific treatises (psychology and genetics) to

explain the Tale of Kiều. Even more surprisingly, Đỗ Minh Tuấn applied Freud's theory to study Kiều in the article *Thúy Kiều và khát vọng giải sex*. Currently, studies on the Tale of Kiều have applied and experienced many modern theories and methods. For example, Department of Vietnamese literature studies is applying new methods in studying the Tale of Kiều such as genre analytical method, typological method, method of comparing historical types, modern prosody, method of studying style... Thus, so far, the authors' studies on the Tale of Kiều have mainly explored, learnt about Confucianism, Buddhism, ethics, aesthetics, conflict between talent and fate, humanism which genius Nguyễn Du has put into his famous work. Besides, readers who love the Tale of Kiều also explore hidden values in the work such as moral, aesthetic, artistic and cultural values. Not only limited to mentioned values, the Tale of Kiều definitely contains many unanswered mysteries, like hidden icebergs in the ocean. Each era, each generation will find values suitable to their era in the work, each era will discover wonderful things. This means debates, mixed opinions, diverse perspectives on the Tale of Kiều will endlessly occur with time □

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