

Southern culture in Ca Van Thinh's research

Sy Dong Le*

Thu Dau Mot University, 6 Tran Van On Street, Phu Hoa Ward, Thu Dau Mot City, Binh Duong Province, Vietnam

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Abstract:

This study focuses on clarifying those good memories in the image of Southern Vietnamese people, the history of struggle in the South, and the beauty of Southern poetry. Using the survey method, we review Ca Van Thinh's articles in journals, research works, as well as Ca Van Thinh's posthumous records from before 1945 to after 1975. Using the analytical method, the author delves deeper into the main contents of Ca Van Thinh's research. Using the synthesis method, we summarize the typical contributions of Ca Van Thinh in the study of Southern culture. From the research results, it has been shown that in his research works on Southern personalities, history, and literature, Ca Van Thinh has pointed out that Southern people - vivid symbols of the behavioural culture of Southern people; Southern history - an indicator of the tendency to build culture attached with patriotism; Southern literature - a database showing the characteristics of popular culture in the South. From there, we hope to once again affirm the contributions of Ca Van Thinh to the study of Southern Vietnamese culture. At the same time, the author clarifies Southern cultural characteristics in the research of a Southern intellectual.

Keywords: Ca Van Thinh, Southern culture, Southern intellectuals, Southern literature.

Classification numbers: 9.3, 10

1. Introduction

In their book *Culture: A Critical Assessment of Concepts and Definitions*, A.L. Kroeber, et al. (1952) [1] cite 164 definitions of culture, including "learned behaviour", "ideas in the mind", "logical structure", "mental defence mechanisms", and "spirit", among others. These definitions illustrate that the concept of culture varies according to the research direction of the discipline. In this article, we define culture as the attitudes and behaviours of humans towards nature and social circumstances.

To date, various aspects of Southern culture have been studied from multiple perspectives, revealing many previously hidden elements of the spiritual life of Southern people. Research efforts have not only highlighted the unique characteristics of the land and its inhabitants but also made recommendations for preserving and promoting its inherent values. Examples of such research include: *Southern Culture in Southeast Asian Social Space* (2000) [2]; Ho Ba Tham's *Southern Cultural Issues and Developments* (2003) [3]; *Characteristics of Southern Folk Cultural*

and Artistic Heritage (2004) [4]; Vu Van Ngoc's *The South Viewed from Culture, Literature, and Language* (2011) [5]; Vo Van Thanh's *Southern Culture through The View* (2013) [6]; *Folk Culture in The South* (2014) [7]; Ho Ngoc Mai's *Southern Culture and Language* (2015) [8]; *The South: Land and People* (2017) [9]; Nguyen Huu Hieu's *Rivers and Waters in Southern Cultural Life* (2017) [10]; Tran Duc Hung's *Local Words in Southern Folk Poetry* (2019) [11]; and *Southern Ecology and Culture in Vietnamese Literature* (2022) [12]. From these works, it is evident that Southern culture is a "living existence" in the process of acculturation, integration, and acceptance of differences.

Ca Van Thinh (1902-1987) was a prominent Southern figure of the 20th century. He spent nearly 20 years (1928-1945) as the school director of Ben Tre province. After 1945, he held numerous important positions in the revolutionary government, such as Acting Minister of Education, Consular Representative in Indonesia, and director of the Social Sciences Library. Alongside his revolutionary career, he

*Email: dongls@tdmu.edu.vn

consistently researched the cultural heritage and history of the South. From the 1940s onwards, Ca Van Thinh published numerous cultural and historical research articles in *Dai Viet Magazine* and *Tri Tan Magazine*, such as *Confucianism in Dong Nai* [13], *De Thien Temple with Our Ancestors* [14], and *Minh Bot Di Ngu - One Book, Two Groups of Writers* [15]. He continued to write about Southern writers and intellectuals like Ho Huan Nghiep, Phan Van Tri, Mac Thien Tich, Trinh Hoai Duc, Vo Truong Toan, Dang Duc Thuat, Ngo Nhan Tinh, Le Quang Dinh, Nguyen Thong, Huynh Man Dat, Tran Thien Chanh, and Nguyen Dinh Chieu through works such as *Nguyen Van Thoai with Thoai Ha River Digging and Vinh Te Canal* [16], *Nguyen Huu Huan's Life and Career* [16], *Dinh Chieu's Life and Career* [17], *Remembering Two Teachers Vo Truong Toan and Nguyen Dinh Chieu* [17], *Thoughts on Southern Literature History and the North - South Relationship* [17], *Translation about Nguyen Thong* [16], and *Dong Nai's Magnanimity* [18]. A close reading of these articles reveals that Ca Van Thinh reconstructed the lives of historical figures who significantly influenced the cultural development and character of Southern people. These research results laid the foundational "bricks" for later academic research on Southern culture. With his contributions, "Ca Van Thinh became a pioneering Southern researcher with modern perspectives and research methods" [17]. This is why the author chose Ca Van Thinh's research to re-identify the characteristics of Southern culture.

2. Southern culture in Ca Van Thinh's research

2.1. Southern notable people - vivid symbols of the behavioural culture of Southern people

Cultural research involves studying human behaviour, language, and attitudes towards the natural and social world. Therefore, understanding the culture of a country, region, or people is best achieved by getting to know its inhabitants.

Ca Van Thinh began to research Southern memories by observing and documenting the behaviour of Southern people, particularly notable Southern individuals. His published and posthumous works include numerous articles on figures such as Vo Truong Toan, Nguyen Dinh Chieu, Dang Duc Thuat, Trinh Hoai Duc, Le Quang Dinh, Ngo Nhan Tinh,

Huynh Man Dat, Tran Thien Chanh, Ho Huan Nghiep, Phan Van Tri, and Nguyen Huu Huan. Through these articles, he allows readers to perceive the unique culture of the South.

For Southern people, respecting those who are virtuous and intellectual has always been a priority. This respect is not merely conveyed through oral traditions or moral explanations but is demonstrated through concrete actions in everyday life. For instance, Vo Truong Toan, a patriotic scholar, was highly respected by the people of Saigon for his virtue. After the French army occupied three provinces in the Eastern South, patriotic scholars and righteous armies decided to move his grave from Hoa Hung to Bao Thanh (Ben Tre), a location not yet occupied by the enemy, to honour his legacy and prevent the French colonialists from tarnishing his reputation. Similarly, Nguyen Trung Truc (Nguyen Van Lich/Nguyen Lich), a peasant hero, is revered by the southern people. The image of Nguyen Trung Truc has been praised and immortalised in poetry by intellectuals and writers. For example, Huynh Man Dat wrote:

*The loyal man whose reputation lasts forever,
The vile man died slowly in shame* [19].

Or Truong Gia Mo wrote:

The devil's face is white

Afraid of the fisherman

Brave instead of the patriot

Nhat Tao burned an enemy ship

Kien Giang destroys the enemy post [19].

In the book *Ky Xuyen Van Sao*, Nguyen Thong praised Nguyen Van Lich: "*The man is deep and steadfastness, brave spirit* [17]".

Another point is that through the community's behaviour with notable men, and the behaviour of notable men with different social classes, Ca Van Thinh further shows that Southern people value fairness and equality. The foundation for establishing that fairness and equality comes from the "Tri ngôn dưỡng khí" [To know the meaning of speech, to nourish morals] education. They focus on human moral cultivation as the foundation, taking the interests of the people and national benefit as the course of action. Through the words of Nghe Chieu [17], we see

that Southern people set an example of Vo Truong Toan's educational style: If you want to foster loyalty, bravery, and heroism, teachers and students must work together to "báo nghĩa" [do virtuous acts], from "nghĩa nhỏ" [small virtues] (honouring one's parents) to "nghĩa lớn" [loyalty to the country], to accumulate more virtue in the person. They would "lập nghĩa" (foster virtue) three times a week each month (in Southern Vietnam in the past, each week had 10 days) [...] Through doing virtuous acts and fostering loyalty and courage, teachers and students remind each other of "tri ngôn", knowing the correct words of the person they are communicating with, whether they are honest or deceitful, because life experiences include deviations (blasphemy), fornication (deceit), deception (false words), and lies that avoid the truth (slandorous words). It is also from Vo Truong Toan's spirit of "trọng nghĩa" [respecting benefaction] and "Tập nghĩa" [doing virtuous acts] that Nguyen Dinh Chieu [17] chose his lifestyle, and wrote:

Transporting righteousness, but the boat will not be sunk,

Writing about treacherous, also the pen is not frayed.

Thus, in the face of righteous deeds, everyone (regardless of social identity and status: teacher or student) must always cultivate to preserve their virtue. When everyone has maintained their virtue, they will be an example for the community to respect and follow; they become a bright spot to exemplify the community's lifestyle.

Moreover, Southerners clearly show contempt for acts that go against national interests and the wishes of the community. A typical example is Nguyen Dinh Chieu's response [17]: "*If the king's land was robbed, my private land was without regret*", when the governor of Ben Tre province, Ponchon, wished to return the fields and gardens to Nguyen Dinh Chieu and patriotic scholars.

The case of Ton Tho Tuong, originally a confucianist, famous for being an excellent student and a good poet, whose family served as mandarins for the Nguyen dynasty for generations, is telling. Despite his poetry being admired by everyone, when Ton Tho Tuong collaborated with the French colonialists, he was immediately condemned and despised by the people

through replies to their poems. Southern patriotic poets like Phan Van Tri and other confucians clearly expressed their disdain for Ton Tho Tuong [19]. Their poems condemned him as a "stupid person", "sitting at the bottom of a well", "foolish in old age", "a person with no dignity", and "a person who has lost honour."

For King Tu Duc, the elders in Can Tho told the story of Cu Tri drinking blood and eating "càng đước" (cang duoc is the name of a type of turtle). According to folklore, this story happened as follows: One day, Phan Van Tri caught a big turtle. He invited his friends to eat the turtle meat. While drinking, he extemporaneously composed the poem "phú" (phú is a literary genre):

Eat turtle's meat

Cut off the cang duoc's head

Drink the cang duoc's blood

Tear the cang duoc's body

Eat the cang duoc's meat

The evidence outlined above demonstrates that the behaviour of Southern people is very distinctive. While intellectuals are typically respected by society, and the patrician class often instils fear, in Cochinchina, this was not necessarily the case. To be respected by the community, one must first possess morals, followed by intelligence and social class. Thus, Southern people not only value gratitude but also promote good deeds, creating equality in community relations - equality rooted in the spirit of virtuous action.

2.2. Southern history - An indicator of the cultural tendency towards patriotism

As previously stated, the reason Southern people are attached to community interests, equality, and ethical standards is recognised by the community. But where do these common standards and interests originate?

Ca Van Thinh's research shows that this foundation stems from patriotism. For Southerners, patriotism is not merely empty slogans nor is it tied to a specific king, family, or court; it is linked to the consciousness of expanding, building, and protecting the territory, along with the traditional cultural values of the nation.

A typical example is Truong Dinh's behaviour [17]. In a time when feudal behaviour was still constrained, he dared to prioritise the country's fate over the king's

command and stood up against foreign invaders. Therefore, Truong Dinh was honoured by the masses and the righteous as the Great Marshal of Binh Tay.

In addition to Truong Dinh, there is also Ho Huan Nghiep [17]. When Ho Huan Nghiep followed Truong Dinh in an uprising in Go Cong, someone asked him upon his return home: “Can Truong Dinh’ suprising succeed?” He replied: “People who do righteous deeds do not count success or failure.” Before being executed by the enemy, he washed his face, fixed his towel, and leisurely recited four verses of poetry before being beheaded:

*I see a righteous cause, don't dare to be indifference,
Be a loyal and filial boy.*

This body dies without regret,

Only compassionate my old mother with gray hair.

Nguyen Thong, with his respect for the heroes, wrote:

“Since the enemy caused upheaval in Luc Province, intellectuals and people risked their lives to stand up and bravely accept death, which is unspeakable, like Do Trinh Thoai in Tan Hoa, Nguyen Lich in Tan An are all brilliant examples. As for the faraway villages and alleys, there were the warrior’s wife and the virtuous women who were not dishonored. They fought the enemy to the death. I personally know of more than a dozen people” [19].

Patriotic scholars such as Nguyen Dinh Chieu, Phan Van Tri, and Huynh Man Dat pioneered the “tị đia” [local moving] to move from the Eastern provinces to the three Western provinces.

The patriotic and anti-enemy actions of patriots and intellectuals have set an example in the lifestyle and awareness of patriotism among the people. This foundation of cultural values takes patriotic traditions as a direction for practice and development. Alongside patriotic heroes and scholars, Southern farmers also spontaneously fought the enemy, despite the court ordering the army to withdraw. These farmers, out of love for righteousness - and righteousness here is attached to the national cause, as described in “Văn tế nghĩa sĩ Cần Giuộc” by Nguyen Dinh Chieu [20].

Then in 1885, there was a “Hội kín” [Secret Assembly] in Eighteen Vuon Trau Village, Hoc Mon,

led by Nguyen Van Buong and Phan Van Hon (Quan Hon), who attacked Saigon, killing Governor Ca (Tran Tu Ca). Even though Nguyen Van Buong and Quan Hon sacrificed their lives, the struggle movement continued to spread to Cho Lon and Go Cong.

These explanations, along with the traditions and cultural character associated with the patriotic traditions of the Southern people, are evident in Ca Van Thinh’s works such as: *Looking Back at The Traditional Morality of The Southern People, The Struggle Movement of The People of Luc Tinh during The First Period of Invasion by The French Army, Over Many Years Our City Was a Battlefield against Foreign Invaders, Mac Thi’s Genealogy and The Battle of Rach Gam - Xoai Mut, Hoc Mon Uprising (1885) or the Tyrant Must Pay for His Crimes, From The Ancient Cultural Relationship to The Solidarity of The Vietnamese - Khmer Struggle to Defeat The American Invaders* [20].

From these works, we see another aspect of Southern culture associated with patriotism, not only in the fight against foreign invaders but also in creating productive spaces, and openness to receiving, acculturating, and interacting with other cultural streams. For example, Nguyen Van Thoai, who was credited with digging the Thoai Ha canal, had his name engraved on the epitaph at Thoai Son mountain: *“The mountain is beside the capital, more than 10 trượng [Trượng is same 4 meters], with a circumference of 2,478 tầm [Tầm is same 2.3 meters; Looking out at the blue-green colour, vertiginous. The plants are moving like dragons playing in the water, as if phoenixes are dancing on the river, that wonderful scene, if it weren’t for the creator who would have made it? Since ancient times, that scene has been mysterious, few people have gone there. The day, he finished digging the canal and presented the map to the king, that was also the day of the strange-meet with nature! The king issued an edict making the name Thoai Ngoc, the famous “Thoai Ha” for the Dong Xuyen canal, to record the old god’s merits...”* [16].

Thus, people who have contributed to building mountains and rivers can have those places named after them. This is also a meaningful deed that Southerners do for those who have contributed to the country.

In the article “De Thien Temple for our Ancestors” (*Angkor Wat - Angkor Thom for our Ancestors*) [14],

Ca Van Thinh explored the discovery of Angkor Wat - Angkor Thom by the Vietnamese people. He addressed the scepticism of both himself and archaeological researchers on the question: Did the Vietnamese or the French discover Angkor Wat - Angkor Thom? By relying on passages from “Việt sử thông giám cương mục khảo lược của Nguyễn Thông” (*Nguyen Thong’s Viet Su Thong Giam Outline*) and poems by Trinh Hoai Duc, such as “Khách Cao Miên quốc kí hoài Diệp Minh Phụng” (*Being a Guest in Cao Mien Remembers Diệp Minh Phung*) and “Kí Huỳnh Ngọc Ân - Hối Sơn Chân Lạp thành” (*In Chan Lap Citadel, Remember Huynh Ngoc An - Hoi Son*), he demonstrated that it was the Vietnamese who first discovered Angkor Wat - Angkor Thom, not the French. Moreover, from Trinh Hoai Duc’s poems, Ca Van Thinh showed the relationship between Vietnam and Khmer and the acceptance of Khmer culture by the Vietnamese.

At this point, we can conclude that patriotism is a significant factor influencing the behaviour of Southern people, rather than the Confucian academic education style and feudal ideology imposed on them. In Ca Van Thinh’s writings about notable men, Southern history also reflects the pride of posterity in the achievements and spiritual heritage of their ancestors.

2.3. Southern literature - A database reflecting the characteristics of popular culture in the South

When Ca Van Thinh was the Provincial Education Officer of Ben Tre, he expressed his concern: “*This post-educated person worries intently that: ‘this little literary granary’ is not enough to provide spiritual ‘food’ for all civilians. Therefore, I exerted my small energy to find and collect every seed, every flower in the coastal fields and cross-fields of the Six Provinces of Southern*” [21]. With this spirit, Ca Van Thinh was dedicated to collecting literary works that are not only valuable linguistically but also in expressing the unique characteristics of Southern culture.

Of the ten “Ly” songs Ca Van Thinh collected, eight reflect the behaviour associated with “river-folk” culture - openness and following nature. For example, the song “Ly Tang Tinh” portrays a girl who is relaxed in her work. She is not impatient with the “Con nước” [tide] but sees it as an inevitable natural phenomenon, accepting the natural law of the water’s rise and fall, and waiting for the water to recede to catch fish and shrimp:

A ly tang tinh tang,

The green water flows around the rock,

I wait for the water to go down, catch fish, catch shrimp [21].

Similarly, the song “Ly Con Còng” [sand crab] presents a gentle perspective on the objective conditions of life:

The crabs lie curled up in the rocky hollow,

The wind downs the “còng” downs, the wind raises the “còng” too [21].

On the other hand, the song “Ly Cây” [plant rice] affirms the sentimentality and straightforwardness of Southern women, who do not hesitate to express their feelings when away from their lover:

She returned to Giong Dua, through the fields, then the fields again.

The wind stirs the rice-field veer, it’s a lonely sad, and sad for him - id.

The hand hold sheaf of corn, hire by day,

The hand hold sheaf of corn, my heart is sad and miss him [21].

That daring is shown even more clearly in the song “Ly áo vá quàng”:

Dare any one to find the scales of a yellow catfish,

The liver of krill, how much it costs i am also buy. [21].

An intractable problem that baffles all who encounter it, but if the person receiving the challenge understands the hidden meaning, they will happily accept the challenge and win the challenger’s heart. This reflects the Southern spirit, living in the “Uncle Ba Phi” cultural area.

In addition to the above songs, Ca Van Thinh also recorded proverbs that express the diverse viewpoints of Southern people on life phenomena. For example, the phrase: “*Chân cứng đá mềm*” [Strong and tough] illustrates the will and strength of pioneers exploring new lands; and “*Đoàn kết thì giàu, chia rẽ thì nghèo*” [United we prosper, divided we fall], highlighting the importance of solidarity for development. Other proverbs reflect a pragmatic attitude towards life: “*Của người phúc ta*” [rob Peter to pay Paul] and “*Được làm*

vua thua làm giặc” [Success is never blamed]. These proverbs also show that Southern people prefer spiritual values over material ones, value a harmonious lifestyle, and are not prone to jealousy.

Moreover, Southern culture is also expressed in folk stories. Ca Van Thinh collected many stories that highlight the fidelity and resilience of Southern women. For instance, the story of *Ba Doi Om’s Mountain* [21] recounts a farmer’s newlywed wife waiting all year for news of her husband, who had gone to dig the Vinh Te canal. After finishing the harvest, she carried a pot of new rice on her head that she reaped, milled, and pounded it herself. She set out from a distant village, hoping to find her husband, only to learn he had died months ago. Exhausted by the pain and despair, hunger, and cold, she died standing on the mountain, her body turning into stone with the rice pot still carried on her head. The locals call this mountain Ba Doi Om mountain [mountain in That Son (Seven mountains)]. It is 251 m high, 1,200 m long, and 600 m wide, and located in the Tinh Bien district, An Giang province. This story not only praises the woman’s deep love for her husband but also reflects the Southern people’s respect for a faithful wife. Another story, *The Story of Nguyen Thi Ton*, narrates the courageous actions of a woman seeking to exonerate her husband [21]:

Bui Huu Nghia (Valedictorian Nghia), considered an upstanding individual, especially in his youth, after earning the highest marks on the prefectural examination (valedictorian), was appointed district chief in Tra Vang (Tra Vinh). However, because he allowed farmers to fish freely without paying taxes, he was sentenced to death by the Governor of Vinh Long province and had to stay in jail to wait for the king’s approval. His wife, Nguyen Thi Ton, travelled to the Hue Court to submit a petition for his exoneration. The court granted amnesty to Bui Huu Nghia, appointing him to guard Vinh Thong encampment at the border to atone for his crimes. Upon her death, Valedictorian Nghia wrote to honour his wife: “Ngã chi bần, khanh độc năng trợ, ngã chi oan, khanh độc năng minh, triều quận cộng xưng khanh thị phụ” [I am poor, you are not criticised, I suffered an injustice, you cleared my name, everyone in the court and district said she was a truly worthy wife]. This story highlights Nguyen Thi Ton’s loyalty and her efforts to save her husband, illustrating the image of a woman who values righteousness and fights for justice.

Similarly, the story of *Ba Tri Old Men* (Ông già Ba Tri) [21] recounts an elderly man persistently filing petitions to sue a tyrant who colluded with district officials to set up a new market, oppressing the people for profit. When his complaints to the district and province were ignored, *Ba Tri Old Men* took his petition to the imperial capital, raising a drum in front of the palace to file his indictment. Thanks to his efforts, people were able to trade again at the old Ba Tri market.

These stories demonstrate that the culture of righteousness is always present in the actions and behaviour of Southern people. That benefaction (việc nghĩa) is linked to community interests and familial relationships, often intertwined with social justice. It is through such righteous behaviour that the position and role of women are elevated, allowing them to influence society. Additionally, popular culture in the South reflects the belief in eliminating evil and restoring good. For example, the story of Thu Huong (Truyện Thủ Huồng) tells of a governor-general and specialist in lending and tax collection (Cai tổng) who, after a near-death experience, dreamt of being in the underworld with shackles awaiting him. Upon waking, he decided to do charitable deeds, building a raft house at the confluence of the Dong Nai and Saigon rivers, where many boats are parked awaiting high tide to row to Bien Hoa or Gia Dinh and home to a bamboo raft with a small hut on top to provide shelter from the wind and rain. The hut provides fish sauce, salt, rice, and water to travellers. This place became known as Nga Ba Raft House (Ngã Ba Nhà Bè). In summary, the belief in eliminating evil, restoring good, and choosing a community-oriented lifestyle characterises Southern people’s behaviour. This belief influences their straightforwardness and intolerance of wrongdoing, coupled with their emotional and tolerant nature.

3. Conclusions

The above analysis confirms that Ca Van Thinh provides a clear explanation of Southern culture. He points out that one of the key factors shaping Southern culture is patriotism, along with living conditions associated with rivers. In this environment, Southern people live and act according to righteousness. This righteousness manifests in eliminating evil, believing in and worshipping good, and is evident in both social responsibilities and familial relationships. Moreover,

this righteous behaviour is tied to the protection of territory, resistance against foreign invaders, and opposition to forces contrary to community interests. Through his research, Ca Van Thinh has not only reconstructed Southern cultural memories but also decoded the origins of Southern culture, thereby suggesting directions for research, preservation, and development of the good traditions and beautiful values inherited from our ancestors.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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