

VIETNAMESE CONTEMPORARY HISTORICAL NOVEL – SOME PRINCIPAL TRENDS

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1. Historical novel – an essential genre of novel

In the ancient times, the situation of undistinguishableness between literature – philosophy – history was common in the world. The imprints of history always existed in many literary genres. In the same time, the literariness was present in historiography. *Shiji* [“*Records of the Grand Historian*”] of Sima Qian (Chinese historiographer, between second and first centuries Before Christ) or *Parallel Lives* of Plutarch (ancient Greek historian, between AD first and second centuries) may be considered literary works... Progressively, the genre of historical literature came to be shaped clearly, in which we found: historical story in verse, historical drama, and especially historical novel. The history of world literature recorded the important contributions of famous Medieval historical versified stories having the echo of ancient epics which are as follows: *The Knight in the Panther Skin* by Shota Rustaveli (Georgian poet in the 12th century), *The Song of Roland* [“*Chanson de Roland*”] of French people, *The Tale of Igor’s Campaign* of Russian people, etc... We also must

mention the important contribution of famous historical dramatic works like a series of historical dramatic pieces by Shakespeare (between 16th and 17th centuries), especially the piece *King Lear*, or the piece *The Cid* [“*Le Cid*”] by French classical dramaturge Corneille (17th century), *Hernani* by Hugo (1830), *Boris Godunov* by Pushkin (1831)... In this spirit, the historical novel has a particular place.

After definition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the historical novel is the one “that has as its setting a period of history and that attempts to convey the spirit, manners, and social conditions of a past age with realistic detail and fidelity (which is in some cases only apparent fidelity) to historical fact. The work may deal with actual historical personages, (...), or it may contain a mixture of fictional and historical characters.”

In this literary genre, history become an inspiration for literary creation freedom. But the aesthetic value is not in the historical truth, but in the artistic truth. However, the artistic truth depends on historical truth.

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In Oriental world, the historical novel officially appeared in Yuan-Ming ages of China (14th-16th centuries) with great chapter-act-structured novels such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* by Luo Guanzhong, *Eastern Zhou Warring States* by Feng Meng Long, *Water Margin* [“*Shuihu Zhuan*”] by Shi Nai’an,... Meanwhile, in the Western world, the historical novel didn’t appear until the romantic period, with the German woman-writer Benedikte Naubert (1752-1819) as pioneer. Naubert had the influence on Walter Scott, a Scotch romantic writer having lived between 18th and 19th centuries, but it’s Scott who was to be considered the avant-garde of historical novel and had the deep and wide influences on European romantic writers. Among Scott’s historical novels, the most famous is *Ivanhoe*.

Thus, in Orient, the historical novel is just one of the beginning sources of novel genre in general. Meanwhile in the Occident, the modern novel has the Renaissance novels as the source, with the famous *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua* by Rabelais and *Don Quixote* by Cervantes as representative works, and the historical novel didn’t appear until romantic times. If the historical novel appeared soon in Orient, it was caused by the fact that here the specialization appeared more late, the confusion of literature and philosophy and history was one of the prominent features of spiritual life.

In the Occident, in spite of soon apparition of historical versified stories and historical drama, but one must to wait until 18th-19th centuries, when the

“historicist” view prevailed in intellectual community, to see then the official birth of historical novel. This phenomenon was connected closely with romanticism, because, one of guidelines of the romanticism was aspiring to the exoticness and returning to the history. Thus, historical novel became one of the essential artistic means of romaniticism. Since then it soon became the artistic mean of many other artistic currents and movements, occupied an important place in the system of literary genres, gave birth to the literary peaks and had the deep and wide influences on literary genres and periods. It brought the literature to the real life in the diachronic development process of mankind. For this reason, the historical literature in general and the historical novel genre in particular are occupying and will always occupy an important position in the literary history of each nation and of entire mankind. The great writers in the world were always interested in historical themes. Chinese classical historical novels always were considered the model works. In the Occident, the short novels like *Taras Bulba* by Nikolai Gogol, as well as the other novels such as *The Miserable Ones* [*Les Misérables*] and *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* [“*Notre-Dame de Paris*”] by Victor Hugo, *Queen Margot* and *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas (father), *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy, *Quo Vadis?* by Henryk Sienkiewicz,... became important milestones of the historical novel in particular and of the novel in general, despite the fact that they could be romantic or realistic.

2. Place of historical novel in the

contemporary Vietnamese literature

In the first phase of Medieval period, Vietnamese literature still followed the classical view that highly appreciated the poetry and underestimated the prose. Thus, in that time, novel in prose did not yet developed; there were only fantastic legends telling the “extraordinary folktales”. Only in 17th century, the Vietnamese novel in prose took form with a historical family annals written in form of chapter-act-shaped novel named *Hoan Chau Ji* [“*Records of Hoan Châu*”] (unknown author). But only by the end of 18th century, one could witness the apparition of one novel which had really important value, that is the *Records of Unified Imperial Lê Dynasty* by Ngô Family Literates. And it’s just a historical novel.

In 20th century, the novel began to have a firm position and became a key force for the development of modern Vietnamese literature. Novel always is a typical genre of one national literature, it has a comprehensive power to include all other literary genres. Similarly, the historical novel is a genre having power to include all other historical literary genres.

However, in a long time from the fifth decade to the middle of second half of the 20th century, for reason that our literature had the immediate duty to serve the great cause in fighting to liberate the nation, so that the modern historical literature had no conditions to develop largely. By that time, there were not much writers who were interested in historical literature. In this situation, Nguyễn Huy Tưởng emerged as a

special case. Right from his beginning in literary career, Nguyễn Huy Tưởng had great interest in history. In the fifth decade of 20th century, he continuously created a series of historical literary works like *Long Trì Nocturn Festivity* (novel, 1942), *Vũ Như Tô* (drama, 1943), *Princess An Tu* (novel, 1944), *Bắc Sơn* (drama, 1946). Unlike the romanticist writers in that time, Nguyễn Huy Tưởng wrote the historical literature not for seeking refuge in history, but he exploited the history from the contemporary realist point of view to serve the present life. After Liberation Day, he still pursued this theme and contributed more many works, among which there was one short historical novel that might be ranged in the rank of classic works for children: *The Flag with Six Gold Words* (1960).

By that time, the historical novel was almost not yet discussed by the literary theorists. After wartime, there was a monograph by Professor Phan Cự Đệ named *Modern Vietnamese Novel*, published in 1975. But in this monograph, Prof. Phan Cự Đệ did not discuss the historical novel in particular. By the beginning of 9th decade of 20th century, the discussion on historical novel was still scarce. By that time, there was one noticeable article of the Romanian author Ion Maxim that was translated into Vietnamese: “The prospects for historical novel” (*Social Sciences Information*, 1982, No. 11, translated by Thu Hà). In this article, the author justified the prospect for the type of historical novel that takes for guidelines the philosophy of history and

philosophy of culture but not the “trivial and strange things”, nor the anecdotes. He said that historical novel must explicate the problems and the evolution laws of history and culture of the nation.

In the Renewal Time [“Đổi Mới”], (from the end of 9th decade of 20th century), with the creation freedom having been widened, the historical theme began to revive and became one of the main themes of literature. Historical novel soon occupied the important place with the long-range novels, as if it wanted to demonstrate its forgotten potential. It met the historical education demand of the times and contributed to resolve the problems of present days. This historical education demand for novel was put by the imperative of real life. Especially from Renewal Time, in context of cultural exchanges and integration, foreign historical films entered massively in Vietnam. Meantime, we could not develop the historical arts with highly socializing power. This led to the situation in which our people, in particular the youth, had the trend to know the foreign history better than Vietnamese history.

In 1997, the writer Hoàng Quốc Hải expressed his concern that although “...our nation has a rich tradition in building and defending country with hardiness and bravery, is not inferior to any nation, but why the outside world knows us too little. That’s because our historical novel developed hard. So that our youth knows well the Chinese, Indian, Greek-Roman, English and French histories...” Meanwhile, they know little the historical personalities of

our country (1). This urged the writers to create the historical novels in order to initiate people, especially the youth, into history.

Besides that, the historical novel has a purpose of borrowing history to discuss the present. History is like an experience fund for use of people in present days. It seems that many problems of the present days could better make social and aesthetic effects by means of historical images. For this reason, historical novel in contemporary times appears to be more necessary than ever. Thus, historical novel is now attracting more interests of many writers than in any time of Vietnamese literary history.

In fact, our contemporary times is witnessing the apparition of a series of renowned historical novels, among which there were the ones that were written by Vietnamese writers and the others were translated from the foreign literatures. Among the Vietnamese historical novels there were many that gained the various prizes, namely: *Hồ Quý Ly* by Nguyễn Xuân Khanh (Prize of the First Novel Competition hold in 1998-2000); the quartet of novels by Hoàng Quốc Hải named *Trần Dynasty in Storm* [with two volumes complemented under re-edition in 2010] (Prize “Bùi Xuân Phái – for the Love of Hanoi”, awarded for the first time by the Bùi Xuân Phái Foundation,); *The Swear Ceremonial Festivity* by Nguyễn Quang Thân (Prize A of the Third Novel Competition hold in 2006-2009). We could say without exaggeration that it’s now the time of historical novel. But, in theoretic literatures, this subject wasn’t

discussed satisfyingly.

In reality, even our reference books didn't much talk about historical novel. The *Dictionary of Literary Terms* (edited by Professors Lê Bá Hán, Trần Đình Sử and Nguyễn Khắc Phi, 1992) exposed only some summary opinions about historical novel. In this book, the authors included "historical novel" in one common entry "genre of historical literature", and considered that historical novel is "the works of art and literature created on historical themes and personages" (2). This opinion did not change under re-edition of the book in 2009. In the book *150 Literary Terms* (1999) by Lại Nguyên Ân, the author didn't mention the historical novel. And in other literary theory books, the theorists of our country discussed only the novel in general and not the historical novel in particular.

One can say, in our country, the theoretic treatises on novel in general and on historical novel in particular are still scarce. Only recently we saw some articles on historical novel such as: "The Contributions of Nguyễn Tử Siêu to Historical Novel Genre in the Beginning of Century" (Nguyễn Huệ Chi, Vũ Thanh, *Review of Literature*, 1996, No. 5); "On Historical Novel in the First Half of 20th Century" (Bùi Văn Lợi, *Social Sciences Information*, 1998, No. 1); "On Historical Novel and the Problem of Teaching Historical Novel in School" (Bùi Văn Lợi, *Education Studies*, 1998, No. 8); "The Relations between Historical Truthfulness and Artistic Fiction in Vietnamese Historical Novel in the First Half of 20th Century"

(Bùi Văn Lợi, *Review of Literature*, 1999, No. 9). And especially there were some dissertations and theses on historical novel like the doctoral thesis *Vietnamese Historical Novel from 1945 up to Now* by Nguyễn Thị Tuyết Minh (Institute of Literature, 2009). But as a whole, in the context of Vietnamese contemporary literature, when the historical novel was welcomed by the writers, then the theorists still did not show enough interest in this matter.

3. Some principal trends in Vietnamese contemporary historical novel

From the Renewal Time, among our theorists community there was one opinion that wanted to put the problem of reviewing the history. Along with this opinion, the theme of history became one essential theme in literary creation. Many writers bravely put forward the new views on history, widened free views on many epochs in the past. Since then, the historical novel was developed in richness and diversity with various trends.

By 1997, in speaking of classification of historical novel trends, the writer Hoàng Quốc Hải told that in the world there were five "schools": - The school respecting historical facts, re-creating and rebuilding history as such: Aleksey Tolstoy (with *Peter the Great, The Road to Calvary*); - The school considering history as pretext for expressing the view of writer: Alexandre Dumas (father); - The school relying on historical facts and legends but writing according to official political viewpoint of its times: Luo Guanzhong (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*); - The school relying on historical facts but distorting

naturalistically the facts in order to create the unofficial historical novel: *Road in the Forest* by Lan Khai (Vietnamese writer), *The Deification*, *The Secrets of Cao Cao's Tomb*, *Conquest of the East*, *Conquest of the West...* (Chinese novels); - The school telling the historical stories, this trend didn't reach the level of novel. (3)

That is a kind of classification relying on reflected subject. However, in my opinion, that classification couldn't make the distinction clear. From the panorama view of historical novel in the *Vietnamese contemporary literature*, and considering the writer's purpose and artistic conception, I can say that there could be *three clear trends* in Vietnamese historical novels which are as follows.

a. Objective chapter-act-structured novels

In belonging in East-Asian culture zone, at the beginning our historical novel had to receive the impacts of Chinese chapter-act-structured novels. We can see the imprints of Luo Guanzhong model of chapter-act-structured novels in our many historical novels from the end of 17th century up to now. In the *Records of Unified Imperial Le Dynasty*, a typical historical novel in the beginning times of Vietnamese modern literature, the narrative style of Ngô Family Literates did repeat the narrative style of Luo Guanzhong. In this novel, each act began with a motto in the form of parallelly structured sentences couple summarizing the contents of that act, e.g: "*Concubine Đặng Tuyên was favoured, gained the first position in the*

rear Court/ Heritor Prince Vương was dethroned and obliged to live in closed door" (First Act). Besides that, the authors usually used the introductory word patterns for passing to the new paragraph, such as: "*Now let's talk about...*", "*One day...*". At the end of each act there was an open concluding sentence: "*To know how is the story, see next act*". This trend lasted until present days.

In fact, in the contemporary times there are still some writers who created chapter-act-structured novels. The typical representative of this trend is Ngô Văn Phú who had a passion for historical novel (his historical novels are: *Vạn Kiếp Divine Sword* [1991], *Seal and Sword Conferred by God* [1998], *Reed Flag Building Country* [1999], *Lord Uy Viễn* [2003], *Lý Công Uẩn* [2006]). Like Nguyễn Huy Tường in previous time, Ngô Văn Phú did not take chapter-act-structured novel for stereotype model. He used the term "chapter" instead of the "act", even more he had some novels which put the numbers for the name of chapter; he also did not repeat the parallelly structured mottoes and the introductory word patterns and the open concluding sentence like in traditional chapter-act-structured novel, but his narration manner still bore the style of chapter-act-structured novel. Sometimes, the echo of chapter-act-structured novel model was still preserved when the author replaced the parallelly structured sentences couple with mottoes extracted from old sayings, popular songs and poetry, etc... For example, throughout

21 chapters of *Vạn Kiếp Divine Sword* we see at each chapter one motto like these: “The great cause belongs to talented and virtuous man (*The Word of Sage*)” [Chapter 1]; “Below there is river, above there is market/ I should take you for wife, shouldn't I? (*Old song*)” [chapter 2]; or in chapter 10 telling about the time when Trần Khánh Dư had to earn his living by selling charcoals, there are his own two verses at the beginning of the chapter: “With a burden of Heaven and Earth I come from the mountain/ In being asked: “What's it”, answer I: “Charcoal” (4). Following this style, the historical things and phenomena themselves conducted the story under the third person, without interference of author.

Especially, in recent time the novel *Tây Sơn Pathetic Story* by Lê Đình Danh (in two volumes, Culture and Information Publisher, 2006) appeared. It's special because it rather rigorously conformed to the model of chapter-act-structured novel. Lê Đình Danh repeated the narration manner of Luo Guanzhong but somewhat with variation. Like Ngô Văn Phú, Lê Đình Danh only named all the parts of the novel “chapter” instead of “act”. However, at the beginning of each chapter, the author still put the parallelly structured mottoes couple like in classical chapter-act-structured novel. For example at the beginning of the first chapter, the author wrote: “*In the North, Prince Tĩnh Đô abused killing the Heritor Prince/ In the South, Trương Phúc Loan completed usurping the power of Head of the army*”. The author also used the transition patterns

of the classical chapter-act-structured novel, but with a little variation in order to make the particular nuance. For example the author usually used the introductory words such as “*Telling about...*”, “*One day...*”, in order to transit into another event.

As a whole, in the novels like *Records of Unified Imperial Lê Dynasty* as well as the works by Nguyễn Huy Tưởng, Ngô Văn Phú or Lê Đình Danh, although the representation of history still conformed to the subjective view of writer, but the authors tried to accomplish the task of *re-portraying successively* the historical facts according to an objective style, without the immediate interference of author. The authors left the autonomy to the facts and characters to express the context, spirit and significance of the epoch, *according to the linear evolution* of real time. *Throughout the novel, there were only the narrative voice of third person and the dialogues between characters*. The novel evolved like a diachronic film. Its attraction is in the events and actions of characters and not in the comments of author, nor in those comments which were expressed through the words of characters. For this reason, the historically educational significance of chapter-act-structured novel is rather passive, that is to say the novel is quite left to the reception of reader. Just because this classical style did not leave to author a commenting role, nor commenting through the words of characters, so this classical style seems less attractive to modern authors.

b. Educational historical novels

The passive narrative style of objective

chapter-act-structured novel did not satisfy the purpose of historical education and teaching for the present life. Therefore, majority of writers in nowadays wanted to improve that style. Instead of purely objective writing style of historical chapter-act-structured novel, some authors chose an active pedagogic *teaching narration style* as a main writing style. Hoàng Quốc Hải is a typical representative for this trend.

With teaching motive, Hoàng Quốc Hải did not choose purely objective writing style like in historical chapter-act-structured novel, but he chose a writing style of pedagogic *teaching narration*. From 1987 to 1994, he wrote unceasingly four novels on Trần Dynasty: *Princess Huyền Trân* (1987), *Storm in the Court* (1989), *Thăng Long in Fury* (1991), *Royal Dynasty Falling* (1994), all named in common as *Trần Dynasty in Storm*. After that, for the 1000th birth anniversary of Thăng Long – Hanoi, he devoted oneself to write the quartet of novels *Eight Kings of Lý Dynasty* with about 3000 pages, begun from 1994 and accomplished in 2009, with unique heart and soul wish to help our people understand their own history and awaken the pride of nation to Vietnamese people. In the same time, he also complemented two volumes to the quartet of novels on Trần Dynasty (namely: *Driving the Mongols-Tatars Invaders*, *Bạch Đằng Bloody Battle*), thus together with the four previous volumes to make a complete set of six novels named *Trần Dynasty in Storm* (published in the same time in 2010 with *Eight Kings of Lý Dynasty*). One can say,

Hoàng Quốc Hải is typical representative of *educational historical novel trend*.

In his historical novels, Hoàng Quốc Hải devoted quite many passages to express through characters the educational thoughts about human feelings and dealing ways in the world, as well as about historical role of nation. He also exposed his teaching thoughts about personality, human proper behaviour and about human moral principles. For example in *Princess Huyền Trân*, Hoàng Quốc Hải created the image of the King Trần Nhân Tông as a sage king, a model king who had the thoughts of honorable man. Hoàng Quốc Hải put in the mouth of King the teaching words told to central mandarin Đoàn Như Hải as if he wanted send own messages:

“I don’t admit the southwards advance! Think what does it happen if now the Yuans also want to advance southwards into our Đại Việt? Don’t impose the undesirable thing on anyone! A benevolent and righteous man may not raise the army to invade other’s territory. (...) I recommend you to calm down yourself. We must forever think about the good.”

In another passage, he let the King Nhân Tông express himself:

“Don’t forget that it is just the large countries which do the bad and unreasonable things. Because they think they have the right to say one thing and do another. (...) Therefore, our age-old misfortune always comes from China. Don’t disregard the small things happened on frontier. These things made me to think about other more important

thing: That is to say they didn't respect the convention of frontier. They always invented the pretext to involve us in dispute. Because they could not conquest us, so they are seeking to gnaw little by little into our territory. (...) Thus, you must keep in mind my teaching: 'Do not let even an inch of ground of ancestors to fall in the hands of the foreigners.'"

The passages like these appeared very much in the novel of Hoàng Quốc Hải. With such a teaching purpose, of course the reason overwhelmed the feeling in his novels, times without number led to the simplification in expressing the thoughts and actions of characters. The typical example for this writing style is the passage describing Princess Huyền Trân consented to take for husband the King Jaya Sinhavarman III (Chế Mân) of Champa Kingdom, after suggestion of the King-Father Nhân Tôn. In the face of such a grave problem put to the entire life of a girl, the author let her think quite rationally and too simply in order to make decision to consent only in more than a half of page. In her thought, Huyền Trân voluntarily accepted the role of salvation ambassador for the sake of country without any worry about her own fate. The author let the characters argue under the conducting of reason and did not let them worry psychologically. One can say, the characters in novels of Hoàng Quốc Hải were imbued with the opinion of "historical education by means of literature."

That's why in the debate about the novels on Trần Dynasty by Hoàng Quốc Hải, held by *Literature and Art* weekly

[*Văn nghệ*] and Women Publisher in Hanoi on 18th October 2003, all the participants underlined the educational significance of historical novels of the writer, acknowledged "traditional epic style, which is popular and easy to read. However, in this debate there is also an opinion considering that the dependence on historical facts made the fictionizing art of Hoàng Quốc Hải limited (...) and thus made the artistic effects unsatisfying the readers." (5) In fact, we see that the writer still deployed the story in frame of *linear time* according to writing style of traditional chapter-act-structured novel. That is, in improving the writing style of historical chapter-act-structured novel, the educational historical novel did not still do the breakthrough in writing art.

However, in the face of "hunger for history" of our people as Hoàng Quốc Hải put it, the fact that he "made the history as literature" in spirit of education was the great contribution to society and to the genre of historical novel. His novels re-portrayed the long historical periods of nation, communicated "the spirit of history" as the poet Hữu Thịnh – chairman of Vietnam Writers Association – concluded the debate. The historical novels by Hoàng Quốc Hải came to readers as the attractive films for all people. That is the success of a writer who set all his heart on national history.

c. Interpretative historical novels

In that above-mentioned debate, the opinion about the limits of fictionizing art and of artistic effects of Hoàng Quốc Hải was put by Nguyễn Xuân Khanh

and Nguyễn Quang Thân, the two who recently received great prizes of Vietnam Writers Association. Nguyễn Xuân Khanh stated that historical novel must exploit deep the features such as problematic theses and psychological facts. Nguyễn Quang Thân underlined the widened freedom of intuition. In reality, through the works of these two writers, we can see that although they had the same purpose of improving the writing style of chapter-act-structured novel, but they did not choose the pedagogic writing style of Hoàng Quốc Hải, and they chose the historical periods and events which were problematic to exploit and interpret. Thus I can say about the existence of third trend – the trend of *interpretative historical novel* – which is represented by Nguyễn Xuân Khanh and Nguyễn Quang Thân.

Hồ Quý Ly is a problematic personage in history of Vietnam. Today there are different opinions about this personage. In my opinion, the “thesis” [to borrow the word of Nguyễn Xuân Khanh] which is the thread running throughout the novel *Hồ Quý Ly* by Nguyễn Xuân Khanh is just the one about “epochal significance” of this character in the declining time of Trần Dynasty, when the fate of Trần Dynasty did not allow it to assume important responsibilities towards the history. In this Nguyễn Xuân Khanh’s novel, this thesis appeared like a comprehensive motif and repeatedly reappeared in the discussion of historical characters. We can say, Nguyễn Xuân Khanh told the historical events to interpret the world

affairs. In his novels, the writer principally *narrated* the facts and not described the landscapes and people. The characters were not portrayed by means of images but by thoughts and ideas. In reading throughout the novel, we could not imagine how are the figure and aspect of the principal characters, but we saw only the thoughts of each character appeared clearly. For the purpose of interpreting history, Nguyễn Xuân Khanh did not describe the events according to the order of linear time as Hoàng Quốc Hải did, but he deployed a multidirectional time with the intermixture of present and past. By that way, the problem which must be interpreted repeatedly appeared to be discussed from various viewpoints and on different levels. So, the novel by Nguyễn Xuân Khanh was deployed unlike the film as in the case of novel by Hoàng Quốc Hải, but it was opened out like a chapter-structured symphony with one principal motif appearing repeatedly. In musical terminology, this principal motif was called after German language as *leitmotiv*.

Meanwhile, Nguyễn Quang Thân also chose the personages who “had the problems” and lived in Lê Dynasty, especially Nguyễn Trãi, to create the novel *The Swear Ceremonial Festivity*. Here, the *leitmotiv* chosen was the conflict between the military power and the intellectuals who were represented by Nguyễn Trãi. This is the principal motif running throughout the work. The repeated apparition of the *leitmotiv* was also deployed in multidirectional time as in *Hồ Quý Ly*. The purpose of Nguyễn

Quang Thân was to honour the talent and intellect of Nguyễn Trãi, the qualities which helped our nation to gain victory in peace and with less bloody conflicts. Only that there is a question which is whether the author did exaggerate or not the conflict between the military power and the intellectuals, and whether he did somewhat injustice to the military of Lê Dynasty? Is it possible that with such exploits and losses after a decade of resistance to Ming enemy, the military of Lê Dynasty appeared to be so bad? And the words of Nguyễn Trãi in *The Swear Ceremonial Festivity* seemed to be too humble towards enemy. In his conserved works, we see that he proved to be more much proudly.

We can say, although there still are many discussible questions about fictionizing art, but this third trend of historical novel seems to be in conformity with the viewpoint of Maxim in his above-mentioned article in the 1997, and also with the expectation horizon of modern public. However, this trend does not occupy the monopolist place, but it complements to another two trends in order to increase the attraction of historical novels.

4. Historical novel and the problem of fictionizing art

With this above-mentioned third trend, we encounter the discussible question of fictionizing art.

If in the novel in general, the fictionizing art is natural technique of writer, then for historical novel, it is just the fictionizing art which is the principal field in which the writer has the

occasion to show his creativeness in order to make historical novel different from a chronicle. The fictional events are also the manifestation of historical viewpoint of author.

However, the fictionizing art in historical novel has the specific feature of its own. The historical novel must be based on real historical events and characters, so the fictionizing art is allowed to create the facts only as “the additive” to history and may not distort history. For this reason, in common opinion in the world as well as in Vietnam, the fictionizing art in historical novel must be limited. The fiction may not be contradictory with the logic of historical facts and plot, and must ensure the historical truthfulness. Otherwise, the work will not be historical novel but only purely fictional novel which is based on borrowing a historical subject or legend, such as the works on Faust subject in the world, or the works on Thúy Kiều subject in Vietnam and China.

Thus, besides the fact that fictionizing art is like making “the additive” to historical novel, the historical novel must take the preciseness for the core feature. The unprecise historical details and facts may lead to the wrong judgments and the subjective deductions, make the readers misunderstand the history. For example in *Royal Dynasty Falling* (1994), Hoàng Quốc Hải wrote that General Trần Khát Trân, when he was in command of the army to fight against the Champa invaders coming in Vietnam under the command of the King Che Bonguar himself, then he was only 20 years old.

Meanwhile in *Hồ Quý Ly*, the writer Nguyễn Xuân Khanh wrote that Commander-in-Chief Trần Khát Trân was then a “mature and dignified man and was about 40 years old”. With these numbers of years so different from each other, the impressions made by these two images of the General will be very different between each other. And the readers will be puzzled about what image they must choose for that talented hero.

There is a last thing I want to notice: the fictionizing art is also originated in artistic conception of writer. So we should not make it absolute when assessing the artistic success of writer. There are some writers who decide to be loyal to history (as Hoàng Quốc Hải), and there are another ones who highly appreciated the fictional creativeness (as Nguyễn Xuân Khanh and Nguyễn

Quang Thân). Thus, the artistic success must be comprehensively evaluated from various viewpoints and not only from perspective of fictionizing art.

(Translated by author)

Endnote:

1. Hoàng Quốc Hải, “Preface”, in: Hoàng Quốc Hải, *Storm in the Court*, Women Publisher, Hanoi, 2003, pp. 9-10.
2. *Dictionary of Literary Terms* (edited by Professors Lê Bá Hán, Trần Đình Sử and Nguyễn Khắc Phi), Education Publisher, Hanoi, 1992, p. 205.
3. Hoàng Quốc Hải, op cit, pp. 14-15.
4. Playing on words: “Than” in Vietnamese means “charcoal” and also means “moan”.
5. (Reporter), “Debate about the novels on Trần Dynasty by Hoàng Quốc Hải”, *Văn nghệ*, No. 43, p. 6.