

THE FLOWERING AGE IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: THE JOURNEY OF GROWING UP OF CHILDREN IN SOME SOUTHEAST ASIAN NARRATIVES

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Abstract: *Economic, political, cultural, and social issues in Southeast Asian countries are often the focus of attention, with limited emphasis placed on children's literature in the region. This article utilizes the juxtapositional model of comparison to analyze three notable works of Southeast Asian children's literature: Chai thời gian [Bottle of Time] by Prabhassorn Sevikul (Thailand), Tôi thấy hoa vàng trên cỏ xanh [I See Yellow Flowers in the Green Grass] by Nguyễn Nhật Ánh (Vietnam), and Chiến binh Cầu Vồng [The Rainbow's Troops] by Andrea Hirata (Indonesia). The study centers on exploring the challenging journey to adulthood experienced by the child protagonists in these works, examining how they confront various events that help them grow and discover deeper meanings in life. Additionally, it introduces a new conceptualization of the age range from 12-13 to just before 18 years old, highlighting the significance of this transitional period, which encompasses changes in the physical, mental, and cognitive development of children at this stage.*

Keywords: *Juxtapositional comparison model, childhood turmoil, forces of resistance and drive, transition to adulthood, Southeast Asian children's literature.*

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1. PROPOSED ISSUE

Southeast Asian literature has long been the subject of Western studies. For example, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) analyzes the novel *Noli Me Tángere* (1887) by Filipino writer José Rizal (1861-96) to demonstrate the involvement of literature in the formation of the imagined nation. Other works such as Thelma B. Kintanar's *Self and Society in Southeast Asian Fiction: Thematic Explorations in the Twentieth Century Fiction of Five ASEAN Countries* (1988), Tony Day's "Self" and "Subject" in *Southeast Asian Literature in the Global Age* (2007), Penny Edwards's *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860-1945* (2007), and Jan van der Putten's *Traditions Redirecting Contemporary Indonesian Cultural Production* (2017) also focus on Southeast Asian literary works. In addition, there are also voices from insiders - Southeast Asian scholars - such as *Essays on Literature and Society in Southeast Asia: Political and Sociological Perspectives* (1981) edited by Seong Chee Tham, *The Southeast Asian Woman Writes Back: Gender, Identity and Nation in the Literatures of Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines* (2017) by Grace V. S. Chin and Kathrina Mohd Daud, and *Literature and Nation-Building in Vietnam: The Invisibilization of the Indians* (2021) by Chi P. Pham. These studies have

contributed to pulling Southeast Asian literature out of the “lowland of world literature” [1, p.51] and affirming the position and identity of Southeast Asian literature on the world literary map. However, most of the above works approach Southeast Asian literature through the relationship between literature and nation, viewing some literary pieces of work as allegories for related economic, political, cultural, and social issues. There are still corps of literature that have not been mentioned by these works, including Southeast Asian children’s literature.

With the desire to provide materials to overcome that deficiency, the article focuses on studying three beautiful pieces of work of Southeast Asian children’s literature: *Bottle of Time* [*Chai thời gian*, 1985] by Thai writer Prabhassorn Sevikul (1948-), *The Rainbow’s Troops* [*Chiến binh Cầu Vồng*, 2005] by Indonesian writer Andrea Hirata (1967-), and *I See Yellow Flowers in the Green Grass* [*Tôi thấy hoa vàng trên cỏ xanh*, 2010] by Vietnamese writer Nguyễn Nhật Ánh (1955-). The three pieces are about the transition to adulthood of teenagers but each piece is a unique story about how teenagers overcome their problems in the transitional period between childhood and adulthood with changes in physical, mental, and cognitive aspects of themselves and the world. After providing an understanding of teenagers as a theoretical basis for the research, the article will apply the juxtapositional model of comparison proposed by scholar S.S. Friedman¹ to analyze and point out the similarities and differences in the growth and maturity of children in these three different geographical and cultural spaces.

2. CONTENT

2.1. The concept of “blossoming age”

In Vietnamese literature and literary research, the age group from 12-13 to 18-19 has been called in various ways. The most common concept is “tuổi mới lớn” (adolescence/ adolescent), and literary pieces written about/ for teenagers are often classified as “văn học viết cho tuổi mới lớn” (literature for adolescents). In 2002, Kim Đồng Publishing House launched the series *Tuổi mới lớn*, including pieces of work by Nguyễn Thị Châu Giang, Vũ Đình Giang, Phan Hồn Nhiên, Nguyễn Hương, Nguyễn Thiên Ngân, Dương Thụy, among other writers, about the lives and feelings of teenagers. Vietnamese writers also share the concept of “tuổi mới lớn.” For example, poet Đinh Hùng wrote: “Khi mới lớn, tuổi mười lăm, mười bảy/ Làm học trò, mắt sáng với môi tươi” [When I was adolescent, at the age of fifteen, seventeen/ Being a pupil, bright eyes and fresh lips” (*Khi mới lớn [When I was adolescent]*) [2]. Writer Đoàn Thạch Biền, editor of the *Áo trắng* [*White Shirt*] magazine dedicated to schoolboys and schoolgirls, confided: “I often write for the age group of 16+, tentatively called ‘tuổi mới lớn’” (cited in [3, pp.44-45]). In an interview, writer Lê Phương Liên, former Head of the Children’s Literature Department of the Vietnam Writers Association, said that “the term ‘tuổi mới lớn’ (nowadays many people call it ‘teenage’) originated from a medical concept to refer to the age group from 13 to 19, physiologically this is the age of sexual puberty” (cited in [4]). Children’s literature researchers in Vietnam

¹ The juxtapositional model of comparison is proposed by scholar Susan Stanford Friedman in her article “Why Not Compare?” (*PMLA*, vol.26, no.3, 2011). It looks for hidden connections and connections between pieces of work, allowing them to interact and converse with each other. This model can be considered a useful approach to neutralize hegemony, expand the scope of meaning creation, and stimulate the possibility of dialogue between different pieces of work.

also often use the concept of “tuổi mới lớn” to define the transition from childhood to adulthood in each person. For instance, Võ Văn Nhơn and Nguyễn Bảo Châu defined that “tuổi mới lớn” is “the transitional period from childhood to adulthood. Therefore, the changes in psychology, emotions, and experiences that a teenager goes through will have a huge difference between their versions as children and ones as adults” [5, pp.1244-1245]. Thus, the two authors believed that “văn học tuổi mới lớn” [adolescent literature] is “an interweaving of children’s one and adult one. It means that pieces written for adolescents will have to address the complex issues of family and social relationships that this age group is facing. However, the issues must be expressed through the innocent lens of souls that have not yet fully grown up” [5, p.1245]. Although not giving a specific definition of “tuổi mới lớn” like Võ Văn Nhơn and Nguyễn Bảo Châu, Thanh Tâm Nguyễn also affirmed that this is “an intermediate age when children transition to the adult world, associated with many complex psychological changes” [3]. Similarly, Nguyễn Thị Thanh Hương also paid attention to the sophisticated and complex psychological development of children during puberty (from 9, 10 years old to about 15, 16 years old) and argued that “this is a special period in the life of each person, a period containing many changes” [6, p.122]. When studying characters at this age, she concentrated on the new emotions that make the characters confused when standing before the boundary of friendship and love.

Besides “tuổi mới lớn,” some other concepts are also used in contemporary Vietnamese literature to identify this age, say, “tuổi trăng tròn” [full-moon age] and “tuổi mộng mơ” [dreamy age]. Nevertheless, there is no specific, precise definition of these concepts in Vietnam. In addition, another concept was proposed by writer Nguyễn Trường Sơn in 1967 when he launched the series *Tuổi hoa* [Blossoming Age] with three types of publications: 1. “Hoa Xanh” [Green Blossoms], including pieces of work about innocent and pure children; 2. “Hoa Đỏ” [Red Blossoms], including adventurous and risky stories of teenagers; 3. “Hoa Tím” [Violet Blossoms], which are stories about the first love (cited in [7]). It can be seen that the concept of “tuổi hoa” used by Nguyễn Trường Sơn has a wide scope, covering childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood with many diverse issues.

Meanwhile, Western researchers often use the concept of “coming of age”. In the Cambridge Dictionary, the noun “coming of age” means someone “legally becomes an adult and is old enough to vote”; “the time when someone matures emotionally or in some other way” [8]. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* explains “coming of age” as “the attainment of prominence, respectability, recognition, or maturity” [9]. It can be seen that both dictionaries above emphasize “coming of age” as a time of change, different from the previous stage, or “maturity” in some aspect or in some way. “Coming of age” is also used as an adjective to refer to a specific type of literature, such as *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*’ definition of the concept of “coming of age novel”: “a coming-of-age novel may be devoted entirely to the crises of late adolescence involving courtship, sexual initiation, separation from parents, and choice of vocation or spouse” [10]. In a study of coming-of-age novels in contemporary American literature, Scott Bradfield and Mark Richard noted that “these novels can also take the form of a journey gone ‘off the rails.’ With a tone of despair, these stories of loss and failure defy conventional ideas of the journey of self-discovery” [11, p.98].

Selectively inheriting the suggestions of Western and Vietnamese scholars, and based on personal observations and research, in this article, the author uses the concept of

“blossoming age” [tuổi hoa] to identify the transitional period from the end of childhood to young adult in preparation for becoming an adult, equivalent to the age from 12-13 years old to before 18 years old - the time when Vietnamese children are recognized as citizens and officially allowed to participate in elections. Because individuals vary in physical and psychological characteristics and circumstances, the speed of physical and mental development of each person is not the same. Therefore, the “blossoming age” in each individual may not coincide. The phrase “blossoming age” is chosen because the author argues that the age from 12-13 to before 18 is a significant stage in each individual’s life, similar to the importance of blossoming time in the life cycle of a tree. “Blossom” is a bright, easily recognizable beauty. However, the “blossom” is the decisive premise of the “fruit,” just like the entire later journey of each person as an adult/ independent individual. Therefore, the “blossoming age” is when each individual realizes physical development and crucial changes that are turning points in their spirit. It is a difficult period for individuals who have just left childhood but have no experience and courage of an adult to face, shoulder, and resolve many unexpected events. *This journey often determines the qualities and development of each individual in the future.* Using the concept of “blossoming age” to analyze three unique narratives about boys and girls in the transition to adulthood by three writers from Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam, the article will focus on their journey of maturity through many events and failures to discover and initially identify and position themselves in the family, school, and social environments.

2.2. Similarities in three Southeast Asian narratives about the transition to adulthood of blossoming-age children

Prabhassorn Sevikul’s *Bottle of Time*, Andrea Hirata’s *The Rainbow’s Troops*, and Nguyễn Nhật Ánh’s *I See Yellow Flowers on the Green Grass* all contain autobiographical elements to some extent. *The Rainbow’s Troops*, as the introduction on the cover of the Vietnamese translation published in 2022 indicates, is based on the real-life story of the writer Andrea Hirata. Similarly, in an interview, the author of *Bottle of Time* shared that he constructed this novel on his memories of his adolescence and that its main character - Nat - is his incarnation, while Nat’s friends are modeled and inspired by his friends (cited in [12]). Meanwhile, the imprint of the writer Nguyễn Nhật Ánh’s hometown, family, and childhood also appears in the piece *I See Yellow Flowers on the Green Grass*. The presence of autobiographical elements in these three narratives shows that the transition to adulthood is a significant period, leaving an indelible mark on the memories of the three writers, and writing is a way for them to relive those special and meaningful years. Although published at different times, all three narratives meet in the context of the stories. The novel *Bottle of Time* is about Thai teenagers living around the 1970s when the song *Time in a Bottle* by Jim Croce was quite popular. In addition, the details about the favorite entertainment activities of school pupils at that time also show a social life without the internet and social media entertainment. *Bottle of Time* takes readers to Thailand in the 1980s through images of cafes selling iced coffee, peanut candy, and soft drinks, where there were three-legged wooden stools and old jukeboxes where people could put money in to listen to their favorite songs. Meanwhile, specific information given at the end of *The Rainbow’s Troops* reveals that the story of eleven Malay girls and boys from the poorest community on Belitong Island took place around the 1980s: “In the early 1990s, the world price of tin plummeted from \$16,000 per ton to \$5,000 per ton. P. N collapsed immediately. All manufacturing

plants closed; thousands of workers lost their jobs. It was the largest layoff in Indonesia, maybe the world” [13, p.409]. Unlike *Bottle of Time* and *The Rainbow’s Troops*, Nguyễn Nhật Ánh’s narrative has no specific time markers. However, the games of tag, marbles, selling goods (which are broken bowls and shredded leaves) that the child characters played with each other and the detail “Three years ago, the flying motorcycle circus came to set up a tent in the village schoolyard” [14, p.337] are indications that *I See Yellow Flowers on the Green Grass* also has a setting in the 1980s, when flying motorcycle performances were very popular in Vietnam and life in Vietnamese rural areas was still pretty poor. Thus, the common point in the three narratives about the journey to adulthood of these Vietnamese, Indonesian, or Thai flower children is that they all took place in the 1970s - 1980s when there was no sign of the internet or technological games. They take readers back in time to the last century, showing the uneasy transitions to adulthood of Southeast Asian child characters.

According to scholar Rudolf Steiner, “Adolescents want to experience life through their ability to think about themselves, others, and the world” (cited in [15]). However, experiencing life with many collisions and events is an uneasy journey for children. On the one hand, events and experiences can help children change their thinking, promoting them to mature. On the other hand, if children encounter events that are too big and beyond their ability to think and act practically, they can fall into a deadlock and struggle to escape adversity. No matter what, this difficult, struggling journey always makes children no longer have the innocence and naivety of yesterday. Nguyễn Nhật Ánh’s *I See Yellow Flowers on the Green Grass* as an example. Thiều, Tường, and Mận are the three main characters of this narrative. As Tường’s older brother, Thiều was good at studying, smart but afraid of ghosts, and often pushed housework to his younger brother. Tường was handsome but not good at studying, willing to do housework for his brother to study. Tường loved and admired his older brother, always gave in to him and tried to protect him, and even took the beatings for him. Mận was Thiều’s classmate. Her family was poor, her father was sick, her mother sold groceries, and she had to take care of her father and help her mother sell goods so she had little time to study. All three characters were innocent, naive, and playful. However, the consecutive events that happened to Mận make her change. Her house burned down, her mother was arrested and taken to the police station, and her father may have died in the fire. In a moment, the little girl suddenly lost everything. Mận had to live in Thiều and Tường’s house, causing the lives of the two brothers to change from then on. Seeing Tường being close to Mận, Thiều felt very uncomfortable. The fire of jealousy burned, pushing Thiều to make consecutive mistakes. The first mistake was that Thiều intentionally let Mr. Năm Ve catch Tường’s beloved toad to cook porridge. This incident made Thiều curse himself for several days, and Tường became sad, no longer the happy, active child. Thiều’s action made it impossible for both brothers to live innocent, carefree days like before. Thiều’s second mistake was even more serious: Because of misunderstanding and jealousy of Tường, Thiều used a stick to hit Tường’s back, causing him to be injured and bedridden. Since then, the three children experienced dark days. Thiều was torn by many different feelings and no longer had simple thoughts: “Honestly, I am not afraid of my mother’s crying or my father’s shouting as much as I am afraid of Mận’s eyes. Her eyes look at me quietly and deeply, as if she is not looking at me but looking through me to see what is in my heart that makes me so cruel”

[14, p.287]. The events that happened to each character were different but still affected the remaining characters, causing all three innocent children to be “shocked” and forcing them to find ways to adapt and overcome.

The fact that growing up is never easy is also the message of the piece *Bottle of Time*. Nat, Eik, and Chai were best friends since first grade, and then they had another best friend named Porm. The four children were close and loved each other, chatting happily every day in class, in the cafeteria, and even when waiting for the bus to go home. However, many incidents happened, making them unable to be carefree anymore. Chai was injured while playing soccer and became “a limping boy” [16, p.59] - a big shock that made him miserable and depressed because he could not fulfill his dream of becoming a soldier like his father. The dream of a complete family of Nat and Ning ended when their parents found new happiness after many years of separation. Both Chai and Nat had to face endless sadness and dark, lonely days. Meanwhile, Porm’s parents forced her to transfer to a school for girls. Another character - Jom - also fell into a deadlock when she discovered his father was having an affair. The children in *Bottle of Time* were all devastated, sad, and unable to continue living as before. They did not have their parents by their side, nor the sympathy and companionship of their relatives, and had no experience in dealing with the storms of life.

The children in *The Rainbow’s Troops* also had to face consecutive events, forcing them to change to adapt. The path to education was already difficult for the children on Belitong Island - the smallest island in Indonesia, possessing outstanding beauty in the ocean but also being home to the indigenous, poor residents. Most of the parents of the children in the Rainbow’s troops were illiterate, had to work hard for each meal, and did not realize that going to school is a basic human right. To get an education, even in Muhammadiyah, a school that deteriorated to the point where the roof was full of holes, the cement floor was crumbling, the wooden beams were rotten, and the windows and doors could not be closed, the poor children of Belitong Island had to fight like real warriors. However, their path to education was even more difficult when the Rector who played an important role in helping poor children go to school fell seriously ill. Muhammadiyah School was also in a precarious situation and could be closed at any time. Not only that, people also discovered that the land where this school was located had a very high tin content and was highly valuable, making the possibility of Muhammadiyah School’s survival even more fragile. The sad news that came one after another in the situation of the Rector being seriously ill and passing away forever made the pupils of Muhammadiyah School feel the irony of life, forcing them to think more about their choices: drop out of school, go back to work to help their families or continue to stay, find every way to protect the existence of the school? The struggle to choose and act forced the children to cross the boundary of childhood and never return.

Juxtaposing *The Rainbow’s Troops*, *Bottle of Time*, and *I See Yellow Flowers on the Green Grass*, one can see that although these three pieces of work are about different children from different lands and cultures, they all show the difficult transition to adulthood of blossoming-age children in the 1970s and 1980s when Southeast Asian countries were facing economic, political, and cultural challenges: an Indonesia struggling with miserable and illiteracy, a Vietnam lacking and poor, a Thailand with unemployment and layoffs. The transition to adulthood of children in the narratives seems similar to the difficult transition

of these Southeast Asian countries in the second half of the 20th century. However, as the next part of the article will show, the child characters overcame the storms in different ways to “blossom” with various colors and scents.

2.3. The various choices to grow and mature in three Southeast Asian narratives

Appearing many times in *Bottle of Time* is the song *Time in a Bottle*: “If I could save time in a bottle/ The first thing that I'd like to do/ Is to save every day/ Till eternity passes away/ Just to spend them with you” [16, p.9]. This was a song that the character Nat especially loved. It was not only sung in the cafe but also echoed in Nat’s memories and mind. This metaphor evokes a reality that contrasts with human desires: it is impossible to contain and “lock” time in a bottle, so whether they want it or not, children must grow up, face difficulties, choose their path, and cannot return to yesterday. Yesterday, Nat and Ning had a peaceful, happy life with their parents, but today, their family has fallen apart and been devastated. Chai used to be a great player but today, he has become a limper, killing his sadness with marijuana. The innocent and naive Ning belongs to the past. Similarly, the family that once had so much sweet happiness for the girl Jom was destroyed by the appearance of a stranger. The successive events brought disaster and suffering, forcing the children to face and overcome. Nat and Ning silently endured the accumulated suffering, while trying to understand and love both their parents when they found new happiness. This choice of the two children reflects the spirit of tolerance, compassion, and forgiveness of Buddhism, which is the national religion of Thailand. Although Nat and Ning are not described as devout children, and images of temples and religious beliefs almost do not appear in the novel, the details such as Nat and Ning’s mother preparing a feast every birthday, and the whole family bringing the feast to the pagoda show that the Buddhist spirit permeates the material and spiritual life of the Thai people. The Buddhist spirit of tolerance helped Nat and Ning to overcome the storms they encountered and also contributed to creating the strength for other teenagers like Eik, Chai, and Pom to overcome suffering. *Bottle of Time* ends with the detail that Ning was pregnant while still a schoolgirl, signaling that the storm has not yet and a new wound will be piled on the old wound in the heart of Ning, a child in an incomplete family. However, the image of Nat embracing Ning to protect his younger sister has kindled a hope that if one cannot lock time in a bottle to keep the peaceful and happy days forever, the sad and dark days will not last forever but pass. The image of the “bottle of time,” therefore, has both a modern breath and is imbued with the Buddhist spirit of impermanence and liberation from suffering when people have thoroughly understood impermanence.

Like *Bottle of Time*, Andrea Hirata’s narrative also contains many messages through metaphors. The most important metaphor in this novel is in its title: *The Rainbow’s Troops*. Eleven pupils of Muhammadiyah School had to fight like real warriors on the battlefield, that was the risk that their shabby school could be closed at any time, imminent death on the way to class, a life of hunger and lack of clothing, the sound of drilling machines and excavators that could destroy the school to exploit the precious tin mine underground. Along with their teachers like brave “generals,” the children went through fear and contempt of the world with a strong belief in the future and the power of knowledge. Their maturity was as beautiful as the magical light of a rainbow appearing after the rain. Each child was a color, and when they held on together, they constructed the special rainbow of Muhammadiyah School. Their special will and determination seem to have roots in the

Islamic spiritual teachings that the Rector and Teacher Mus taught them from their first day of school. In the middle of the board including the name of Muhammadiyah is a line in Arabic: “Do good things, avoid evil.” The strong will of the Rector and Teacher Mus was also a shining example for the children to follow. Religious beliefs, regular religious practice, and the will to overcome difficulties turned the boys and girls into warriors with the beauty of the seven colors of the rainbow. This spirit runs from the first to the last lines of *The Rainbow’s Troops*, creating a unique beauty for Hirata’s novel.

Meanwhile, writer Nguyễn Nhật Ánh shows the power of fairy tales in supporting children’s souls. Little boy Tường loved fairy tales and believed in the law that “good people are rewarded” in fairy tales. Among them, Tường preferred the story of Purple Toad, which told about a toad that could speak human language and help a student pass the exam and marry a princess. When Tường had an accident and was bedridden, it was his belief in the rewards for good people and miracles that helped Tường overcome his sad situation, meet the “princess” and then recover. On the contrary, thanks to meeting Tường, the “princess” also escaped the dream that had haunted her for so long. Tường’s recovery also brought happiness to his whole family, especially Thiều - the older brother who had made many regrettable mistakes with his gentle younger brother. The character Thiều also had many changes in psychology and personality after realizing how badly he had behaved and the price he had to pay for his mistakes. The narrative ends with the metaphorical image of “yellow flowers on green grass,” representing maturity and simple happiness in real life.

Thus, *Bottle of Time*, *The Rainbow’s Troops*, and *I See Yellow Flowers on the Green Grass* have provided readers with three different metaphors about the transition to adulthood of the blossoming-age characters right from their titles. The bottle of time carries the meaning of not being able to lock time in a bottle, just as no matter how beautiful childhood is, people cannot stay there forever, boys and girls must “pop the cork” to become adults. To “pop the cork,” the appearance of events and challenges is necessary because those resistance force are the driving force for the child characters to grow up and move on to a new stage. The metaphor contains the above message and the regrets about childhood that will forever remain in the bottle of memory of each person. Meanwhile, when placed side by side, “troops” and “rainbow” are metaphors for fierceness and gentleness, war and peace, reality and fantasy. To reach the beautiful “rainbow,” the boys and girls must go through the rain with the spirit of brave “troops” and what *The Rainbow’s Troops* brings to readers is the story of Malay children who have continuously gone through fierce storms of themselves, their families, their homeland, and their country with the spirit of true warriors. The spirit is apparent in blossoming-age characters who long to study, to get out of the darkness of illiteracy and poverty to live beautifully like the colors of the rainbow. The image of “yellow flowers on the green grass” in the Vietnamese narrative is a metaphor for the discovery of children’s eyes: when overcoming fears and the ugly dark corners of their souls, the gift that the child characters receive is the bright yellow flowers blooming on the green grass on the hill named Withered Grass. Any child must go through events and difficulties to grow up and receive simple gifts that bring happiness like yellow flowers on green grass in everyday life. Not only showing the diversity and uniqueness of Southeast Asian children’s literature, the metaphors “time bottle,” “rainbow,” “troops,” and “yellow flowers on green grass” also contribute to highlighting the

meaningful messages in the three narratives by Prabhassorn Sevikul, Andrea Hirata, and Nguyễn Nhật Ánh about the struggling transition to adulthood of Southeast Asian children in particular as well as that of blossoming-age children in general in the context of globalization today.

3. CONCLUSION

Bottle of Time, *The Rainbow's Troops*, and *I See Yellow Flowers on the Green Grass* come from three different Southeast Asian countries, but all focus on depicting the journey of facing life events to grow up of Vietnamese, Indonesian, and Thai teenagers. In that journey, each blossoming-age child has a different choice of behavior. The Buddhist spirit of tolerance is the spiritual support for the Thai boys and girls in *Bottle of Time* to overcome sadness and crisis. Religious beliefs and wills tempered in hardship have helped the eleven little warriors of Muhammadiyah School overcome fear and contempt to grow up and move forward. The goodness and belief in miracles that support and protect people in adversity are the driving forces for Nguyễn Nhật Ánh's characters to overcome dark days to perfect themselves and find meaningful things. Despite their differences, all three narratives are touching portraits of the difficult path of growth and maturity for Southeast Asian children. The three narratives emphasize that different "blossoming" journeys will determine different "fruits." Therefore, on the one hand, they provide pan-Southeast-Asian dialogues about the transition to adulthood of children growing up in various geographical and cultural spaces. On the other hand, they trigger new dialogues with several pieces of work about the growth and maturity of blossoming-age children in Asia and around the world, such as *In Desert and Wilderness* by Henryk Sienkiewicz, *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho, *Harry Potter* by J. K. Rowling, among other pieces, and also dialogues about the journey of growing up of children in the last century with ones of this modern, globalized century.

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TUỔI HOA TRONG VĂN HỌC THIẾU NHI: HÀNH TRÌNH TRƯỞNG THÀNH CỦA TRẺ EM TRONG MỘT SỐ TỰ SỰ ĐÔNG NAM Á

Tóm tắt: Những nghiên cứu về văn học Đông Nam Á thường xem xét các tác phẩm văn học như những hoán dụ cho các vấn đề kinh tế, chính trị, văn hóa, xã hội của các quốc gia Đông Nam Á và ít khi chú ý đến văn học thiếu nhi của khu vực này. Bài viết sử dụng mô hình so sánh cận kề để khảo sát ba tác phẩm đặc sắc của văn học thiếu nhi Đông Nam Á, bao gồm *Chai thời gian* của Prabhassorn Sevikul (Thái Lan), *Tôi thấy hoa vàng trên cỏ xanh* của Nguyễn Nhật Ánh (Việt Nam), và *Chiến binh Cầu Vồng* của Andrea Hirata (Indonesia). Bài viết tập trung làm rõ hành trình trưởng thành không dễ dàng của các nhân vật thiếu nhi trong ba tác phẩm này và những cách đối diện với biến cố của các nhân vật để hoàn thiện mình và tìm thấy những điều ý nghĩa trong cuộc sống. Bài viết cũng đề xuất một cách định danh khác về lứa tuổi từ 12,13 tuổi đến trước 18 tuổi để nhấn mạnh ý nghĩa về sự chuyển giao gắn liền với những thay đổi trong thể chất, tinh thần và nhận thức của trẻ em ở lứa tuổi này.

Từ khóa: So sánh đặt cạnh nhau, biến cố tuổi thơ, lực cản và lực đẩy, hành trình trưởng thành, văn học thiếu nhi Đông Nam Á.