

“THE TALE OF KIEU” – THE CHOICE OF VIETNAM VALUES

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 28/11/2023	The purpose of this paper is to explain why an ordinary literary source has become the pinnacle of Vietnamese literature, elevated as a celebration of the national traditional cultural characteristics of Vietnam. This study focuses on the ideological transformation and adaptation of a scholar and a beauty novel into a Nom poetry. Based on national culture, the traditional six-eight-meter genre, and Nom script, a special literary work was born, reflecting many traditional cultural characteristics of Vietnam. The study shows how the transformation from a “normally average” literary work to a cultural characteristic symbol of Vietnamese national culture has played out. The article employs several methods such as analysis, synthesis, comparison, typological research, literature, and culture interdisciplinary methods, and a systematic approach. The paper sheds light on the adaptation of a literary work reaching the pinnacle of Vietnamese medieval written literature in the context of the regional and Vietnam’s particular traditional culture through decoding the creative process of Nguyen Du’s <i>The Tale of Kieu</i> - a symbol of Vietnamese national culture. The paper shows how a literary work has become a national literary peak and the image of <i>The Tale of Kieu</i> becomes a symbol of national consciousness, the spirit of cultural nationalization.
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“TRUYỆN KIỀU” – SỰ LỰA CHỌN GIÁ TRỊ VIỆT NAM

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài: 28/11/2023	Mục đích của bài viết này là lý giải vì sao mà một bản nguồn văn học bình thường đã trở thành một tác phẩm đỉnh cao của văn học Việt Nam, được nâng tầm như một sự tôn vinh văn hóa truyền thống dân tộc. Nghiên cứu này tập trung vào sự chuyển hướng tư tưởng và chuyển thể của một tác phẩm tiểu thuyết tài tử giai nhân thành một tác phẩm truyện thơ Nôm. Trên cơ sở văn hóa dân tộc, thể thơ lục bát truyền thống và chữ Nôm, một tác phẩm văn học đặc sắc ra đời phản ánh nhiều nét văn hóa truyền thống dân tộc Việt. Nghiên cứu cho thấy sự biến đổi từ một tác phẩm bình thường trở thành một biểu tượng của văn hóa Việt Nam đã được diễn ra như thế nào. Bài viết sử dụng một số phương pháp như: phương pháp phân tích, tổng hợp, đối chiếu, hệ thống, loại hình, liên ngành văn học – văn hóa. Bài viết làm sáng tỏ quá trình một tác phẩm văn học đạt đến đỉnh cao của văn học viết trung đại Việt Nam trong bối cảnh lịch sử văn hóa khu vực và Việt Nam thông qua việc giải mã quá trình sáng tạo <i>Truyện Kiều</i> của Nguyễn Du - biểu tượng của văn hóa dân tộc Việt Nam. Bài viết cho thấy một tác phẩm văn học đã trở thành một đỉnh cao văn học dân tộc như thế nào và hình tượng <i>Truyện Kiều</i> trở thành một biểu tượng của ý thức dân tộc, tinh thần khẳng định văn hóa dân tộc.
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1. Introduction

A New Lament for a Broken Heart (Đoạn trường tân thanh) by Nguyen Du, known by Vietnamese people as *The Tale of Kieu*, is a poetic story comprised of 3254 lines of poetry, i.e., 1627 verses in the traditional six-eight meter. The plot is based on *The Tale of Kim Van Kieu* (Kim Vân Kiều truyện) by a Chinese writer known by the pen name Thanh Tam Tai Nhan. Considered a classic work of Vietnamese medieval literature and culture [1] - [2], Nguyen Du's *Tale of Kieu* has been cherished by a large number of Vietnamese people since its inception and revered by many ancient writers. *The Tale of Kieu* has been a great passion for hundreds of years, capturing the hearts of millions of people, and will continue to be so. This paper traces the transformation of what was once an "ordinary" literary work into a typical masterpiece, considered a classic, offering a glimpse into Vietnamese culture and society. It outlines the gradual transformation in its reception and adaptation [3, p.481], [4, p.2217].

Over the past 200 years, *The Tale of Kieu* has deeply influenced the emotions and souls of the Vietnamese people [5] - [6]. A folk simile goes: "Love what, love to play a card game/ Love Ho Bon horse, love Thuy Kieu Nom poem" (Mê gì, mê đánh tổ tôm/ Mê ngựa Hộ Bồn, mê nôm Thúy Kiều). Consequently, Nguyen Du has become a distinguished figure in world culture. To this day, the title *A New Lament for a Broken Heart* remains a subject of debate [7, p.12], but *The Tale of Kieu* continues to stand as the foremost masterpiece of Vietnamese classical literature. Kim Thanh Than, a Chinese writer and theorist during the Qing dynasty, disapproved of Thanh Tam Tai Nhan's writing of *The Tale of Kim Van Kieu*, stating that "the writing was rambling like flood water spreading, not flowing in a stream" [8, p.10], revealing the perceived value of *The Tale of Kim Van Kieu* by Thanh Tam Tai Nhan at the time [9, p.3], [10, p.99], [11, p.6], [12, pp.275-276], [13], [4]. As of now, there has not been a comprehensive study on the factors that shed light on the creative process of *The Tale of Kieu* within the context of Vietnamese specifics and humanity. This study aims to decipher the core elements of *The Tale of Kieu*'s success.

2. Methodology

The article utilizes main research methods such as analysis, synthesis, comparison, and the interdisciplinary method of literature and culture to clarify the ideological transformation and adaptation from a "scholar and beauty" novel by an anonymous Chinese author, published in late seventeenth century China, into Nom poetry - the traditional six-eight meter genre of the Vietnamese national poetry. This created a special literary work that reflects many traditional cultural characteristics of Vietnam, its people, and the great Vietnamese national poet. It also delves into the ideological transformation and adaptation of *The Tale of Kieu* (Nguyen Du), from being a "normally average" literary work to becoming a symbol of Vietnamese national cultural characteristics. From the interdisciplinary perspective of literature and culture, dialectical materialism elucidates the fundamental causes of these differences, including historical era, Vietnamese culture, subject matter, and the author's style, shedding light on the adaptation of a literary work reaching the pinnacle of Vietnamese medieval written literature within the context of Vietnam's specific traditional culture. The paper further illuminates the importance of acculturation as a significant feature of Vietnamese literary-culture research, reflecting the development of Vietnamese culture and literature, as well as the connotations of the era.

To understand *The Tale of Kieu*'s place in the context of Vietnamese values, from a systemic viewpoint, we aim to examine Nguyen Du's works, including those in the Han script [14], to comprehend how his thoughts are expressed, and then compare them with the fact that he modified *The Tale of Kim Van Kieu* into *The Tale of Kieu*. After all, an author's works always possess a unity of thought.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Historical creation of the story

Vuong Thuy Kieu was a real person in the Ming Dynasty mentioned alongside Tu Hai in official history books such as the History of the *Ming Dynasty – Chronicle* (*Minh sử - Thế Tông bản kỷ*), *Ming Shilu-Shizōng Shilu* (*Minh thực lục - Thế Tông thực lục*), and *Tru Hai Border Map* (*Trù hải đồ biên*) (Ho Ton Hien - General Governor of the Ming Dynasty) [12], [13], [4]. Chinese folk compositions, most evidently in *The Tale of Vuong Thuy Kieu*, describe the chronicle of *The Beginning and End of Suppressing Xuhai* (*Kỷ tiếu Từ Hải bản mạt*) (Mao Khon), which was considered the earliest record of the legend of Vuong Thuy Kieu and Tu Hai. Subsequently, Vuong Thuy Kieu became the central figure in numerous novels and several dramas, such as *The Gibbon Squeaks Four Times* (*Từ Thanh Viên*) (Tu Van Truong), *Ho Phach Chuy* (*Hồ phách chủ*) (Diep Tri Phi), *Song Thuy Vien* (*Song Thúy viên*) (Ha Binh Hoanh) [15]. Several other works like *Vuong Kieu Nhi* (*Vương Kiều Nhi*) (Vuong The Trinh), *Ngu So Tan Chi* (*Ngũ Sô tân chí*) (Truong Trieu), *Bai Thuyet* (*Bại thuyết*) (Tong Khoi Phung), *The Tale of Vuong Thuy Kieu* (*Vương Thúy Kiều truyện*) (Du Hoai), *The Tale of Ly Thuy Kieu* (*Lý Thúy Kiều truyện*) (Doi Si Lam) and *The Tale of Vuong Thuy Kieu* (*Vương Thúy Kiều truyện*) (Ho Khoang), all revolved around the love and hatred involving the trio of Tu Hai - Vuong Thuy Kieu - Ho Ton Hien. Vuong Thuy Kieu soon became the central figure in many romantic novels, such as *Ho Thieu Bao Binh Oa Chien Cong* (*Hồ Thiệu Bảo bình Oa chiến công*) (Chu Tiệp), *Sinh Bao Hoa Ngac an*, *Tu Ta Tu Hai Nghia* (*Sinh báo Hoa Ngạc ân, tử tã Từ Hải nghĩa*) (Mong Giac Dao Nhan), and *Thu Ho Khau* (*Thu hồ khâu*) (Vuong Lung), etc. Notably during the Qing Dynasty, there were works like *The Tale of Kim Van Kieu* (Thanh Tam Tai Nhan) and *Thu Ho Khau* (Vuong Lung) [16], which reflected the wandering journey of Thuy Kieu as a courtesan, revealing social realities such as lawless and corrupt functionaries and moral decay. The authors also expressed agreement and entrusted the ideal of a savior in the protestant character Tu Hai. Generally, there are three similarities in the above-mentioned works. First, they affirm Vuong Thuy Kieu as a renowned courtesan, advising Tu Hai to submit to the court. Second, the court did not keep its promises, acting inconsistently and deceitfully, and breaking their words. Third, before Vuong Thuy Kieu - a female civilian, Ho Ton Hien, the legate appeared cunning, petty, and rude. As complex as her background and behavior are, the end of Thuy Kieu's life has given rise to various theories, all of which are charming. These stories all adorn the character of Vuong Thuy Kieu, honoring the image of women in society [17, p.16], [18, p.177]. Most of the works focus on the love affair and tragic ending between a reputed bandit and a famous courtesan, exploring different directions. Kieu's life has yet to prove the idea of *Destiny* and *Cause & Effect*. This story did not captivate literary critics and never gained recognition in the realm of Chinese literature. However, it was widely circulated with several printed editions and was performed on stage in China during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was also translated into Manchu and, in the mid-eighteenth century, into Japanese. Moreover, it was read by Vietnamese people [12, pp. 275–276], [13], [19], [4]. Upon arrival in Vietnam, the character Vuong Thuy Kieu underwent a complete makeover: after the removal of several parts and the alteration of many details, the story became more intriguing and humane; the character's personality became more consistent, and her behavior more balanced and lenient [2]. Of course, from *The Tale of Kim Van Kieu* to *The Tale of Kieu*, there have been many other stories!

3.2. How Kim Van Kieu came to Vietnam and Nguyen Du

A remarkable literary work first reveals itself in the art of words. However, if the value of a literary work and its dissemination are solely expressed on the surface of language without depth in culture, it cannot withstand the test of time. When discussing the history of creation, we aim to shed light on three points: the context, the people, and the art form. To address the context, we

will present two viewpoints. The first is the tributary relationship (involving bibliographic exchange), commonly undertaken by functionaries who visited China to obtain books or received books as gifts to bring back home, etc. Conversely, Chinese individuals who journeyed to Vietnam brought with them Chinese cultural bibliographies [20, pp.261-283]. Secondly, the Confucian court examination system served as the recruitment system for functionaries in the feudal state of Vietnam, as well as in other feudal East Asian countries. Vietnam's examination system was heavily influenced by China, leading to Literature in the Chinese style becoming the most recognized and effective standard for the selection of functionaries. The examination content in Vietnam was similar to that of China [21]. It is crucial to note that the Han script (or Chinese script) was part of the exams, and Confucian ideology (three moral bonds and five cardinal virtues) was deemed essential for gentlemen to study [22].

Regarding Nguyen Du, the author, who is he? Why did he choose *The Tale of Kim Van Kieu* by Thanh Tam Tai Nhan to edit? Had this work been adapted by someone else, our *The Tale of Kieu* might not exist today. To learn more about Nguyen Du and his works, we refer to historical documents. *The True Chronicles of Greater Vietnam (Đại Nam thực lục)* from the Historical Academy of the Nguyen Dynasty wrote about Nguyen Du: the son of Duke Xuan of Le Dynasty (1428-1789), Nguyen Nghiem. Du grew up in a family with a literary tradition; his mother, noted for her singing and poetry composition, was his father's third wife. Nguyen Du declined to serve in the Tây Sơn administration and returned to his native village for ten years... [23, p.650], [24, p.237]. In 1813, Nguyen Du traveled to China as a missionary. With his profound knowledge of Chinese script and classical Chinese literature, he found *The Tale of Kim Van Kieu* very intriguing. "A few years after returning home, he translated into Nom poetry in the traditional six-eight meter genre of the Vietnamese national" [5, p.82]. Nguyen Du's works include Han literary works such as *Thanh Hien's poetry collection (Thanh Hiên thi tập)*, *Singing Oddly while in Central Vietnam (Nam Trung tạp ngâm)*, *Random notes on the way to China (Bắc hành tạp lục)*, and *Nom works including Borrowing Young Hat-Guildsmen's Word (Thác lời trai Phường Nón)*, *A Requiem for All Ten Classes of Sentient Beings (Văn tế thập loại chúng sinh)*, and *The Tale of Kieu*, among others. Nguyen Du seems to possess a very strong personality. During his time as a functionary, he always maintained a humble attitude towards his superiors and appeared to be perpetually melancholic. When seriously ill, he declined medication and passed away quietly [25, p.292], [26].

In addition to Nguyen Du's *The Tale of Kieu* which we are all familiar with, there are many other works that feature the story of Vương Thúy Kiều [6, p.169], [1, p.10], [26]. Some of these use *The Tale of Kim Van Kieu* by Thanh Tam Tai Nhan as the source (original text) for composition. In these cases, the derivative works are a result of recomposition, such as *The Tale of Kieu* (also known as *The Tale of Thúy Kiều*, *The Tale of Kim Van Kieu*, *A New Lament for a Broken Heart*) by Nguyen Du; *Kim Van Kieu Notes (Kim Vân Kiều lục)* by Pham Quy Thich; *Thanh Tam Tai Nhan's Poetry Collection (Thanh Tâm Tài Nhân thi tập)* by Tran Bich San, Chu Manh Trinh; Copies of the *Articles of the Ancient and Brilliant Kings Mild Mandarin to Praise The Tale of Kieu/ or Thanh Tam Tai Tu's Story (Thanh Tâm Tài tử cổ kim minh lương đề vịnh tập biên)* by Minh Menh, Tu Duc, Nguyen Khuyen [27, p.398]. Furthermore, there are other works that use Nguyen Du's *The Tale of Kieu* to recompose, such as *Ca Phả* (anonymous); *Kim Van Kieu Han Script Dien Am Ca (Kim Vân Kiều Hán tự diễn âm ca)* by Le Du; *Kim Van Kieu's Drama (Kim Vân Kiều trò)* by an anonymous author; *Kim Van Kieu's Fu (Kim Vân Kiều phú)* by an anonymous author; *Kim Van Kieu's Notes Translate (Kim Vân Kiều truyện diễn tự)* by Nguyen Kien, who translated the full version of Nguyen Du's *Tale of Kieu* into Han poetry in the six-eight meter format [28, p.40]. For over half a century, numerous Chinese researchers have dedicated considerable effort and intellect to researching and translating this work into Chinese. The most notable translators are Hoang Dat Cau [29], [30], whose translation is considered as "preliminary" and La Truong Son [30], [31], followed by Trieu Ngoc Lan [30], [32]. It is somewhat paradoxical yet interesting to note that the Han script was translated into Nom script

(Vietnamese demotic script), and then the Nom script was translated back into Han script, a unique feat in literary history. However, it is understandable as Nguyen Du, after relying on *The Tale of Kim Van Kieu* (Thanh Tam Tai Nhan), transformed the work into a masterpiece, which, in terms of literary art, has many more outstanding aspects than the original version - a romance novel which, in modern parlance, is considered “just average” [30]. The history of translating *The Tale of Kieu* back into Han script is even more intriguing considering that it was once accomplished by an anonymous Confucian during Tu Duc’s reign (1848-1883), resulting in a work called *Kim Van Kieu Notes* [33]. In general, while all the translations, besides achieving the purpose of cultural exchange to introduce the masterpiece *The Tale of Kieu* to the Han script community, hardly match the same artistic value as the “original” Nom version by Nguyen Du. The following Han translations are noteworthy: *Thuy Kieu Poetry Collection* (*Thúy Kiều thi tập*) by various authors, featuring 36 poems in 26 pages documenting Kieu from her first encounter with Kim Trong to their reunion. *Thuy Kieu So Ngo Canh Huong Thi* (composed by Nguyen Thuc Dinh, Bachelor of Le Dynasty) portrays 30 poems from Kieu’s first meeting with Kim Trong to their reunion, with annotations and comments across 38 pages. *Thuy Kieu Notes* (*Thúy Kiều lục*) by multiple authors presents the story of Thuy Kieu in Han script (in prose form), spanning 87 pages and featuring numerous poems. Pham Quy Thich’s comprehensive discussion on the background of Kieu and *The Tale of Kieu* in Han script (a simplified version) called *Kim Van Kieu’s Fu* by multiple authors, printed by Tu Van Duong in 1907, comprises 12 pages. Moreover, the source version of Nguyen Du’s *Tale of Kieu* was also adapted into works of Cheo art - *Kim Van Kieu* (anonymous), engraved in 1875, comprising 3 chapters and 136 pages. *Kim Van Kieu’s Drama* (anonymous), printed by Quang Thinh Duong in 1914, embraces 6 episodes, 2 chapters, and 54 pages, etc. Notably, there are works that continue the story of Thuy Kieu, such as *Recording Dao Nguyen’s Dream - Next, A New Lament for a Broken Heart* (*Đào hoa mộng ký - Tục Đoạn trường tân thanh*) by Tien Phong Lien Dinh and Can Phong Ha Dam Hien. In recite form, there is *Kim Kieu Dien Ca* (anonymous), printed by Thinh My Duong in 1906, spanning 12 pages; 12 works featuring Kieu in the form of singing while speaking (as Ca Tru) - *Kim Van Kieu Ge* (edited by Dao Nguyen Ngoc and Thu Luong Gia Tu); Military drum songs with themes taken from *Kim Van Kieu truyện*, comprising 26 pages, etc. Around the 1920s of the 20th century, a French director produced the feature film *Kim Van Kieu*, which was produced by Indochine Films et Cinémas. The plot of *Kim Van Kieu* was adapted into a movie script by E.A Famechon with minimal alterations. However, the film *Kim Van Kieu* also marked a significant milestone in Vietnam’s film and art history, leaving a strong impression on contemporary cultural life by introducing the widely known story, *The Tale of Kieu*, in movie form - an art form that was novel, even to Western countries. Additionally, there are works of research and comparison, such as *Kim Van Kieu’s Collection* (*Kim Vân Kiều hợp tập*) by anonymous authors; *A Comprehensive Annotated Tale of Thuy Kieu* (*Thúy Kiều truyện tường chú*) by Chiem Van Thi.

3.3. Adaptation of the novel into the Narrative Poem of Six-Eight Meter by Nguyen Du

The adaptation of novels into the national Nom script is attributed to the remarkable transformation that took place in the 10th - 12th centuries after the period of Tang dynasty governance was over for the Vietnamese people [33], [34], [35]. The 13th century marked a significant milestone in the development of Vietnamese culture and Nom script in particular [36]. It was during this era that Nom poetry and literature became abundantly part of the people’s lives. The relative perfection of Nom script fulfilled the various needs of Vietnamese authors, from note-taking to composition during the 18th - 19th centuries. This period saw a flourishing of written literature in Nom script, which included not only *The Tale of Kieu* but also other Nom poems adapted from Chinese episodic novels. The use of Chinese popular literary works, such as novels and dramas, to be transformed into Nom script, shaped a movement with significant achievements in medieval Vietnamese literature [37], [26], [38]. This literary trend, prominently

referred to as a reaction to the dominance of Chinese culture, paved the way for Nguyen Du's *The Tale of Kieu* to follow suit [37, p.652]. Transformed from an episodic novel into a Nom poem, *The Tale of Kieu* underwent a shift in art principles [5, p.9].

The six-eight (6-8-6-8) meter, a distinctive meter of many Nom narrative poems, stands out in terms of its structure and musicality. It possesses an expressive role quite different from that of the six-eight in folk songs and romance poems, mainly serving as background rhythm. Thanks to its high flexibility and sustainability, the six-eight meter is capable of creating works of limitless scope [39, pp.64-69]. In terms of musicality, it is the unity of the sound model that creates the attractiveness and convenience in receptiveness. Only Vietnamese people write poems in six-eight meter, making it a "specialty" of Vietnamese poetry [40, pp.77-78], [41, pp.690-724]. Folk writers used the six-eight meter to compose poetry, and it was also used to create lyrics for folk songs such as quan ho, Nghe Tinh, and Binh Tri Thien. Over 95% of folk songs in the Vietnamese folk song treasury were written in the six-eight meter [42, p.42]. Nguyen Du, as well as other authors, utilized the six-eight meter for many works, including *The Tale of Kieu*, *The Story of the Flower Letter* (*Hoa Tiên truyện*), and *The Tale of Luc Van Tien* (*Truyện Lục Vân Tiên*). The six-eight meter, with its flexibility in verse and pacing, is a poetry style imbued with national identity.

The Tale of the Flower Letter, based on the Chinese song "The Eighth Genius Book: Romance of the Flowery" (Đệ bát tài tử Hoa tiên ký) [43, p.43], provided inspiration to Nguyen Du as he composed *The Tale of Kieu*. The similarities between *The Tale of the Flower Letter* and *The Tale of Kieu* are apparent in many verses [42, p.324]. Nguyen Du, in his works, notably emphasizes the concept of fortune and the concept of human life, distinguishing himself by highly appreciating the heart, valuing it three times as much as talent. He also displays sympathy for women through his poetry. His works reflect a nostalgic, caring, and loving heart that spans among thousands of people, for all eternity [2], [44, p. 71].

Nguyen Du's creative prowess and the value of *The Tale of Kieu* were broadly recognized and appreciated by monarchs, functionaries, and writers. *The Tale of Kieu* can be seen as Nguyen Du's "performance stage." The tale eloquently incorporates "the use of the heart and its suffering" [45, p.144] reflecting the effort, enthusiasm, and artistic talent of Nguyen Du. The poetic narrative achieved a level of excellence, capturing "the vision and the loving heart," [45, p.144] thereby representing a philosophical ideology. Nguyen Du's portrayal of a nostalgic, caring, and loving heart extends beyond societal boundaries and transcends eras, reaching among thousands of people, for all eternity [2], [44, p. 71].

4. Conclusion

We would like to incorporate four verses from Ho Quy Ly's poem *Answering Questions about Annam Customs* (Đáp nhân vấn An Nam phong tục) [46, p.246] to illustrate the multifaceted and reciprocal nature of the relationship between Vietnam and China in terms of literature and culture. This cross-cultural exchange is not only unidirectional but also multidimensional and reciprocal. The poem embodies the spirit of national generosity by King Ho Quy Ly [47, p.145]. This unique academic perspective served as a form of creative innovation that confounded many contemporaries [47, pp.185-190], [48]. Ho Quy Ly's cultural and educational reform stemmed from the pervasive Tong Nho-style of learning that permeated the Later Le dynasty, ultimately contributing to the Ming invasion in the early 15th century, and contributing to cultural genocide [49, p.97].

In the realm of translating and introducing ancient national literature, *The Tale of Kieu* was introduced relatively early. Truong Vinh Ky (1837-1898) transcribed and annotated *The Tale of Kieu* into the Vietnamese alphabet (the national language) in 1875, over half a century after the passing of Nguyen Du, exactly 147 years ago (as of 2022). This act infused new life into the work, and over the generations, significant changes have influenced the narrative. It is evident that there

have been qualitative changes in *The Tale of Kim Van Kieu* by Thanh Tam Tai Nhan following its introduction to Vietnam and Nguyen Du's creative interpretation. While *The Tale of Kim Van Kieu* by Thanh Tam Tai Nhan primarily focuses on Thuy Kieu's life, Nguyen Du's *Tale of Kieu* similarly delves into Thuy Kieu's story, while also implying Nguyen Du's own personal narrative.

This eloquently depicts the enduring nature of literary and cultural exchange and its transformative impact across generations.

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