

The current situation of literary reading in Vietnam today: Solutions and recommendations

Nguyễn Đăng Điệp

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Institute of Literature, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences
Email: diepvvh@gmail.com

Received 10 May 2016; published 15 June 2016

Abstract: *For almost ten years now, the public has warned about the degradation of culture and the decline of reading culture in Vietnam as each person reads less than one book per year on average. Based on the analysis of current reading culture in our country, this article proposes solutions, recommendations towards fostering the reading culture promotion in general, literary reading in particular to fulfil the task of the country's sustainable development.*

Keywords: Culture, Literature, Vietnam.

1. The current situation of literary reading in Vietnam today:

According to the opinions of specialists, the reading society hasn't been formed until the beginning of XXI century^(*).

^(*) In the seminar dated June 19, 2008 held in Hanoi by Research Team Leaders of the "Studying of current situation, proposing solutions for maintaining and developing the need of reading culture of Vietnamese people in the era of industrializing and modernizing the country", Prof. Đinh Xuân Dũng believed that the need of reading, reading culture, reading society have been the unknowns that the researchers must pay attention to. Dr. Nguyễn An tiêm affirmed that: There is no reading society formed in Vietnam. Prof. Chu Hào emphasized that, in fact, there is no reading culture among Vietnamese people.

Furthermore, the study of reading culture in general and the perceiving practice of art and literature works in particular had just been 'kicked off' recently, right in the 28th session of the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (from 25th October to 16th November 1995), the UNESCO decided to choose April 23rd annually as the *World Book and Copyright Day*. For about the past ten years, there have been over 150 countries including Vietnam that have responded to this decision. Accordingly, the reading culture in Vietnam started

to draw attention. Pursuant to the Decision №284/QĐ-TTg dated February 24th, 2014 by the Prime Minister, the April 21st annually is regarded as Vietnam Book Day.

To make it clearer about the current situation of reading culture in Vietnam, we may give the following evidences:

According to the data from Ministry of Information and Communications, there have been 63 publishing houses in Vietnam now (<https://ppdvn.gov.vn...>). Regarding the library, the statistical data from Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, as of 2015, there have been 17,022 public libraries/ reading halls/ bookcases nationwide with nearly 40 millions copies serving over 21 millions readers per year (<http://www.bvhttdl.gov.vn...>). This means that a Vietnamese reads less than one book a year. Above mentioned numbers show the truly sorrowful situation of reading in Vietnam in comparison with two neighboured countries that are China and South Korea.

Working in Resource development for researching and teaching Korean literature in Vietnam - a project funded by Korean Studies Promotion Service, Phan Thị Thu Hiền and Nguyễn Thị Hiền indicate: At present, South Korea has around 1,825 book houses (excluding small-sized book houses). Kyobo Book Centre - the largest book house chain in Korea with 24 book houses nationwide, was established in 1980. This chain has up to 3.2 millions members from Book Clubs and 180,000 clients, who buy book online and

offline everyday. In 2011, South Korea had 27,202 libraries at all sizes. As for Seoul, there have been more than 100 public libraries. The public libraries in South Korea also organize Reading Clubs for all people, the number of this type of clubs are 1,599 out of 1,850 nationwide. There are 38,170 publishing houses, among which 20% are online. The average growth of online publishing market is 19.7% (or this number is 25% if included online magazines and newspapers). In 2012, the e-book market (excluding textbooks and reference books) reached the turnover of 55 billions won making up 1.3% of overall publishing market. Again, according to the statistical data in 2012, on average the Korean people read 4.5 books each per month (consist of 3.1 printed books and 1.4 e-books). Among these books, the most favourite is 'literary book' at 25.9%, then goes to the books relating to 'hobbies, travelling and health' at 19.3%. A fairly important number of 42.6% book resource is self-purchased to read (Phan Thị Thu Hiền, Nguyễn Thị Hiền, 2014).

In China, the 'Entertainment Weekly' of the China Radio International (CRI) informed that in 2012, the 10th survey conducted by the China Institute of Publishing Science in 48 cities of 28 provinces and autonomous areas has received 18,619 well-answered questionnaires. The results showed that there were three new trends in the Chinese reading: both Chinese printed and e-book readings increased; the more on-line readers there were, the less were willing to pay; the children

and teenagers were of the highest reading percentage. In 2012, on average, Chinese people read 4.39 printed books each, this number had been increasing in 7 years successively; Yet, e-book reading percentage increased significantly: in 2012 every Chinese read 2.35 e-books, while in 2011 this number was 1.42, the increasing was at 65.5%. Regarding the ages, the reading rates of under 8-aged children were at 64.5%, of teenagers from 9 to 13 years old were at 96.5%, of adolescence from 14 to 17 years old were at 80.5% (<http://vietnamese.cri.cn...>).

Obviously, once regarding culture as the foundation, the driving force for development and international integration, the sorrowful reality of reading culture make us concerned about.

2. Building up reading society from perspectives of theory and practice

First of all, theoretically, we understand that to develop the country in the intellectual era, strengthening the reading culture plays a very important role since it is integral to the improvement of human and national competent factors. Literary reading is also an important issue as art and literature possess special advantages in nurturing personality and human spirit, the very essential factor guaranteeing the sustainable development. The advantage of literature is expressed in three aspects: readers can read anywhere (space) and anytime (time); the impact of literature is the competence of converting human

beings by spirits's hidden touching, this competence can be individual and reproductive, rippled in community; each literary masterpiece can be regarded as an encyclopedia of life helping readers in opening new and scholarly intellectual channel. Karl Marx said once the knowledge he have acquired from literature masterpieces was far more than from the works on economics of Englishmen accumulated by that time.

In Vietnam, right after seizing independence, President Ho Chi Minh called to eradicate the illiteracy and heighten the people's intellect. He also emphasized the role of culture, regarded it as an important course for constructing, building and defending the country. Ho Chi Minh ideology was integral to the Party's philosophy of culture in general and art-literature in particular. In the process of renovating country, our Party also affirms that culture is both 'objective and driving force' for the development. Thus, culture must be appreciate in the same ranking with politics, economy and society; culture must be absorbed in all aspects of life. The resolutions on art and literature, notably the Resolution №23 of the Political Bureau, the Resolution №33-NQ/TW reaffirmed significant achievements of art and literature in the period of industrialization and modernization of the country, frankly pointing out the constraints that must be retreated. By the time, the importance of culture and the role of art and literature have been better awared of. In July 2005,

the formerly Ministry of Culture and Information (and now Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism) proposed the Project of socializing cultural activities, promoting culture into market, emphasizing the development of cultural industry that opened a new approach for us to think of the formation of cultural market, including literary sector. These were served as the important theoretical bases to build up learning society, reading culture and literary reading in our country.

Practically, from our survey, reading culture hasn't been degraded as we concerned about so far^(*). Take the Internet and cellular network only, Vietnam belongs to the top Southeast Asia countries that possess the highest growth rates. Along with artistic and literary books, readers also approached scientific-technological, entrepreneurship, and life-skill books,... Definitely, if the quantity is considered, the number of the readers has been increased. The reading forms have been also diversified: reading in the Internet, e-books, online newspapers, comics, or photocopies,...

However, it's necessary to say that if we consider the quantity and the diversity of the publications, of the

distribution system, especially the quality/the seriousness of the reading, there would be evidences to concern about reading culture 'degradation'. There are many general readers today but the thorough and serious readers. A lot of people pay much attention on entertainment aspect but the intellectual content of the book. Notably, book reading hasn't been a regular habit yet among the workers and farmers. The young generation also reads literary books less than before, and the literature in school is losing its important role. These are vital issues that require in-depth researches since successfully establish the reading society or not is related to the sustainable development.

In spite of these difficulties, the awareness raising of reading culture has been flared up by the book and reading lovers. Politicians, culturist, intellectuals, and artists established forums narrowing the distance to created opportunities for perceiving and disseminating knowledge through books. In the launching of the Phan Chu Trinh Translation Fund in January 2007, the writer Nguyễn Ngọc brought a noteworthy comparison: 'On Liberty by John Stuart Mill has been regarded as the classic not only in Europe but all over the world for a long time. This book was firstly published in the United Kingdom in 1859. Less than 10 years later, in 1868, it was translated in Japan, and its circulation reached 2 millions while the Japan's population was at 36 million by that time. But in Vietnam, 'until 2004, it [On Liberty]

(*) The summative report of the Project 'The survey of current situation of literary reading in Vietnam today' (Task at ministerial level), defended in Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, December, 2015.

was just translated for the first time in our country, and the circulation was only 1,000 copies, it means that the translation was later than in Japan one century and a half, the print quantity was smaller than in Japan 2,000 times' (Nguyễn Ngọc, 2007). These are absolutely meaningful numbers. Till now, within the framework of the Phan Chu Trinh Translation Fund, this elite bookcase has published only around 50 works with not large circulation, at 10% in comparison with the wish of its founders.

The elite literary publication has no brighter situation, although many cultural and communication companies managed with many options to set forth for this kind of fastidious books. The elite literature seemed to be dimmed in a mountain of temporary fashioned entertainment books, especially the so-called 'romance'. The development of popular literature is necessary and it needs to be researched, but its encroachment to the elite literature like in Vietnam today also needs more investigation because of its short term and long term impacts. This is of the top crucial when cultural policies hasn't promoted different forms of elite literature, creating bases for streaming the choices and perception. Particularly, at some times Vietnam publication has successfully achieved both economic and cultural impact targets. For example, the circulation of second publication of the Trịnh Lữ's translation of novel 'Norwegian wood' by Haruki Murakami reached millions copies

what just *Đặng Thùy Trâm Diary* could be compared with. The circulation of books in the first and successive publications that reached tens of thousands has been maintained, but mostly belongs to the literature market of the South of Vietnam with the fames of the writers like Nguyễn Nhật Ánh, Dương Thụy, Nguyễn Ngọc Tư,... Apart from the appropriate content for the readers of different ages, regions, it should be appreciated the brand building strategy of publishing agencies in the South. In order to run cultural business and cultural practice, many publishing houses and culture companies have to pursue both the need of the market and the need of aesthetics to uphold and develop the literature publication activities.

The above analyses show that we absolutely can propose realistic policies right from the orientation for the publishing houses to control the supply. Considering book reading truly practical meaningful for improving human competent factor, the Government should be responsible and committed to non-profitable contribution in the field of publication and the compulsory education programs.

3. Solutions and recommendations

The solution system

To establish the reading society and strongly foster the literary reading in out country these days, it's necessary to focus on the following solutions:

Firstly, raising full awareness of the importance of book and reading. To be aware of literary reading as well as the

importance of modern literature is an urgent work. The importance of literature and literary reading culture are mentioned by all people, but the fact. This originates from three main reasons. *First*, we have focused on developing economy and paid less attention to the humanity and social sciences for a long time. Only on recognizing the shortcomings in the individual's personality, especially the raise of materialism, pragmatism, violence and emotionless of young people... we just turned back to pay attention to educating cultural values and literature as meaningful values of nurturing awareness, ideology, belief, and values for people. *Second*, the boom of information technology and modern information devices made the market share of reading culture narrowed. *Third*, as for modern people, time consumption isn't enough for literature. Yet, in industrial zones, workers need eating and sleeping in order to assure their health other than reading. The trade union doesn't pay attention to spiritual activities apart from some fugitive performances. The question is that why reading societies are still formed in developed countries, in countries with market economy? To answer this question, the first issue is to make whole society have full understanding of reading culture, to foster the literary reading as well as to educate people through literature. In the past two resistance wars, literature played a huge role in educating,

encouraging and promoting compatriots of the whole country to actively participate in defending and constructing the fatherland. But in the renovation period, the situation of literary reading was a problem of severe concern that for example, according to the statistical data, each book often was printed out less than 1,000 copies but it's difficult to release in a country of 90 millions people.

Secondly, establishing distribution and library network: To foster the establishment of public libraries, encourage to bring private libraries in full play is one realistic solution. On the other hand, there is a need to socialize the literature promotion. At present, bookstores are paying more attention to profit other than the social effect of literary books. If publishing centers have a free reading sector for the poor, adolescents, surely the real number of reader will increase. There is authority that punished student for his book stealing as he love reading but couldn't afford the book. Are bookstores responsible themselves to share the literary values with the readers aiming at the social effect other than simply the economic outcome, aren't they? The library system received little investment, the small number of key libraries received large investment that only paid attention the benefits from services while the service attitude wasn't kind and thoughtful. This fact unintentionally sets obstacle on reading desire of the readers, who lack favorable conditions, notably the book

prices are fairly high in comparison with the reading need of the children and the retired. It's should be considered that the library establishment project proposed by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism needs to be thoroughly studied with the consultation from library system establishment in developed countries all over the world, especially from the South Korea.

Thirdly, building the right awareness of the Literature subject in schooling education: Formally, the Literature subject is still playing an important role in schools. This is also the main subject since it is related to the key examinations. However, it's easy to recognize by everyone the fact that students are tired of literature learning, few students choose Group C (consisting of Literature, History, Geography) in university entrance examination. Except for the teacher's quality, there are three emerging issues to further research. *First*, the syllabus must be appropriate, must select the truly preeminent masterpieces of content, idea, and artistic method to improve the attractiveness and educational effects.. Many literature works were introduced in the syllabus but they lacked of literariness. It's necessary to note that the functions of educating, cognition, prediction and entertainment must be realized through aesthetic function. If the literature work lacks of literariness and students don't want to read, there is nothing to realize the education function. *Second*, the application of technology in literature

teaching is worth encouraging, but overutilization isn't a recommendation because technology can't replace human in passing the emotion and the fire of passion. *Third*, literature teaching must be integral to the intersubject's knowledge of history, ethnology, human ecology,... to make students understand that literature means human, and the literary story is also the story of life. The objective of literature teaching and learning is to make human humaner, love the country much more, and know how to feel the beauty. Once know how to feel the beauty, people won't be inhumane and know how to love their origin, their fatherland. It means that together with perceiving other scientific and cultural knowledge, reading culture will help young people in perfecting their personalities.

Fourth, the responsibility of the writers and literature critics. The most important task of the writer is to create the preeminent works, and of the critic is to orient readers towards full conditions, opportunities for enjoying the finest literary values. The fact that the writers pursue the works with the target of entertainment and trade, the critics forget their missions as 'super-readers' will degrade the quality of the reading. This is the fact happened the past time what made the readers can't distinguish between good and bad books, pay money for the low quality books. Being in such circumstance several times, the readers will lose the passion of purchasing literary books.

Fifth, the responsibility of art and literature officials and managers. The most important task of the officials and managers isn't to constrain or to take precaution other than to be the 'midwife' that good books can come to the market, the arguments and dialogues on literature can happen in a democratic environment. The dynamic and democratic literature environment will encourage reading environment, and when there are many good books in the market, accurate literature promotion, of course, the low quality books will be eradicated from the reader's choice.

Sixth, the policy of art and culture. Being well aware of specific features, roles, functions and values of the art and literature, the Party and the State should sooner conduct the institutional and normative reform in the practical life as well as in the cultural market so that the guideline of cultural development and humane human building is fully possibly deployed in reality. The State should have projects to foster the publication of national art and literature, of translation of global elite culture; digitalize the treasure of national document for both reserve, protection, and practical serving for utilizing and upholding such priceless spiritual values;... The State should have appropriate law and policy on tax and investment to encourage publishing houses, private culture and communication companies, professional associations and individuals to effectively and dynamically operate in the field of cultural business. should use

the supportive policy to foster the cultural products that meet the norms, the habits and customs of the nation and the whole society is looking forwards.

Some recommendations

- Should have consensus and the attention of effective investment: Building up the reading society, learning society, lifelong learning must be the popular conception of all people, must be the will from the top leaders of the Party and the State to each family, each individual of the society. Today, culture is regarded as the development 'capital', human is both subject of the cultural creation and subject of cultural beneficiary, thus, reading and literary reading must be considered as internal need. From the awareness to the action: establishing the library system, requiring compulsory reading and encouraging reading by hobbies.

- Creating broad reading spaces: Accepting the reading in different spaces and different forms of reading. Formulating the reading habit from families to schools and in society, agencies, organizations, regarding reading as an index of human development. The flexible reading spaces contributes not only in expanding quantity and scale of reading but also the quality of reading. However, the important thing is the orientation for the readers to look for the elite, not the fugitive, superficial and low quality cultural products.

- Should create favorable material and spiritual conditions for the literature authors, theorists, critics, and

translators. It must be considered as the field of the creation subject and cultural propagation subject. The creating favorable material conditions and spiritual spaces for artists is at the top important what helps the artists devoting whole heart to produce preeminent art works, facilitates cultural propagation subjects with better conditions to do the job so that the reading culture can be drastically developed.

- The system of policy, legislative documents, norms on cultural security should have been open enough for favorable realization of literature creation, publication and perception. It's important to invest in publication of the works that serve the specific and direct political tasks, popularize the guideline of art, but the more important is to create all favorable conditions for propagating the preeminent artistic works with high vitality □

References

1. Communist Party of Vietnam (2005), *Report summing up theoretical and practical issues over the past 20 years of renovation (Doi moi) (1986-2006)*, National Political Publishing House, Hanoi.
2. Nguyễn Hữu Giới (2013), *Thinking of books, reading culture and library*, Vietnam Culture and Information Publishing House, Hanoi.
3. Chen Xin (2013), *The Chinese publishing industry* (Translated by Thúy Lan, Thanh Huyền), National Political Publishing House, Hanoi.
4. Phan Thị Thu Hiền, Nguyễn Thị Hiền (2014), 'Reading culture in south Korea', proceeding at Conference *Reading culture and its current situation in Ho Chi Minh City and southern provinces of Vietnam*, Project 'The survey of current situation of literary reading held by (Vietnam Institute of Literature) and University of Social Sciences and Humanities - Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City in 30/9/2014.
5. Council for Theory and Criticism of Literature and Art (2009), *Art and literature in market mechanism and integration*, Political Publishing House, Hanoi.
6. Nguyễn Ngọc (2007), 'A great and critical course', speech at the Launching ceremony the Phan Chu Trinh Translation Fund, Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations in 9/1/2007.
7. Tia Sáng Magazine and Tre Publishing House, HCMC (2006), 'Culture in integration era'.
8. Vietnam National University Press, Hanoi (2011), *Readers and contemporary art public*.
9. Political Publishing House, Hanoi (2013), *Vietnam publishing industry in renovation period*.
10. UNDP, *The Human Development Report*, CD-ROM 1990-1999.
11. <https://ppdvn.gov.vn/web/guest/dan-h-sach-don-vi>
12. <http://www.bvhttdl.gov.vn/vn/address/119/index.html>
13. <http://vietnamese.cri.cn/561/2013/05/01/1s185887.htm>