



## Research Article

**VIETNAMESE LITERATURE IN EAST ASIAN VISION –  
A CASE STUDY OF TAIWANESE SCHOLARS***Dinh Phan Cam Van**Ho Chi Minh City University of Education**Corresponding author: Dinh Phan Cam Van – Email: vandpc@hcmue.edu.vn**Received: April 05, 2019; Revised: June 13, 2019; Accepted: July 01, 2019***ABSTRACT**

*For a literature, observations from outside facilitate more open and multi-dimensional scientific dialogues. The article initially reviews the perspectives of East Asian scholars on Vietnamese literature, focusing on Taiwanese scholars' studies. Studies of Taiwanese scholars show new concepts about East Asia, thereby bringing a new approach to literature in countries sharing the same literary culture.*

**Keywords:** East Asia vision, East Asian literature, Vietnamese Literature, Taiwanese scholars.

**Introduction**

Who am I? Where do I belong? The question is not only an obsession, the concern of each individual as an adult, but today, every nation is also asking the same question. The world is fast moving to globalization, models that seem solid and persistent still fall into disintegration, urging each nation to position themselves clearly in the spatial and temporal dimensions. Internal research is a popular way of each nation when identifying their identity, looking for a few distinct points, identifying existence with individuality. However, when the world is interacting increasingly intensely, we are surprised with new perceptions. “Two Europeans, one German and one French, when communicating with each other will identify each other as German and French. Two Europeans, one German and one French when communicating with two Arabs, a Saudi and an Egyptian, will identify each other as two Europeans and two Arabs.” (Samuel Huntington, 2005, p.72). Thus, with people, broadly speaking, each culture, identifying their identity by looking from the outside and what does not belong to you is more convenient and easier. Dialogue voices will create multidimensional, open observations and complement and complete more objective conclusions thanks to similarities and comparisons.

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### **1. Vietnamese scholars approaching East Asian literature**

Locating Vietnamese literature in the region from the internal perspective - the view of indigenous scholars is a popular observation direction. From the Vietnamese cultural background, scholars have found the connections between Vietnamese literature and Southeast Asian literature; Vietnamese literature with neighboring China. According to Nguyen Nam, the consideration of East Asia as an entity (East Asia) was established in the early twentieth century by an American artist - E.F.Fenollosa (1853-1908). Since 1930, Japanese politics have used this to determine that the focal point of the Han Chinese region is no longer China but Japan, in order to create a new counterweight to Europe, to counter the theory of "Eurocentric view." "When the two words East Asian first appeared, to some extent, they were the derivatives of imperial power imagination. Until the early post-war period, the meaning of the words "East Asia" was all set by Japan "(Tran Phuong Minh, 2015, p.3). Thus, the concept of East Asia still refers to the area sharing the literary culture - the area of Sinitic culture, Confucian culture or the area that uses chopsticks, etc., with a new nature, containing new meanings. This area includes 6 countries and territories: China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Singapore, Taiwan. The perception of "East Asia", of East Asian literary issues from Vietnamese scholars was quite late. This is also the general situation of regional academic trends.

In the twentieth century, Vietnamese researchers, due to limited data and international exchange conditions, when investigating the relationship between Vietnamese literature and East Asian countries, only focussed on Chinese sources, without an overview, or did not find direct / indirect links with other literatures in the region. In the mid-1990s (XX), the vision for East Asian literature was broadened through studies of relations between Vietnamese literature and Korean literature. It can be said that the open steps on Korean literature research were influenced by the impact of Korean culture on Vietnam in the 90s (XX), which a few years later created the "Korean wave"(Hallyu). Thus, in addition to China, Vietnamese scholars have fully identified a "brother" with many similarities in the "bloodline" of literature. Through studies comparing some authors and specific works, correspondences in the process of developing the two nations' literatures were connected.

However, an overview of regional literature, including Vietnam is still left open. Scholar Dang Thanh Le was the first person to have a deep interest in this issue. From the thesis "East Asia - a special research object" (Dang Thanh Le, 2002, p.3), the author offers orientations for studying regional literature in rich and diverse exchanges. Regional culture and literature have created outstanding values and modern meanings, contributing to building and developing the life of each nation and mankind. Vietnamese literature operates in the East Asian context, with common patterns with regional literature. Two great traditions of Vietnamese literature: patriotism and humanity both have indigenous roots and have a common origin from East Asian sources, built on the foundation of

ideological influence throughout East Asia: Confucianism, Buddha, Laoism. Thence, it affirms the role of Vietnam in creating cultural areas alongside China, Japan and Korea. This important conclusion has raised the level of Vietnam, the Vietnamese literature - “a central country among those sharing the same literary cultures” (Dang Thanh Le, 2002, p.4). In our opinion, first and foremost it is necessary to emphasize and analyze more comprehensively another aspect of Vietnam. Vietnam has created traditional East Asian values in dependent space, not in independent, autonomous state like Korea and Japan. Vietnamese culture was indigenous from the time of the Dong Son culture, both accepting Sinicization and curing Sinicization. The process of curing Sinicization of Vietnam has unique features unlike those of Korea and Japan. Vietnamese culture and literature are always aware of the idea of a nation “which has long been a civilization”. The birth of Nôm, in particular, the national script, is the inevitable result of this process. Second, the history of the area of countries sharing the same literary cultures is not only about four countries: China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam; Other countries and territories such as Taiwan and Singapore are also East Asian powers, contributing to the creation of the Asian value system”... values worth spreading” (Samuel Huntington, 2005, p.135). The role of East Asia in the East is similar to that of Greek-Roman in the West”... East Asian society and Greek-Roman society - the two main axes of East - West interaction” (Tran Ngoc Vuong, 2018, p.52).

Humanity in the twentieth century witnessed the “Japanese miracle”, entering the twenty-first century, with the rise of, East Asia have become an important area of the world. Literature research in East Asia has prospered, marking a breakthrough. In Vietnam, international conferences on East Asia were held accordingly. The research results are collected in two typical works of Doan Le Giang: *East Asian modern literature from a comparative perspective* (2011), *Vietnamese and Japanese Literature in the East Asian context* (2013). Vietnamese literature has an organic relationship with other countries in the region, not only in the medieval period - the expansion period of the Sinitic cultural circle, but stretches from ancient to modern. The interest of Vietnamese scholars does not stop with authors and works that are directly related. The view is raised to the regional forms and literary systems, which, in turn, explains the similarities in bilateral posture. The encroachment of powers from the territory to the culture for a long time made the Vietnamese always have a “defensive” mentality that tries to preserve the culture without “diffraction”. Moreover, it was the culture of the rulers for centuries, so the view and observation of Vietnamese scholars sometimes could not avoid biases. Studying literature in the whole area helps Vietnam reduce the psychological pressure of “small states”, and be more confident with allies within the coverage of Han culture. And the important thing is, studying the whole region will help visualize the overview, which has a broader base of literature of each country and territory.

The process of approaching and studying Vietnamese literature in the East Asian context of Vietnamese scholars is the necessary reference basis to more fully identify the position of Vietnamese literature in the region, which is also the observation of the nation's process of integrating with humanity.

## **2. The research trend of East Asian scholars on regional literature**

Entering the twenty-first century, East Asia region in general, East Asian literature in particular has become the potential research object of East-West scholars. In terms of materials, we have some initial comments on the research results of regional scholars as follows:

Since the 1980s (XX), China has had state-level research works on the literature of Sinitic outside the border (Foreign Relations Department, Foreign Sino-Vietnamese Literature). This research trend continues to be maintained today. Zhang Bowei (2017) in *The Methods and Practice in the Research of East Asian Sinitic Literature* (Overseas Chinese Studies Series) used the article “New materials, new issues, new methods – three research phases in overseas Chinese studies” as the prologue, demonstrating that the process and tendency of approaching East Asian literature of Chinese scholars. The general spirit of this work is to take China as the center, to observe the effects of Chinese literature on countries sharing the same literary cultures

In addition to studying the influence, the trend of studying cultural exchanges through studying classical Chinese literature in the region also brings a different perspective on regional literary appearance. Kang-i Sun Chang, Liu Huiying (2010) contributed their massive work: East Asian culture and literature research (volumes 1 & 2) also follow this research direction. Among the studies of the relations between Chinese literature and regional literature, research on the relations with Japanese literature have the most coverage. Wang Zhongshen (2001) discusses the relationship between Chinese and Japanese literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: *Excess and imagination – A research comparing Japanese and Chinese literature of the twentieth century*. Wang Xiaoping, Zuo Tianchen (2011) in *Reading and conversing East Asian literary classics*, combined methods of analysis, interpretation, traditional research with comparative literary research, depicting the history of literature exchange over thousands of years of China and Japan, conducting research on Chinese literature in Asia according to the inclination trend.

The common spirit of Chinese scholars studying East Asian literature, including Vietnam: studying the dominant influence; tending to “unify”, taking Chinese characters - Sinitic culture as the Mother culture.

Japanese scholars have provided many treatises on the relationship between Japanese literature and Chinese literature. Japanese scholars have affirmed the role of Chinese literature in the history of national literature. Literary Chinese characters in Japan are associated with the mandarins and aristocrats, forming their own literary division. In the process of exchange, contact with Chinese literature, Japanese always actively select and

enrich the national literature. Some authors and Chinese literary works have a profound influence on Japanese literary life: Bai Juyi Poetry, *Jiandeng xinhua*, *Shui Hu Zhuan*, etc. The process of development of Japanese literature is the process of acquiring Chinese and ethnicization in all aspects: literature, genre, poetic exam... *Sinitic poetry and Japanese* (Murakami Tetkumi, 1994); *The history of Japanese literature* (Konishi Jinichi, 1993), *The impacts of Chinese literature on works of Natsume Soseki* (Ji Fen Gao, 1992), etc.

Studies by Korean scholars, when studying classical literature, all show influences from China. Like Japanese literature, Korean literature absorbed China in the spirit of localization, using indigenous elements to create its own characteristics for national literature. This research direction is often seen in historical literary works. Woo Han Yong, Park In Gee, Chung Byung Heon, Choi Byeong Woo, Yoon Bun Hee (2009). *Korean literary classics*; Komisook - Jungmin - Jung Byung Sul (2006), *The history of Korean literature from ancient time to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century*. Studying phenomena, focusing on considering the relationship between such works as *Hong Gil-dong jeon* and *Shui Hu Zhuan*, *Geumo Sinhwa* and *Jiandeng xinhua*, *Recording stories in the year of Ren chen* and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The authors Cho Dong Il, Seo Dae Seok, Lee Hai Soon, Kim Dae Haeng, Park Hee Byoung, Oh Sae young, Cho Nam Hyon (2010), in the *Korean Literature Lectures*, commented a lot about the relationships between the above works.

Through some of the above works, it can be seen that the central problem that the researchers posed is the influence, reception, and continuity of Chinese literature with Japanese and Korean literature. Vietnamese literature has not yet become a subject of formal research and system of East Asian academic circles. (Perhaps this situation is the same as Vietnam has not had much research conditions on Japanese, Korean, Singaporean, Taiwanese literature). This shows that the issue of studying East Asian literature needs to have a different perspective, different evaluation methods. The “literary” cultural area of the medieval period has changed in quality, becoming the modern “heterogeneous” area of modern times. In the National University research project with Nguyen Nam as the chairman, there have been some translation statistics and specific evaluation studies. Some Vietnamese authors have received interests in the study of East Asian literature: Nguyen Trai (Quoc am thi tap, Uc trai thi tap), Nguyễn Du (The Tale of Kieu), Nguyễn Dữ (Truyen ky man luc), Nguyen Binh Khiem (Bach Van am thi tap), Ho Xuan Huong poetry, Le Quy Don (Van Dai loi ngu), Phan Boi Chau (Vietnam vong quoc su) etc., among which, the dominant number is the study of Korean scholars. However, what the authors study is not as important as approaching Vietnamese literature in which position (See Nguyen Nam, 2017).

### **3. East Asia in the vision of Taiwanese scholars**

We set aside a section to examine the results of Taiwanese scholars' research on Vietnamese literature in the East Asian context. In fact, between Taiwan and Vietnam, there is a close relationship between economic cooperation, trade, culture, education and

especially Taiwan-Vietnam family model. In-depth research on the culture and literature of the two countries has not been interested in by both sides. Taiwanese literature and Vietnamese literature have yet to create the attractiveness, attracting research of East Asian scholars. Since 1990, Taiwan together with Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea, etc. Have been considered four Asian economic tigers, but the voice of Taiwanese literature in the region is not yet “heavy.” “Standing on a large Asian map, the figure of Taiwanese writers is extremely lonely and lost.” (Tran Phuong Minh, 2015, p.2). However, Taiwan's study of regional literature actually contributed, moreover, recent years reached new stature.

Since the 1980s (XX) Taiwanese scholars have collected and published Han Chinese fiction outside the Chinese border, including: Sinitic Korea novel, Sinitic Vietnamese novels. In the *Overseas Sinitic novels discussion series* compiled by the Chinese Society of Classical Literature Research, the Taiwanese Library Student published in February 1989, published studies of Sinitic novels of regional countries. Two genres of regional influences: periodicals and episodes of novels are focused on understanding through screening and comparison of works on different aspects: materials, classification, models genre ... brings new findings. The approach of scholars now, still taking China as a center, considering the diffusion, the spread of Chinese literature outside the border. For Sinitic Vietnamese novels, the works of *Truyen ky man luc*, *Hoang Le nhat thong chi*, *Hoang Viet long hung chi*, *Hoang Viet xuan thu*, *Vietnam khai quoc chi truyen (Nam trieu cong nghiep dien chi)* have been analysed and commented carefully. In the 1980s (XX), the series of novels such as *Hoang Viet long hung chi*, *Hoang Viet xuan thu*, and *Vietnam khai quoc chi truyen (Nam trieu cong nghiep dien chi)* was quite strange in Vietnam. The publication by Taiwanese scholars has brought a message about the delayed, unattended exploitation of the Sinitic heritage in Vietnam..

In the second decade of the 21st century, after more than thirty years, Taiwan's East Asian literature studies have made outstanding achievements. From the four works: *Interpretation of East Asian Sinitic Literature* (Kim Zhengyu, 2013), *Sinitic Poetry and Buddhist Culture in the East Asian Cultural Circle* (Xiao Lehua, 2014), *East Asian Literature: Dialogue between history and art* (Tran Phuong Minh, 2015), *Vietnam in the East Asia vision* (Chung Thai Quan, 2015), we have a few observations, around the issue of Vietnamese literature in the “vision” of East Asia “:

**First:** Regarding the concept of “East Asia”, in comparison with the views of the Japanese, Taiwanese scholars have introduced new concepts and ways of interpretation. The island nation of Taiwan has a special historical fate. That affects the positioning of native literature. In 1980, when the data was unearthed and reorganized, it was the dawn and enlightenment period of the Taiwanese literature. In 1990, Taiwanese society was completely democratic, the study of Taiwanese literature reached its achievement, truly becoming the realm of knowledge. Attaching themselves to the East Asian world, the East Asian vision of Taiwanese scholars has double meanings. On the one hand, they

acknowledge the spirit of East Asia inherent, on the one hand, they were deeply aware and affirmed, Taiwanese literature of the twenty-first century must make a “soulful” effort, must write the voice of their own country without suffering oppressive yoke of imperial institutions before the war, at the same time endured the national party regime after the war. “When Taiwanese writers can write their literary history, it can be said that their literary works are when literature has the power to explain the concept of “East Asia”. (Tran Phuong Minh, 2015, p. 3).

*The soul of East Asian literature* is not only China, Japan or any country, it must be the native voice of all countries in the region. Influences from civilized centers radiate to the surrounding areas, only exist in a reservoir, a part of society, and some phenomena have only the temporal and temporal meaning. Foreign elements always make up a low proportion of cultural elements. The culture of each nation develops throughout history, tradition made from the sustainable continuation of indigenous culture and localization. If East Asia was once dominated by a country in the region, the culture of introduction came along with the horse invading, indigenous culture and the imported culture both absorbed and able to “separate”. The study of East Asian literature is the study of artistic beings that are not dominated by dominant powers. The East Asian literary process will have a different history if it raises the question of dialogue “between history and art”.

The Taiwanese scholar's orientation to study East Asian literature *opened up a new approach, moving up a new ladder, wanting to intervene in the East Asian meaning, re-explaining the literature of great powers in the spirit of New East Asia*. In that spirit, nothing else is required to fully observe the existence of cultural regions once considered “lowland”, the role of indigenous culture in weaving the East Asian cultural multicolor carpet. This view is necessary, to see East Asia - a dynamic, multifaceted entity, always discovered and created. New constructs are not intended to break the whole body, but to balance the position of literary countries in the region, stemming from the character of artistic creation and new demands of the time. The era of accompanying globalization is a multi-cultural and intercultural world model.

**Second:** In 2016, Tsai Ing-wen's inaugural Speech emphasized the strategy of Southbound and her government quickly implemented the “The New Southbound Policy”, with more comprehensive investment cooperation, expanded in the fields of culture, education, tourism, etc. Also at this stage, the position of Vietnam is particularly focused, has always been a top concern in Taiwan's strategy.

Thus, along with changes in Taiwan's development strategy are changes in the vision of East Asian literature, Vietnam is not only an economic investment object but also a cultural entity to be studied deeper. Culture always comes with economic power, soft power really only promotes, creating strength on the basis of hard power. Taiwan is aiming for Vietnam not to popularize culture. For Taiwan, Vietnam as well as other countries in the cultural area are both strange and familiar. The three powerful lines of thought that

attracted East Asia were Confucianism, Taoism and Buddha, which became the convergence of literary works. The study of Vietnamese literature by Taiwanese scholars is firstly attributed to these thoughts. For example, when discussing the Buddhist culture in the Chinese characters of the East Asian script, Tieu Le Hoa, in addition to pointing out the meeting points, also said that the “literary self-awareness” of the poet-monk of Vietnam during Le and Ly dynasties is different from that of Tang and Song. The creative path of the Chinese poet monk is poetry and Zen uniting “Non-dual Poetry-Meditation”, high literary self-awareness, literary career independent of imperial careers. “The Annamese poet-monks are good at poetry, but their poetry in addition to praising the Buddha Dharma is used to serve the emperor” (Xiao Lehua, 2014, p.41). This difference has indicated the important characteristics of poetry in the two countries. It is also impossible to conclude that poetry attached / not attached to the emperor is worth or not valuable, but we see the literary characteristics of each nation. The poet-monks of Vietnam paid attention to the meaning of using literature to support political, “cultural” consciousness very highly, due to a historical reason. Patriarchal destiny is always at the top, so writers are literary but do not embark on literature but use literature to contribute to social security. Also from the point of view of thought, Jing Hualing explained the difficulties of the Confucianists in the Tran dynasty - the prosperous Buddhist era, through the case of Truong Han Sieu when writing *Duc Thuy son linh te phap ky* and *Khai Nghiem bi ki*. Conflicts in Truong Han Sieu's behavior, showing how a Confucian Confucianist like Truong Han Sieu had to respond in a particular context. This was not the result of the reception and acculturation of regional literature, but from the real situation of Vietnam. The destiny of the nation is always the passion of the Vietnamese people. Even literary talents do not escape themselves into the “dream” of literature, but are always conscious of using literature to discuss and contribute their responsibility to the times and the country. Maybe the literary value, “literary self-awareness” is somewhat poor but “political self-awareness” reflects the spirit of Vietnam, the period of building a medieval nation in the circle of Chinese institutions and cultures.

**Third:** In the correlation between Vietnamese literature and Japanese, Korean literature, Vietnamese literature is classified into “sub-region”, Japan and Korea together in another “sub-region”. Studies on Vietnamese literature are not as rich as Japan and Korea but are new. Some studies of Japanese scholars on Vietnam were also introduced by Taiwanese researchers. Thus, we have a fairly comprehensive picture of Vietnam from common issues such as economic and trade exchange, political ideology, academic thought, state model, etc., to literary issues such as poetic perspective of the famed Confucianist Le Quy Don, Vietnamese Confucian culture in *Vu Trung tuy but*, national spirit in the texts of Sinitic essays of Phan Boi Chau, etc.

A highlight of Taiwanese scholars' argument system we see an agreement. That is, while all received Chinese culture, compared to Japan and Korea, Vietnam was so difficult.

The above mentioned mentality and position of Vietnam; it should be noted here the original South East Asian culture of Vietnam. The culture of a thousand years of Northern domination is an overlay on the indigenous Southeast Asian culture of Vietnamese people. It is worth mentioning that, the thousand years of Northern domination to the mighty dynasties of China, the influence was very wide in the region: Han and Tang. The purpose of China from Qin, Han, and Tang was to “assimilate” An Nam, which means to submerge an Annam - Southeast Asia. As a result of more than a thousand years of Northern domination and a thousand years of building the Dai Viet feudal state, there were answers. “If you want to decode Vietnam, then considering Vietnam just imitating Chinese culture is only half true, the other half is to clarify why Chinese emulation causes so many problems, embarrassing and stressful. Because Vietnam is a Southeast Asian country, the cultural background is different... “(Chung Thai Quan, 2015, p.335). Vietnam has entered the East Asian world in the posture of a Southeast Asian country, integrating the cultural area with a different “status”. Therefore, considering cultural issues, Vietnamese literature must see the complexity between the two flows of culture. The role of Vietnam's regional creation is not only to nurture and develop East Asian values but also to complement and enrich Southeast Asian elements for East Asia..

Unfortunately, the research works of East Asian scholars on Vietnamese literature mainly stop in classical literature and medieval literature. If studying Vietnamese literature in modern times, they will see more clearly the great “escape” of Vietnamese literature in comparison with other regional literatures. For example, the escape of New Poetry, opens “A new era in poetry” in Vietnam. Not to mention other exchanges and acculturation between Vietnamese literature and Western literature, mainly French literature and Russian literature. Vietnamese literature as well as literature of other countries and territories in the region the area has not stopped in the area and has been increasingly expanding, reaching out to all-human literature in the “Flat World”.

### **Conclusion**

“Socio-cultural integration is the process of opening and exchanging culture with other countries; sharing cultural and spiritual values with the world; absorbing the advanced cultural values of the world to supplement and enrich the national culture” (Pham Quoc Tru, 2011). Analyses and assessments from scholars in the region help us understand more deeply about ourselves. Each country, when fully aware of itself, succeeds in the integration process. Original culture and indigenous culture are the core elements, orienting the determination of identity. The integration process not only acquires but also shares self-worth. Being a Southeast Asian nation but an important link in East Asia, the approach to Vietnamese cultural and literary issues needs to be multidimensional, surpassing regionalism. Issues about the region and Vietnamese literature mentioned by Taiwanese scholars will increase the necessary dialogue, opening up new opportunities in East Asian literary research.

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### VĂN HỌC VIỆT NAM TRONG TẦM NHÌN ĐÔNG Á – TRƯỜNG HỢP NGHIÊN CỨU CỦA HỌC GIẢ ĐÀI LOAN

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#### TÓM TẮT

Đối với một nền văn học, những quan sát từ bên ngoài khiến đối thoại khoa học càng thêm rộng mở, đa chiều. Bài viết bước đầu tổng quan các góc nhìn của học giả khu vực Đông Á về văn học Việt Nam, trong đó bàn sâu hơn những nghiên cứu của học giả Đài Loan. Nghiên cứu của học giả Đài Loan cho thấy những quan niệm mới về khu vực Đông Á, từ đó mang đến cách tiếp cận mới về văn học các nước trong khối văn hóa đồng văn.

**Từ khóa:** tầm nhìn Đông Á, văn học Đông Á, văn học Việt Nam, học giả Đài Loan.