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**KEELE UNIVERSITY**

**Theory and practice in twentieth-century  
Vietnamese *kí*: studies in the history and politics of a  
literary genre**

**Linh-Hue Bui**

A dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
at the Keele University

**March 2016**

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## **Abstract**

*Kí* is a special genre in Vietnamese literature which embraces many subgenres of nonfiction which are classified in Western literature under such headings as diary, memoir, travelogue, biography, autobiography, and reportage. Within the twentieth century, *kí* has experienced many ups and downs before, during and after the Vietnam War. In this dissertation, from the angle of cultural studies which see genres both as historical products and a representation of subjectivity which resists to the assimilation of collective memory, I will investigate the theory and production of *kí* in the twentieth-century Vietnamese literature in order to find out the hidden mechanism which control the up and down and the variation of *kí*. The theory and practice of *kí* in North Vietnam since 1945 to the 1986 Reform, and the performance of *kí* in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War, as well as the return of *kí* to be a democratic genre in North Vietnam after the 1986 Reform, will be investigated to clarify how a genre, as a historical product, reacts to different rhetorical strategies in different historical situations.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1. Overview

*Kí* is a special genre in Vietnamese literature which embraces many subgenres of nonfiction which are classified in Western literature under such headings as diary, memoir, travelogue, biography, autobiography, and reportage. It also shares many similarities to Chinese *baogao wenxue* (reportage) and Soviet *oçerk* (sketch/reportage). If so, why it is impossible to describe *kí* simply as literary nonfiction? First, *kí* does not contain all subgenres of literary nonfiction (for example, literary essays, satirical essays, letters, food writing and other hybridized essays). Secondly, I wish to retain the word *kí* because it has a particular history in Vietnam. That is the reason why I prefer to reserve the name *kí* in this research.

In this dissertation, I use the term *kí* to refer to any literary nonfiction text that describes a factual event, person, social phenomenon or historical period, using literary styles and technique and written in the form of prose. However, in Vietnamese literary history, there have been many different opinions on what is *kí* and how many subgenres it embraces. In Vietnam before 1945 and in South Vietnam from 1945–1975, *kí* normally refers to nonfictional genre which are *phóng sự* (investigative reportage), *kí sự* (historical reportage), *truyện kí* (biography), *du kí* (travelogue), *hồi kí* (memoir), and *nhật kí* (diary).<sup>1</sup> In North Vietnam from 1945–1986, socialist critics tended to broaden the category of *kí* by including *bút kí* (a flexible combination of travelogue, reportage and literary essays) and *tùy bút* (literary essays) into the genre. Also in this

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<sup>1</sup> See Vũ Ngọc Phan, *Nhà Văn Hiện Đại (Modern Writers)* (Văn học, 1998) and Võ Phiến, 'Văn Học Miền Nam: Tổng Quan (Introduction to South Vietnamese Literature)' (Westminster: Văn nghệ, 1988) <<http://www.vietnamvanhien.net/vanhocmiennamtongquan.pdf>> [accessed 20 March 2013].

period in North Vietnam, *truyện kí* (biography) turned into a loose combination of autobiography/biography and fiction which praises the socialist heroes. However, after the Renovation in 1986, *bút kí*, *tùy bút*, and especially the socialist *truyện kí* have gradually been removed from the category of *kí*, which means that recent *kí* scholars and readers have come back to the definition of *kí* before 1945.

The changes in the theory and performance of *kí* in Vietnamese twentieth-century literature inspired me to examine the hidden mechanism for those changes. Besides, among others, *kí* plays an important and unique role in Vietnamese literature. Firstly, it is one of the genres which had the most to do with the modernization of Vietnamese literature in the first half of the twentieth century (1900–1945). It also fuelled two influential debates among Vietnamese literary circles, which were the pen war over art–for–art’s sake or art–for–life’s sake (1935–1939)<sup>2</sup> and the debate over the fictional elements in *kí* in the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, during the Vietnam War, which, in the North Vietnam, is known as “kháng chiến chống Mỹ, Ngụy” (“War of National Salvation against the Americans”), *kí* plays an important role in both North and South Vietnamese literature. And lastly, this is also the genre which has produced many contested and socially influential works at each point in Vietnamese modern literary history.

However, the study of *kí* has not matched its important position in Vietnamese literature. One of the main reasons for this lack of attention is that the theory and practice of *kí* vary a great deal between historical periods. Most domestic studies of *kí* have been based on the traditional literary criticism which is heavily influenced by Soviet literary criticism. Furthermore, the production of *kí* after 1975 has only attracted a few researchers because of its political sensitiveness. To the international critics and readers, this Vietnamese literary genre is still largely an unknown area though its subgenres are not unfamiliar in Western literary tradition. Recently,

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<sup>2</sup> See Vũ Trọng Phụng, ‘Để đáp Lại Báo Ngày Nay: Dâm Hay Không Dâm (A Response to Ngày Nay Newspaper: Pornographic or Not)’, *Báo Tương Lai*.

<sup>3</sup> This debate will be presented in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

Charles A. Laughlin's *Chinese Reportage: The Aesthetics of Historical Experience* (2002) which investigates the performance of Chinese *baogao wenxue* (reportage), a close relative of Vietnamese *kí*, has a lot to do with filling this gap. However, this is not enough to help understand this special genre in Vietnamese literature.

Since the 1930s, critics and writers have tried to form a theory of *kí* using theoretical approaches. Narrator, themes, plot, literary styles, spatial – temporal typology, typicality, allowances of literary techniques, among others, are of the most interest in *kí* criticism. However, these theoretical approaches fail to explain the position changes among *kí* subgenres as well as between *kí* and other literary genres in Vietnamese literary history, not to mention the changes in poetics inside this genre in every period. Meanwhile, *kí* proves that it has a special relationship to Vietnamese historical changes such as the National Front (1936 – 1939), the Vietnam War (1945 – 1975) and the Renovation which started in 1986. This relationship suggests that a historical approach to the genre might be a fruitful one.

There are a few Vietnamese researchers who have investigated the genre or one of its subgenres from the angle of cultural studies. Trịnh Bích Liên's PhD dissertation *Phóng sự Việt Nam trong môi trường sinh thái văn hóa thời kì đổi mới* (*Vietnamese Investigative reportage in the Renovation Culture*, 2008) approaches investigative reportage as a democratic voice which contributes to the social change in Vietnamese society. However, the main content of the research is in fact based on a rather traditional critical approach which focuses on realist values and techniques as well as literary styles. The dissertation remains unclear about the historical and generic connections between investigative reportage and other *kí* subgenres as a whole and therefore fails to explain the changes in this genre over time.<sup>4</sup> In such a situation, Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Minh's PhD dissertation *Kí như một loại hình diễn ngôn* (*Kí as Discourse*, 2013), which combines discourse theory and cultural semiotics to set up a theory of *kí*, is a significant

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<sup>4</sup> Another PhD dissertation which shares this approach is Cao Thị Xuân Phượng, *Phóng Sự Việt Nam Thời Kỳ Đổi Mới* (*Vietnamese Investigate Reportage in the Renovation*)" (Vietnam Institute of Social Sciences, 2011).

development in the study of this genre. She argues that there are two basic codes which form a *kí* text: the generic code (which includes two individual codes: the truth code and the artistic code) and the ideological code. Whereas the generic code sets the stable, fixed form of a *kí* text, the ideological code is the unstable one which makes this genre change over time. For example, because in the medieval time, magic and extraordinary creatures were believed to exist, medieval *kí* also includes stories about them and counts them as facts. Minh spends one third of her dissertation investigating the performance of *kí* in the North Vietnamese literature produced during the Vietnam War, showing how socialist realism “ritualizes” the structure of *kí*<sup>5</sup>.

International scholars recently have paid more attention to the relationship between literary nonfiction genres, especially, autobiography (an important subgenre of *kí*), and historical situations from the angle of cultural studies. Connecting autobiography to the expression of gender, postcoloniality and wartime, scholars of autobiographical studies have shown the problematic nature of autobiography due to the essence of memory and language as well as the act of writing. Linda Anderson’s *Autobiography* (2001) provides an overview of different approaches to autobiography, ranging from the poststructuralist Paul de Man’s claims regarding the death of autobiography as well as more positive views of the genre from critics such as Jacques Derrida, Fredric Jameson and Alastair Fowler. While analysing postcolonial and female autobiographical texts, Anderson asks how autobiography “can be used or read as a mode of political questioning at the very juncture of contradictory and dissonant discourses” (p. 13). Following Anderson, Victoria Stewart in *Women’s Autobiography: War and Trauma* (2004) explores selected female writers’ autobiographies around the time of World War I and World War II in terms of dealing with trauma and resisting a collective romanticized view of war as well as questioning the act of writing autobiography. David Huddart, in his book *Postcolonial Theory and Autobiography* (2008), challenges the conception that autobiography is narrowly

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<sup>5</sup> In this part of her dissertation, Minh is influenced by the way Katerina Clark applies cultural semiotics to analyze how Stalinist socialist realism assimilates the novel into the form of epic in her book *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, first published in 1981 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

ethnocentric and paternalist and suggests that autobiography constitutes a general philosophical resistance to universal concepts and theories. While these scholars emphasize the democratic nature of the genre, there are other scholars who dig deep into the relationship between autobiography and the politics of memory, an approach to genre which was inspired by such critical works as Maurice Halbwachs's *The Collective Memory* (first published in 1939, translated into English in 1980), Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on The Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) as well as Michel Foucault's ideas on truth as rhetorically constructed and the relationship between literature and politics, counter-memory and popular memory. Among the critical works on the politics of memory in literary nonfiction genres, two articles share my approach to *kí*: Peter Zinoman in his article "Reading Revolutionary Prison Memoirs" in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (2001), and, relating to investigative reportage, a subgenre of *kí*, Michael Schudson and Chris Anderson's article "Objectivity, Professionalism, and Truth Seeking in Journalism" (in *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, 2000) is an example of criticism which challenges the belief that journalist texts are objective and truthful, instead exploring the ways in which such writing can be used to create an institutionalized and official memory.

The scholarship on autobiography and reportage has led me to approach all subgenres of *kí* as a whole from the point of view of cultural studies, which considers genres as socially constructed. However, to understand *kí* requires additional research which investigates this genre as a unique phenomenon in Vietnamese literature, putting it in the Vietnamese historical, political and cultural situations since the 1930s as well as exploring its connections to its sibling genres in other countries' literature.

Charles A. Laughlin's *Chinese Reportage* confirms the literary merit of reportage and its significance in the Chinese leftist cultural legacy, arguing that values of individualism and humanism underpin the aesthetics of reportage, and suggesting that this makes the genre a

democratic voice against social and political injustice. The book also shows how socialist realism's themes and literary styles assimilate reportage into propaganda under Mao's policies on art and literature. However, Laughlin neglects to consider the relationship between Chinese reportage and other literary nonfiction genres which share the same relationship with socialist realism in particular and Chinese history in general. Similarly, Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Minh's PhD dissertation *Kí as Discourse*, despite exploring all subgenres of *kí* as a whole, only focuses on how socialist realism manipulated *kí* in North Vietnamese literature during the Vietnam War, without further connecting it to the production and criticism of *kí* in South Vietnamese literature during the War, as well as after the Renovation (Đổi Mới) in 1986. This leaves unexplained the question of why and how the theory and practice of *kí* significantly differs among different historical periods as well as why *kí* can fulfil a double role as a tool to create collective memory for propaganda purposes, and as a powerful democratic resistance to the official collective memory.

It is also important to note that there is a gap in the study of South Vietnamese literature during the Vietnam War in general and *kí* in particular due to its political sensitiveness. There is a popular view among South Vietnamese exile scholars that South Vietnamese literature was independent from politics, and played a positive role in reflecting and adjusting political policies<sup>6</sup>. In fact, however, *kí* in South Vietnamese literature during the Vietnam War both differs and is similar to *ki* in North Vietnamese literature in terms of the relationship with collective memory.

In this study, from the angle of cultural studies, I will investigate the theory and practice of *kí* in both the North and South Vietnamese literature during the Vietnam War as well as after the Renovation in 1986, putting this body of work in the contexts of Vietnamese literary modernization, socialist realism, and postmodernism. Focusing on the relationship between its generic markers (accurate presentation of facts and literary technique) and the changes in the perceptions of truth among different historical periods, doctrines and literary cultures, this

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<sup>6</sup>See Võ Phiến.

dissertation will explore how differently political authorities and individual writers treated *kí* to match their purposes. From the angle of the politics of memory, I argue that *kí* plays a double role: it functions as a propaganda tool to create institutionalized memory but it also resists that institutionalization.

## **1.2. Terms and methods**

### **1.2.1. Brief history of *kí***

It is necessary to distinguish *kí* from American New Journalism<sup>7</sup>. Although New Journalism is basically literary reportage, which is a subgenre of *kí*, this literary movement is a unique way of combining fictional techniques and journalism to create a fresh, unconventional kind of journalism. Like journalism, it deals with real, current events and its purpose is to criticize or reflect a political, social or cultural phenomenon. Like fiction, New Journalism embraces fictional devices to make itself a more flexible way of writing than conventional journalism. John Hellmann points out that New Journalists select, arrange and stylistically transform journalistic elements in order to “create an aesthetic experience embodying the author’s personal experience and interpretation of the subject”, which help readers “not merely read about events, but participate in the author’s personal experience and interpretation of them”<sup>8</sup>. New Journalists believed that is an appropriate way to access a fragmented, chaotic and “unreal” reality like American society in the 1960s and 1970s.

The word *kí*, originally a Sino–Vietnamese word, means “to record”. During the medieval period, it is often difficult to place a given text in either a historical, philosophical or literary category because the text is normally a combination of all these above. The prototypes of *kí*,

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<sup>7</sup> New Journalism is American literary movement in the 1960s and '70s that pushed the boundaries of traditional journalism by applying literary techniques and a subjective perspective, which is unusual in conventional journalism. Preferring "truth" to "facts", reporters immersed themselves in the stories as they wrote them. The term was coined by Tom Wolfe in a 1973. Prominent writers of New Journalism Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Hunter S. Thompson, Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, Terry Southern, Robert Christgau, Gay Talese.

<sup>8</sup> John Hellmann, *Fables of Fact: The New Journalism as New Fiction* (Urbana: Illinois University Press, 1981), 25.

which are *tạp kí* (random records, in which the writer records what he has seen or heard, containing historical information about places, cultural artifacts, customs or even extraordinary incidents) and *kí sự* (including travelogue and historical reportage, which narrates a journey or a historical event)<sup>9</sup>, are no exceptions to this rule. Other scholars add *thực lục* (records about feudal dynasties), *bì kí* (historical records written on stele), *tự* (preface), *bạt* (postface) in to the category of *kí*. These genres have their roots in the tradition of nonfiction prose in Chinese medieval literature which left a deep influence on Vietnamese literature, through nearly a millennium of Chinese domination (111 – 938). The reason for this generic categorization is that these genres are believed to contain not fabricated stories but facts only. Although these prototypes of *kí* are not pure but a combination of different kinds of writing, they show that medieval writers did pay attention to a distinction between nonfiction and fiction as well as acknowledge their ethics and responsibility as the witnesses of history. Medieval *kí* not only combines different knowledge areas such as history, philosophy and literature but also different modes of writing as well: the medieval writers did not only narrate or describe an event, a journey, a place or a person but also expressed their feelings and thoughts. It is common for a writer to add some verses into the text as a way to reveal his or her feelings towards the object. These basic generic markers leave their traces in the theory and practice of modern *kí*. Understanding medieval *kí* helps to explain the later difficulties of Vietnamese critics and writers while trying to define the subgenres of *kí*.

The earliest works which closely resemble *kí* in a modern sense can be traced back to the 1700s in Vietnamese traditional literature and include such works as Vũ Phương Đễ's *Công dư tiện kí* (*Random Notes Taken When Unoccupied by Public Affairs*, 1755), and Lê Hữu Trác's *Thượng kinh kí sự* (*Record of a Visit to the Royal Palace*, 1782). The former records the social, cultural and historical events and even some magical incidents which the writer witnessed or heard about, while the latter narrates a journey into the royal life through sharp, satirical yet tolerant eyes,

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<sup>9</sup> See Trần Đình Sử, *Mấy Vấn Đề Thi Pháp Văn Học Trung Đại Việt Nam (Poetics of Vietnamese Medieval Literature: Some Research Topics)* (Hanoi: Giáo dục, 1999), p. 324.

providing readers with insights into the corrupt reality of feudal society. While *Công dư tiếp kí*'s form resembles that of the short story in a number of ways, *Thượng kinh kí sự*, though different to investigative reportage in the modern sense, may usefully be considered as the first investigative reportage in Vietnamese literature. There is a longstanding tradition in Vietnamese feudal society to treat poetry and academic essays as superior to narrative texts. However, since the 1700s, when Vietnamese feudalism reached its climax of corruption, the need to reveal social issues through story-telling increased, reflected in the blossom of proto-reportage and fiction.

Modern *kí* was formed along with the process of the modernization of Vietnamese literature which began with the French colonization of Vietnam (1858 – 1945). The influence of European education, printing technology, journalism and the replacement of Sino-Vietnamese letters with *quốc ngữ* (Latin-based national script) transformed literature. The Western genres such as journalistic reporting, autobiography, short stories, novels and literary criticism were introduced into Vietnamese literature, merging with the existing literary tradition in order to fulfil the modernization of Vietnamese literature. Diary, memoir, biography, autobiography, travelogue, investigative reportage – different forms of Western literary nonfiction – were adopted and absorbed into Vietnamese literature by the French-educated intellectual generation. While Western philosophy is known for its intensive use of logic, reasoning, and categorization, Eastern philosophy tends to make less rigid distinctions between, for example, metaphysics and epistemology. Whereas Western philosophy tends to focus on the parts and prefers breaking down ideas and concepts into categories, Eastern philosophy tends to focus on the totality, aiming to link ideas together and show how they all reflect the same truths. Therefore, it is understandable that the theory of genre was not particularly well developed in Chinese and Vietnamese literary criticism. Medieval intellectuals rather focused on themes, literary styles and techniques, as well as the historical, political and ethical values present in a literary work. This is why it is appropriate to claim that the adoption of Western literary nonfiction genres during the

colonial period helped Vietnamese writers and critics to gain a clearer understanding of the existing traditional genres, including medieval *kí*. An overview of *kí*'s subgenres, including modern and traditional ones appeared in 1942, when Vũ Ngọc Phan's two-volume *Nhà văn hiện đại* (*Modern Vietnamese Writers*) was published. In the book, Phan acknowledges the confusion of genres among literary circles<sup>10</sup> and sets up an overview of genre using both his knowledge of Western literary genres as well as of the Vietnamese literary tradition. He categorizes writers into groups based on the genres in which they excel. Vũ distinguishes and defines different genres of literary nonfiction prose as follows: *bút kí* (a flexible combination between reportage/travelogue and literary essay), *lịch sử kí sự* (historical reportage), *truyện kí* (biography), and finally *phóng sự* (investigative reportage)<sup>11</sup>. Basing on Phan's definitions, readers can realize that *tùy bút* (literary essays) share many similarities with *tạp kí* (random records, a subgenre of the medieval *kí* which was mentioned above); modern *kí sự* (historical reportage) is not much different from its predecessor in medieval literature, its predecessor in Vietnamese traditional literature. Although Phan showed that these genres are all nonfictional, he was not the one who put them together under an umbrella term, *kí*. Among them, in this period of Vietnamese literary modernization, *tùy bút* and *phóng sự* were at the heart of Vietnamese literature, while *kí sự* and autobiographical genre which are *truyện kí*, *nhật kí*, *hồi kí* attracted less attention of writers. It is interesting that the wake of individualism in Vietnamese culture and literature was mainly expressed not in autobiography but in *thơ Mới* (*New Poetry*, a renovation in Vietnamese poetry, which was influenced by French Romanticism and Symbolism)<sup>12</sup> and *tùy bút*. In "Concepts of 'Individual' and

<sup>10</sup> "Cách đây không lâu, vào khoảng năm 1934– 1936, nhiều nhà văn nước ta vẫn chưa phân biệt được thể nào là lịch sử, thể nào là lịch sử ký sự, thể nào là lịch sử tiểu thuyết và thể nào là truyện ký" ("Not long ago, many Vietnamese writers were still unable to distinguish historical reportages, historical novels and biographies") in Vũ Ngọc Phan, *Nhà Văn Hiện Đại* (*Modern Writers*) (Văn học, 1998) 491.

<sup>11</sup> In Western literary theory, both historical reportage and investigative reportage are known as literary reportage. However, it is difficult to simply group these two genres under one umbrella term (literary reportage) because there is a tradition of historical reportage in Vietnamese medieval literature. Furthermore, differences between these two subgenres become visible in North Vietnamese literature during the Vietnam War, as I argue in Chapter 2.

<sup>12</sup> Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân, 'Một Thời đại Trong Thi ca', in *Thi Nhân Việt Nam, 1932–1941* (*Vietnamese Poets*) (Hanoi: Văn học), pp. 15–47.

‘Self’ in Twentieth Century Vietnam”, David Marr states that Vietnamese autobiography in the early twentieth century was less likely to reveal inner feelings, personal concerns or family interactions. The experience which is shown in most memoirs of this period, especially prison memoirs, was mainly used for political and personal effect. Marr also points out that only Nguyễn Hồng’s *Những ngày thơ ấu* (*Days of Childhood*, 1938) can be seen as the “high point of personal exploration via the medium of autobiography”.<sup>13</sup> As I mentioned in the Introduction of this dissertation, Peter Zinoman continues Marr’s idea in an analysis of the twentieth-century Vietnamese revolutionary prison memoirs as the legitimization of the past of CPV cadres.<sup>14</sup> This attitude toward autobiography has a lot to do with collectivism which was constructed by Confucianism and socialist realism, as I will argue in the following part in this chapter.

Among the genres of literary nonfiction, investigative reportage, influenced by nineteenth-century French critical realism and maybe the reportages of the proletarian literary movements of many nations in the 1920s (including the United States, Germany, China, Japan and the Soviet Union)<sup>15</sup>, played an important role in the most active period of the modernization of Vietnamese literature (1930 – 1945) and had a close relationship to the liberal movement in Vietnam between 1936 and 1939. In 1936, the anti-fascist Popular Front, an alliance of French left-wing movements, won the May 1936 elections, leading to the formation of a new government headed by Léon Blum. The new government implemented various domestic reforms and also instigated a new policy for all French colonies, including Indochina, increasing the democratic conditions in these areas. A corresponding Indochinese Democratic Front was formed,

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<sup>13</sup> David Marr, ‘Concepts of “Individual” and “Self” in Twentieth-Century Vietnam’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 34 (2000), 769–96, 785.

<sup>14</sup> Zinoman, ‘Reading Revolutionary Prison Memoirs.’

<sup>15</sup> Due to the lack of documentation in this area, it is difficult to identify whether the emergence of Vietnamese investigative reportage between 1936 and 1939 was influenced by the reportage of the worldwide proletarian literary movement or was merely part of a widespread but disconnected literary response to a similar historical situation in various different countries. I have seen no evidence that reportage writers such as Vũ Trọng Phụng, Tam Lang or Ngô Tất Tố ever read works of the German writer Egon Erwin Kisch, who promoted literary reportage as the genre of the new era, and left a deep influence on Chinese literary reportage. Nor do these writers seem to have been familiar with other Chinese, Soviet or Japanese texts of this genre before or around the boom of *kí* in Vietnamese literature after 1930.

uniting nationalists under the lead of the Indochina Communist Party. This historical situation led to the flowering of investigative reportage which revealed the dark side of Vietnamese colonial society including official corruption and the miserable life of proletarians. Prominent writers of investigative reportage during this period are Vũ Trọng Phụng, Tam Lang, Trọng Lang, Ngô Tất Tố, among others. Phụng earned the nickname *ông vua phóng sự* (*The King of Reportage*) after publishing influential reportages which are *Làm đĩ* (*To be a Whore*), *Lục Xi* (*V.D. Clinic*), *Cạm bẫy người* (*The Man Trap*), *Cơm thầy Cơm cô* (*Household Servants*). Phụng is also famous for writing novels which are rich in investigative reportage quality, for example, *Số đỏ* (*Dumb Luck*, 1936),

It is noteworthy that writers of literary essays and investigative reportage before 1945 did neither have the need to put them under any theory of genre nor debate over whether they could contain any fictional elements or not, as the writers of the following period (1945–1986) did. Phụng, the King of Reportage, only involved in a pen war between writers who supported “art for art’s sake” and ones who devoted to “art for life’s sake”, fueled by the charges that his works were pornographic by *Ngày nay* columnist Nhất Chi Mai.<sup>16</sup> In fact, while claiming that his works were all about truth and to reveal the true face of the corrupted society, he was not bound in using fictional techniques in his reportage. Thúy Tranviet comments on Phụng’s *The Industry of Marrying Europeans*: “In his reportage, Phụng often uses this tactic of shifting back and forth between non-fictional reporting and fictional invention to intensify the parody of the situation”, and “while retaining elements of the truth, a *phóng sự* writer has the freedom to exaggerate the event in order to make the story more interesting. Vũ Trọng Phụng had always been motivated by the truth, as he had often said in his writings. [...] If the truth-seeking aspect in his work made Vũ Trọng Phụng a reporter, his ability to fictionalize the truth made him a writer”.<sup>17</sup> It seems that Phụng’s reportage is not about photographic realism but imaginative truth.

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<sup>16</sup> Vũ Trọng Phụng.

<sup>17</sup> Thúy Tranviet, ‘Introduction: “Vũ Trọng Phụng’s The Industry of Marrying Europeans: A Satirical Narrative”, in *The Industry of Marrying Europeans* (Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 2006), pp. 9–21, 10, 11, 12.

While Vietnamese writers and critics before 1945 paid little attention to the theory of literary nonfiction, North Vietnamese literature during the First Indochina War (1945–1954) and the Vietnam War (1954–1975) took high regard of some literary nonfiction genres which are *kí sự* (historical reportage), *bút kí*, and *tùy bút*, a special subgenre of *bút kí*. Especially, during this period, there was the emergence of *truyện kí*, which, originally referred to biography in Vietnamese literature before 1945. However, *truyện kí* from 1945 to 1975 turned into a loose combination of autobiography/biography and fiction and was put under the category of *kí*. It is the first time in Vietnamese literary history, *kí* became an umbrella term for a wide range of literary nonfiction genre, which are investigative reportage, historical reportage, memoir, diary, biography, travelogue, *bút kí*, *tùy bút*, and even *truyện kí*. These theory and performance of *kí* emerged under the influence of Stalinist socialist realism which obsessed North Vietnamese literature since 1943 to the Renovation in 1986. In this dissertation, I will clarify why Stalinist socialist realism took an importance role in the construction of such theory of *kí* in North Vietnam (1945–1986), whereas in South Vietnamese literature (1954–1975) and Vietnamese Renovation literature (1986–present), writers and critics tended to come back to the conception of *kí* before 1945.

### **1.2.2. Cultural studies approaches to genre**

In several dictionaries of literary terms which were published before 2000, literary nonfiction is left out. For example, in the second edition of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (first published in 1990, 2nd edition in 2001 by Oxford University Press), Chris Baldick only mentions drama, fiction and poetry as three basic literary genres. But, in recently dictionaries, literary nonfiction genres have been listed along with the three mentioned genres. J. A. Cuddon, in *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (5th edition, Wiley–Blackwell, 2013) acknowledges the emergence of “a number of non-fiction genres, notably autobiography, biography and the essay” as literary genres (p. 299). The acknowledgment of several nonfiction

genres as literature along with the claim that genres are not pre-determined but socially constructed by cultural materialists puts the study of *kí* on a firmer basis and encourage me to explore what differences and similarities the tradition of Vietnamese *kí* shares with other literary nonfiction.

*Kí* is not, as I will argue, a pre-determined, fixed literary genre but a socially constructed one, which changed over time due to different historical, political, cultural circumstances of Vietnamese history. The essence of *kí* lies in the politics of the relationship between “truth”, memory and literary nonfiction genres. To understand why I choose to approach *kí* from the point of view of the politics of memory, let’s take a brief look at cultural studies, a historical approach to genre.

In *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research and Pedagogy* (2010), Anis S. Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff distinguish two basic approaches to genres in literary tradition: the theoretical and the historical approaches. Typical for the theoretical approaches, Neo-classicalists develop a theoretical, trans-historical set of categories to “classify and describe relations between literary texts, rather than examine how genres emerge from and are codified by users within actual contexts of use” (p. 15); Structuralists understand genres as “literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact”<sup>18</sup>. Romanticists and Post-Romanticists such as Freidrich Schlegel, Benedetto Croce, and Maurice Blanchot began to turn from theoretical to historical approaches with their “denial of genre”, contributing to a dynamic understanding of the relationship between texts and genres, which left a deep influence on post-structuralists such as Jacques Derrida. Doubting that genre is a property of a text, Derrida argues that there is no genreless text but texts do not belong to a specific genre because texts participate in a genre, or more accurately, several

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<sup>18</sup> Fredric Jameson, quoted in Anis S. Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff, *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research and Pedagogy* (Indiana: Parlor Press & The WAC Clearinghouse, 2010), 18.

genres at once: “genres are the preconditions for textual performances”.<sup>19</sup> Reader response approaches recognize genre not as a property of a texts but a performance of a reader, particularly the literary critic, upon a text.

Reacting against theoretical approaches which study literature in isolation from its social and political contexts, cultural studies approaches to genre were a product of the historical approach to culture. These approaches explore the dynamic relationship between genres, literary texts, and socio–culture, especially “the way genres organize, generate, normalize, and help reproduce literary as well as non–literary social actions in dynamic, ongoing, culturally defined and defining ways”.<sup>20</sup> For example, David Quint, in *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton*, points out that epic belongs to the victor as the victors experience history as coherent, end–directed story told by their own power, while romance belongs to the losers as they are powerless to shape their own ends; or Peter Hitchcock argues that the urge to codify the novel as a genre in the 1960s and 70s was connected to a decolonizing process in which postcolonial states asserted their autonomy and difference.<sup>21</sup>

Both new historicism and cultural materialism, two branches of cultural studies, which build on Marxist and historicist approaches to literary texts, emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s: new historicism in the USA and cultural materialism in Britain. Although they agree that literature can be used to legitimize power, and focus on exploring “the role of historical context in interpreting literary texts and the role of literary rhetoric in interpreting history”,<sup>22</sup> while “new historicists believe that the challenge literature poses for power is ultimately contained, cultural materialists believe that literature has the potential to subvert it”.<sup>23</sup> The limit of both these approaches is that they neglect to consider the author’s subjectivity and creativeness while

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<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Law of Genre* (1999), quoted in Bawarshi and Reiff, 21.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>22</sup> See John Brannigan, *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (Macmillan Press Ltd, 1998), 4

<sup>23</sup> Peter Childs and Roger Fowler, *The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 43.

considering all works no more than a struggle between dominant and subordinate readings. As a result, the artistic and linguistic aspects of the texts are mostly left out of concerns in these kinds of study.

While the tradition of theoretical approaches failed to explain the complexity of *kí* due to seeing it as a fixed genre, cultural studies has the potential to solve this problem by looking at this genre as a historical phenomenon. Believing that “[g]enre formations and transformations are linked to social formations and transformations in ideological, powerful ways”, cultural studies has contributed to genre studies by examining “how genres reflect and participate in legitimizing social practices and recognizing how generic distinctions maintain hierarchies of power, value, and culture”.<sup>24</sup>

Cultural studies make use of memory studies in order to analyse the interactions between individual memory and collective memory hidden under texts, media, memorials, commemoration. It seems that auto/biographical nonfiction (life-writing) is one of the areas where cultural studies and memory studies meet the most often. There have been a number of scholarly works which examine the connection between this genre and collective memory at some level: examples include Linda Anderson's *Autobiography* (2001), Victoria Stewart's *Women's Autobiography: War and Trauma* (2004), and David Huddart's *Postcolonial Theory and Autobiography* (2008). In “Reading Revolutionary Prison Memoirs” (in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, 2001), Peter Zinoman demonstrates that revolutionary prison memoirs served as propaganda to create a collective memory about the communist leaders as proletarian heroes and in particular to obscure their bourgeois background. Owen Evans in *Mapping the Contours of Oppression: Subjectivity, Truth and Fiction in Recent German Autobiographical Treatments of Totalitarianism* (2006) investigates eight works of autobiographical nonfiction and fiction to clarify the connection between totalitarian regimes and

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<sup>24</sup> Bawarshi and Reiff, 25

individual. His research is influenced by Anderson's idea on the connection between autobiography and survival from oppression.<sup>25</sup> My research does not only examine autobiography, memoir, diary but also connects them to other subgenres of *kí* to see how *kí*, as a genre, was manipulated to create collective memory under the influence of propaganda and how it resisted collective memory at the same time.

Over the past two decades, cultural memory studies, a research trend which studies the relationship between culture and memory, has become a key issue of interdisciplinary research which has attracted the attention of many international scholars. It has been applied in numerous areas: history, translation studies, film and media studies, journalism, museum and memorial studies, psychology, and politics. It also covers a wide range of topics: gender, postcoloniality, nationalism, immigration, war and the self, among others. One of the key concepts of cultural memory studies is “collective memory” (alternative terms include social memory, institutionalized memory, public memory and cultural memory<sup>26</sup>) which was coined by Maurice Halbwachs in 1920s. Halbwachs argued that individuals remember not individually but as a member of a group. The group contexts are the social frameworks of individual memory: “It is in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories”.<sup>27</sup> The concept of “collective memory” opened a new path for memory studies, as reviewed in *The Collective Memory Reader*: memory now is understood as “at once situated in social frameworks (e.g. family and nation), enabled by changing media technologies (e.g. the Internet and digital recording), confronted with cultural institutions (e.g., memorials and museums), and shaped by political circumstances (e.g. wars and catastrophes)”.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, studying memory helps us to understand “what categories people, groups, and cultures employ to make sense of their lives, their social, cultural, and

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<sup>25</sup> Anderson, 104.

<sup>26</sup> These terms cannot replace for each other perfectly. They can be different to each other due to different contexts of usage.

<sup>27</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 38.

<sup>28</sup> Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Daniel Levy, ‘Introduction’, in *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. by Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Daniel Levy (Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 3–62.

political attachments, and the concomitant ideals that are validated – in short, the political, cultural and social theories that command normative attention.<sup>29</sup>

Since the 1970s, along with the memory boom (the publication of many auto/biographical writings in different countries, especially European ones) and the linguistic/cultural turn, which approaches culture as a symbolic, linguistic and representational system<sup>30</sup>, cultural memory studies has witnessed a veritable boom in various countries and disciplines. Scholars of memory studies have been enriching its legacy with various approaches to memory: while Halbwachs (1920s) considers remembering as a collective action, Paul Ricoeur in *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2003) reminds us not to forget the role of the individual in that process. Aleida Assmann divides collective memory into social memory, political memory and cultural memory, in which “canon” and “archive” are the sources creating cultural memory.<sup>31</sup> Inspired by the theory of collective memory, Paul Fussell, in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) explored how the new experience of World War I and its literature reshaped the memories of an entire generation. Jay Winter in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (1995) has also shown how commemorations of World War I transform individual grief into public mourning.

From the angle of trauma studies, Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992), Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman in

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<sup>29</sup>Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky–Seroussi and Daniel Levy, “Introduction,” in *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. by Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky–Seroussi, and Daniel Levy (Oxford University Press, 2011), 34.

<sup>30</sup> See Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, “Introduction,” in *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, ed. by Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt (The University of California Press, 1999), pp. 1–34, 8. In the 1970s, many foundational works of the movement emerged: Hayden White’s *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth–Century Europe* (1973), Clifford Geertz’s *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (1973), Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1977), and Pierre Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977).

<sup>31</sup> See Aleida Assmann, “Canon and Archive,” (first published in *Erinnerungsraum: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*. 1999) in *The Collective Memory Reader*, ed. by Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky–Seroussi, and Daniel Levy (Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 334–337, and Aleida Assmann, ‘Re–Framing Memory. Between Individual and Collective Forms of Constructing the Past’, in *Reforming The Past: History, Memory and Identity in Modern Europe*, ed. by Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree, and Jay Winter (Amsterdam University Press, 2010), pp. 35–50.

*Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992) andr Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) all claim that forgetting is as important as remembering, and a fallible memory (mistakes or amnesiac elements) may speak to a historical truth: how the traumatic person is shocked and changed by the horror incident, or how collective amnesia reflects the way the group or nation dealt with the traumatic past. Kali Tal, in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996) suggests to consider the specific effects of trauma on the process of narration. For example, in 'Speaking the Language of Pain: Vietnam War Literature in the Context of a Literature of Trauma,' she shows how traumatized soldiers use narratives to gather scattered personal myths in order to undermine the national myth of the war<sup>32</sup>.

The recent international conference on *The Cultural Politics of Memory* at Cardiff University (14 to 16 May 2014) is an example of how cultural memory studies is still at the heart of research concerns gathers scholars from various disciplines. Among literary texts, auto/biographical nonfiction has been credited as one of the most popular sources, due to its unique generic trait: individual, nonfictional reflection of the past, which is based on a witness narrator with sincerity and authentic experience. What a study of life-writing texts seeks, as Saunders points out, is not historical fact but modes of writing, not actual memories but memories as representations, and representations as memories. More specifically, such approaches search for "interpretations of the ways in which memory was produced, constructed, written, and circulated".<sup>33</sup> Kí, since 1945 up to present, has been in a serious relationship with the (Vietnam) war trauma and political oppression. The above insights into memory studies will have a lot to do with exploring the politics of this genre, in other words, they help to make sense the

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<sup>32</sup> Tal.

<sup>33</sup> Max Saunders, "Life-Writing, Cultural Memory, and Literary Studies," in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. by Herausgegeben von Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nunning (Walter de Gruyter, 2008), pp. 321–332, 322–323.

way *kí* has been utilized as collective remembrance as well as how it has resisted against that institutionalization as individual approaches to history.

To investigate the cultural politics of memory in *kí* means to explore how institutions and writers transformed the genre to either conform, establish or resist institutionalized memory. The biggest institutionalized memory that *kí* has dealt with since 1945 is socialist realism, a theory which is heavily influenced by Lenin's Theory of Reflection and put much importance on "truth" and its related terms which are "truthfulness" and "sincerity".

### **1.3. Outline of chapters**

In this dissertation, from the angle of cultural studies which see genres both as historical products and a representation of subjectivity which resists to the assimilation of collective memory, I will investigate the theory and production of *kí* in the twentieth-century Vietnamese literature in order to clarify the hidden mechanism which control the ups and downs and the variation of *kí*.

In Chapter 1, I have given a brief look at the definition and subgenres of *kí*, as well as approaches to *kí*, as a genre, in Vietnamese and in western criticism. Chapter 1 also explains why cultural studies is appropriate to investigate the unique transformation of *kí* in Vietnamese literature. In Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, I will provide a comparison of North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese *kí* during the Vietnam War, whereas in Chapter 4 I will show how *kí* after the Renovation in 1986 resists the institutionalization of Stalinist socialist realism, which is analysed in Chapter 2. The whole thesis aims to demonstrate how a genre reacts to different rhetorical strategies in different historical situations.

In Chapter 2 of this dissertation, "Stalinist Socialist Realism and North Vietnamese *Kí*, 1945 to 1986", I will clarify how the collectivism inherited from Confucian *chân* was continued in Stalinist socialist realism in Vietnamese literature during 1945–1986, revealing in the way it

institutionalized the concepts *chân thực* (truthfulness), *chân thật/chân thành* (sincerity), *sự thực* (truth) and *chân lí* (Truth) as its main principles. In North Vietnamese literature from 1945 to 1986, socialist realism became the rhetoric of truth which is used by the Vietnamese Communist Party to legitimate its power. In this chapter, I will also demonstrate how Nhân văn Giai phẩm writers resisted that institutionalization of truthfulness and sincerity and how socialist *kí* conformed to it. Especially, I will examine the replacement of investigative reportage by other kinds of *kí* which are *kí sự*, *bút kí*, *tùy bút*, *truyện kí*. Through its canonization of *kí* which is poor in investigative quality and rich in propagandist content, socialist realism provided institutionalized memory of the socialist transformation and the Vietnam War.

In Chapter 3, “South Vietnamese *Kí* during the Vietnam War (1954 – 1975)”, I will examine how different the way South Vietnamese writers during the period 1945–1975 perceived the concept of sincerity and truthfulness, which led to the diversified demonstration of the Vietnam War in *kí*. I will also argue that despite many South Vietnamese exiled scholars claimed the independence of South Vietnamese literature from politics, the works of four South Vietnamese *kí* writers show that they were not totally free from orthodox ideology and censorship.

The Renovation (Đổi Mới) in 1986 made a great change in Vietnamese literature. In Chapter 4, “Vietnamese *Kí* since the Renovation”, I will look at the performance of memoirs, diaries and autobiographical metafiction to find out the changes in the way renovation writers have thought of sincerity and truthfulness. The resurrection of investigative reportage, the decanonization of socialist writers, the turn toward autobiographical metafiction will be examined to show how Vietnamese writers since 1986 resist the assimilation of Stalinist socialist realism, which has been monopolized to construct institutionalized memory.

This project, explores the assimilation of and resistance against the institutionalization of memory in Vietnamese *kí* since 1945 up to present. The project links the conceptions of sincerity

and truthfulness between North Vietnamese writers (1945–1986), South Vietnamese writers (1945–1975) and Vietnamese renovation writers (1986–present) to show how these concepts support different rhetorical strategies.

## Chapter 2

### Stalinist Socialist Realism and North Vietnamese Kí, 1945 to 1986

It is undeniable that theory of *kí* as we see today was formed and developed during this sensitive historical period (1945–1986) in North Vietnam. In this chapter, historical, political and cultural circumstances will be investigated to find out how what were the foundations for the theory and performance of *kí* during 1945–1986. The extent to which writers during this period conformed to or resisted the theory will be of the main content of this chapter as well.

Let's recall a brief history of the relationship between the USSR and Vietnam in the twentieth century. After nearly a thousand year of being a Chinese colony, Vietnam officially gained its independence from China in 939 A.D. and started to build up the country under feudalism. In 1858, the French army started to invade Vietnam and completed the invasion of the whole of Vietnam by 1887. During the French colonial period, there were many revolutionary movements and resistances which were raised by patriots with different ideologies and plans. Various alternatives to French rule (a return to feudalism, the adoption of Japanese modernization or the application of Sun Yat-sen's political philosophy<sup>34</sup>) were entertained, but none proved capable of dislodging the colonial system. Nguyen Ai Quoc (later become President Ho Chi Minh) went to Europe in 1911 to find another way to gain independence for Vietnam. Working hard to survive and travelling from country to country, watching the production of capitalism as well as experiencing the life of proletarians, finally, he found that Lenin's revolutionary theory could be applied to Vietnamese historical circumstances. Marxism shows that to transform a feudal society to a socialist one, it is necessary to develop capitalism in order to prepare proper material conditions first. Lenin applied it creatively: he supposed that it is

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<sup>34</sup> The Chinese revolutionist Sun Yat-sen created a political philosophy known as the Three Principles of the People (nationalism, democracy, and the people's livelihood).

possible to make a shortcut for Russia by leaping over to socialism from feudalism without a capitalist period. Inspired by the foundation of Soviet Russia, Nguyen Ai Quoc recruited young patriots to establish the Indochina Communist Party in 1930. In 1945, when German and Japan forces were defeated, Nguyen Ai Quoc (now known as Ho Chi Minh) succeeded in leading Vietnamese people to gain the independence from Japanese army by the August Revolution and established the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1945. But in 1946, the French army came back and threatened the existence of the young republic. The Indochina War between the French army and the Vietnamese people under the lead of the Vietnam Independence Alliance Association (Viet Minh Front, which was formed in China in May 1941 by Ho Chi Minh) started in December 1946. In 1950, the Chinese People's Republic and Soviet Russia started supporting Viet Minh with weapons. Viet Minh won the Indochina War by defeating the French army at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. But after that, Vietnam was separated into two sides: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV or North Vietnam) under the lead of the Vietnam Communist Party (CPV, with the support of socialist countries), and the anti-communist Republic of Vietnam (RVN or South Vietnam) and its allies – most notably the United States. The Vietnam War in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia started on 1 November 1955 and finished with the Fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975. Supported by China and Soviet Russia, the Vietnam People's Army (North Vietnamese Army) and the Vietcong (also known as the National Liberation Front, or NLF), a lightly armed South Vietnamese communist front directed by the North, combined guerrilla war strategy with conventional battles to fight South Vietnamese forces which were backed by the American military advisors and army as well as equipped with air superiority and other latest weapons.

The U.S. government viewed the involvement in the war as a way to prevent a communist takeover of South Vietnam as part of their wider strategy of containment. The North Vietnamese government and the Vietcong viewed the war as a resistance war, fought initially against France,

backed by the U.S., and later against South Vietnam, which it regarded as a U.S. puppet state. During the Vietnam War, North Vietnamese government and army received great support from Russia: weapons, food, clothes for soldiers, as well as intellectual, financial and, technical help for socialist transformation in the North. North Vietnam sent a lot of students and intellectuals to Russia, forming a close relationship between socialist Vietnamese culture and Soviet political culture. Not only Soviet policies regarding industries and agriculture but also Soviet socialist realism in literature and art became the models for the young socialist Vietnam. Since 1945 to 1986, before the “Đổi Mới” (“Renovation”) started, the influence of Soviet politics and culture remained strong in Vietnam.

## **2.1. The adoption of Stalinist socialist realism into Vietnam, 1945–1986**

Tracking down the Soviet materials on socialist realism which were translated and published in Vietnam as well as Vietnamese texts during 1936 – 1986, it is not difficult to see that Soviet theories of socialist realism had a great influence on Vietnamese literature and arts during the twentieth century. Firstly, it is necessary to clarify how Stalin manipulated Lenin’s Reflection Theory to legitimate socialist realism as his instrument to keep literature and arts dependent of politics.

### **2.1.1. Lenin’s Reflection Theory**

In Chapter Six “Empirio–Criticism and Historical Materialism” of *Materialism and Empirio–Criticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy*, 1909) Lenin states:

Social consciousness *reflects* social being—that is Marx’s teaching. A reflection may be an approximately true copy of the reflected, but to speak of identity is absurd. Consciousness in general *reflects* being—that is a general principle of *all* materialism. It is impossible not to see its direct and *inseparable* connection with the principle of historical materialism: social consciousness *reflects* social being.

[...] Materialism in general recognises objectively real being (matter) as independent of the consciousness, sensation, experience, etc., of humanity. Historical materialism recognises social being as independent of the social consciousness of humanity. In both cases consciousness is only the reflection of being, at best an approximately true (adequate, perfectly exact) reflection of it.<sup>35</sup>

According to historical materialism, social consciousness reflects social being. But how exact can this reflection be? In Chapter 2 of *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy* (1909), when arguing against Bogdanov's statements on absolute and relative truth, Lenin states that human beings are capable of getting at the truth: "Human thought then by its nature is capable of giving, and does give, absolute truth, which is compounded of a sum-total of relative truths". But he also states that truth only exists in a limited field: "Truth and error, like all thought-concepts which move in polar opposites, have absolute validity only in an extremely limited field", and there is no boundary between relative and absolute truth<sup>36</sup>. This ideological point of view influenced Lenin's thoughts on literature as well. Lenin's article "Leo Tolstoy as the Mirror of the Russian Revolution" in *Proletary* (Vol. 35, 1908) is famous for articulating a typically Leninist view of art and literature. He focuses on clarifying, from the perspective of Marxism, how Tolstoy succeeded and failed in reflecting the struggle between classes in Russian feudal society in 19<sup>th</sup> century. Lenin advocated a kind of literature which supported politics (Party-spirited literature). But he did not mean that art's truth must be identical to reality's truth. In the 1930s, however, Stalin began to apply Lenin's Reflection Theory in a more crude and literal way.

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<sup>35</sup> V. I. Lenin and Abraham trans. Fineberg, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy* (Moscow: Zveno Publishers, 1909). Retrieved from: <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1908/mec/six2.htm#v14pp72h-322>> [Accessed 16 August 2013].

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

It is visible that this Reflection Theory–influenced cultural policy was popular in Vietnam from the 1940s to 1986. Even now, its echoes in current Vietnamese culture can be detected (see Chapter 4). Lenin’s *Tổ chức của Đảng và Văn học Đảng* (*Party Organization and Party Literature*, 1905), one of the first books to be published in an independent North Vietnam, was translated in Vietnamese by Xuân Trường and published by Sự Thật Publishers in 1957. It was followed by Lenin’s *Bàn về Văn học và Nghệ thuật* (*Lenin On Literature and Arts*, edited by Jean Fréville, 1957) which was published in North Vietnam in 1960. Three years later, in 1963, *Về Văn hóa Văn nghệ* (*On Literature and Arts*), a collection of communist leaders, including Hồ Chí Minh, Trường Chinh, Lê Duẩn and Phạm Văn Đồng, who were deeply influenced by Lenin’s thoughts, was published. It was considered the key book for writers and cultural officials and reprinted the year after (1964) and several times after that. The influence of Reflection Theory on literary criticism and theory can be seen in other books which are mentioned in the previous part of this chapter.

Leonid I. Timofeev can be considered as the most prominent and earliest communist critic whose books were introduced to literary circles in North Vietnam. His book *Từ điển Thuật ngữ Văn học* (*Dictionary of Literary Terms*) was translated and published in Vietnamese in 1955. Timofeev’s influence can be easily traced in books of key critics of the early period of socialist literature in North Vietnam such as Lê Đình Kỵ and Hà Minh Đức. In *Nguyên lý lý luận văn học* (*Principles of Literary Criticism*, Vol. 1, 1944) which was translated by Lê Đình Kỵ and published in North Vietnam in 1962, Timofeev’s literary criticism and theory are intensively influenced by Lenin’s Reflection Theory:

The objective content of an artistic work (and literature in general) is, first, the historical reality which predetermines the writer’s consciousness as well as his life conditions reflected in his works, regardless of his attitude towards those conditions. “A reflection may be an approximately true copy of the reflected, but to speak of identity is absurd. Consciousness in general reflects being – that is a general principle of all materialism”,

Lenin said. “It is impossible not to see its direct and inseparable connection with the principle of historical materialism: social consciousness reflects social being” [...] But the objective content of an artistic work is also subjective: it is expressed in the way the writer introduce the reality. The way the writer selects and explains facts reflects how he perceives and evaluates reality.<sup>37</sup>

However, Timofeev’s intention when applying Lenin’s Reflection Theory is to legitimate Stalin socialist realism as an indispensable and advanced methodology for Soviet writers.

Therefore, in term of literary history, it is clear that socialist realism is thoroughly defined by the historical conditions and is an indispensable development phase of our literature. [...] The Regulations of the USSR Union of Writers (1934) show that writers in the Soviet Union agreed to sincerely and concretely reflect the reality of its revolutionary progresss, collectively held a socialist view of that reality and the wish to contribute to the socialist transformation positively, and shared a Party spirit which is the best expression of the masses spirit.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Leonid I. Timofeev, *Nguyên lý lý luận văn học* (Principles of Literary Criticism), Vol. 1, trans. Lê Đình Kỳ (Hanoi: Văn hóa Publishers, 1962), 39–40. Original text in Vietnamese: “Vậy nội dung khách quan của một tác phẩm nghệ thuật (và do đó theo nghĩa rộng, có thể nói là của văn học nói chung), trước hết là cái thực tế lịch sử đã quyết định ý thức của chính nhà văn, cũng như đã quyết định hoàn cảnh cuộc sống trong đó có nhà văn, đã được nhà văn đem phản ánh trong sáng tác của mình, dù bản thân nhà văn có thái độ đối với hoàn cảnh ấy như thế nào chăng nữa. “Cái được phản ánh tồn tại độc lập đối với những cái phản ánh nó (độc lập đối với việc nhận thức thế giới bên ngoài) là luận điểm cơ bản của chủ nghĩa duy vật”, Lenin said. (...) Đồng thời nội dung khách quan của tác phẩm nghệ thuật không thể không có màu sắc chủ quan; đó là cách giới thiệu của nhà văn về cuộc sống mà nhà văn miêu tả trong tác phẩm. Nhà văn chọn lọc và giải thích những sự kiện của cuộc sống mà mình miêu tả tức là đánh giá hiện thực và nói lên thái độ của mình đối với hiện thực ấy”.

<sup>38</sup> Leonid I. Timofeev, *Nguyên lý lý luận văn học* (Principles of Literary Criticism), Vol. 2, trans. Lê Đình Kỳ (Hanoi: Văn hóa Publishers, 1962), 262–263. Original text in Vietnamese: “Như thế, đứng về phương diện lịch sử văn học mà nói, thì rõ ràng là phương pháp hiện thực xã hội chủ nghĩa được quy định một cách sâu sắc bởi hoàn cảnh lịch sử và là một giai đoạn phát triển tất yếu của nền văn học chúng ta. (...) Trong điều lệ của Hội các nhà văn Xô viết (1934) đã chỉ ra rằng những nhà văn Xô–viết thống nhất với nhau ở chí hướng chung là phản ánh một cách chân thực và cụ thể lịch sử cuộc sống trong sự phát triển cách mạng của nó, ở thái độ xã hội chủ nghĩa với cuộc sống ấy, ở lòng mong muốn tham gia một cách tích cực vào công cuộc kiến thiết chủ nghĩa xã hội, ở tính đảng cộng sản chủ nghĩa với tính chất là biểu hiện tối cao của tính nhân dân”.

Basically, Lenin's reflection theory does not suggest that the work of art mirrors the appearance of things in the world. It reflects their underlying structures (as defined by Marxist Leninism). So socialist realism would not, for Lenin, have to be photographically "realistic". It is only Stalin, later on, who insists on less experimental forms of representation. This Stalinist policy of culture was expressed early in many messages and articles by Trường Chinh, the highest cultural leader in North Vietnam.

### 2.1.2. What is Stalinist socialist realism?

Timofeev's legitimization of Stalinist socialist realism can be seen in the series of Vietnamese theoretical books published in 1962, which are *Những Nguyên lý về Lý luận Văn học* (*Principles of Literary Criticism*), *Tác phẩm Văn học* (*Literary Works*) and *Loại thể Văn học* (*Literary Genres*). These books were written by Lê Đình Kỵ and Hà Minh Đức and became the manuals for university students. Another book which demonstrates Stalinist socialist realism is *Nguyên Lý Văn học* (*Principles of Literature*, 1965) which was written by several university professors (Hà Minh Đức, Nguyễn Vĩnh, Nguyễn Văn Hạnh and Lê Bá Hán, among others) in North Vietnam.<sup>39</sup> Again, Reflection Theory was mentioned as the ideological foundation for literary criticism:

The philosophical foundation for properly apprehending the relationship between literature and reality is the Marxist–Leninist Reflection Theory. It is a theory which explains the origins and forms of perception as well as the human capability of apprehending reality [...] Human beings are absolutely able to apprehend it, or in other words, to get to the essence of the world and understand the world's operation principles in order to better it.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> It was reprinted in 1974 under a new title *Cơ sở Lý luận Văn học* (*Introduction to Literary Criticism and Theory*, Vol. 1, Giáo dục Publishers).

<sup>40</sup> Hà Minh Đức et. al., *Cơ sở Lý luận Văn học* (*Introduction to Literary Criticism and Theory*), Vol. 1 (Hanoi: Giáo dục Publishers, 1974), 53. Original text in Vietnamese: "Cơ sở triết học để giải quyết đúng đắn mối quan hệ giữa văn học và hiện thực là phản ánh luận của chủ nghĩa Mác – Lênin. Đó là lý luận về nguồn gốc của nhận thức và hình thức của quá trình nhận thức, về khả năng nhận thức thế giới của con người (...) Con

The book also points out the value of a literary work is defined by how exactly it reflects reality, how it helps readers to acknowledge the objective truth, and how it promotes social progress. Marxist–Leninist socialism is mentioned as the ideological foundation for writers to get to the essence of reality and to acquire “truthfulness” in their works. In the book, *tính chân thật* (*truthfulness*) is presented as one of the most important standards of literature. It is defined as “the reflection of the essence and principles of reality, in other words, the reflection of truths” and it is “concentrated into typical characters and situations”.<sup>41</sup> However, as in Timofeev’s book, the authors also use Reflection Theory to legitimate Stalinist socialist realism. The book explains “party spirit”, “class spirit” and “the masses’ spirit” as indispensable qualities of socialist realism. These principles reflect the fact that Stalinist socialist realism is nothing other than a strategy to make literature become a tool of politics.

The definition of socialist realism in J. A. Cuddon’s *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* might be considered as one of the best definitions for this term so far:

By the time of the first Soviet Writer’s Congress of 1934, socialist realism emerged, in an atmosphere of Stalinist repression of all other factions, as the victorious official Party aesthetic, sanctioned by Maxim Gorky, N. Bukharin and A. A. Zhdanov, Secretary of the Central Committee for “ideology”. Zhdanov defined socialist realism as the portrayal of “reality in its revolutionary development”. Such art, he argued, must contribute to the project of ideological transformation and education of the working class. Other features of socialist realism, as designed by its various proponents, were an emphasis on factuality,

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người hoàn toàn có thể nhận thức được thế giới, nghĩa là thâm nhập vào bản chất của thế giới, nắm được những quy luật vận động của thế giới để cải tạo thế giới”.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 57, 73, 76. Original text in Vietnamese: “Giá trị của một tác phẩm nghệ thuật được quyết định ở chỗ (...) nó phản ánh đúng đắn đến mức nào hiện thực khách quan, giúp cho người ta nhận thức đến mức nào chân lý cuộc sống, tác động đến mức nào công cuộc cải tạo cuộc sống” (57). “Do đó nhà văn phải có thế giới quan đúng đắn để có thể phản ánh hiện thực đúng đắn. Thế giới quan” đó chính là chủ nghĩa Mác – Lê nin. (...) Tính chân thật là sự phản ánh bản chất và quy luật của hiện thực tức là phản ánh được chân lý cuộc sống” (73). “Tính chân thật được nâng cao và tập trung nhất thành tính điển hình của những tính cách và hoàn cảnh” (76).

the integration of scientific and technical detail, the application of later 19<sup>th</sup> century realist techniques to Soviet heroes, and the literary projection of a socialist future. Socialist realism traced its authority back through Lenin's notions of *parinost* (partisanship) and literature as reflection of reality to the statements of Marx and Engels themselves, especially Engel's comments on the importance of expressing "typical" individuals and forces. But this alleged lineage is somewhat misleading. While Marx and Engels certainly saw literature as performing an ideological function, they stressed its highly mediated connection with economic formations, and Engels spoke of its "relative autonomy". It is true that they both praised realism but they did not centralize it in any coherent interventionist formulation. [...] It was only with Lenin and Trosky that literature was ascribed an interventionist and partisan function in a broader revolutionary approach. But the interventionism championed by both men was highly complex and flexible, qualified by its reference to particular historical circumstances.<sup>42</sup>

It is evident that, originally, socialist realism is not much different from realism which is "a mode of writing that gives the impression of recording or reflecting faithfully an actual way of life. The term refers, sometimes confusingly, both to a literary method based on detailed accuracy of description (i.e. Verisimilitude) and to a more general attitude that rejects idealization, escapism, and other extravagant qualities of romance in favour of recognizing soberly the actual problem of life"<sup>43</sup>. All theories of realism, including socialist realism, "rest on the assumption that the novel imitates reality, and that that reality is more or less stable and commonly accessible. But it is possible to conceive of the relationship between art and reality in terms of imaginative creation rather than imitation"<sup>44</sup>. Socialist realism and others pursue is not the accurate imitation of an objective reality but an imaginative truth. What makes socialist realism different from other

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<sup>42</sup> Cuddon, 664.

<sup>43</sup> Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 2nd edn (Oxford University Press, 2001), 199.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

theories of realism is that it only focuses on reality “in its revolutionary development” There is nothing necessarily or inherently mono-voiced about the notion of socialist realism (Brecht, for example). However, after Lenin’s death, Joseph Stalin<sup>45</sup>, during his reign, distorted and monopolized socialist realism to become the sole doctrine for literati. In the meeting with writers at Gorky’s house (October 1932), Stalin said: “An artist should first of all show our life truthfully. If he complies with the task he will not fail to single out the factors which lead us to socialism. This I should call social art, socialist realism”.<sup>46</sup>

As demonstrated in Stalin’s speech on socialist realism and Timofeev’s *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Stalinist socialist realism values “truth” and related terms such as “truthfulness” and “sincerity” However, these values were predetermined by the Party spirit. A literary work would be only “truthful” and “sincere” if it conformed to the Party’s doctrine. Socialist realism, therefore, became the instrument to control intellectuals and maintain the dependence of literature and arts on politics Along with the influence of the USSR, Stalinist socialist realism became extremely influential in Vietnam from 1945 to 1986.

### **2.1.3. How Stalinist socialist realism was introduced into Vietnam?**

In the book *Nhìn lại nửa thế kỷ lý luận chủ nghĩa hiện thực xã hội chủ nghĩa ở Việt Nam 1936–1986* (*A Review of 50-year Socialist Realism in Vietnam 1936–1986*, 1999), Phương Lưu chronicles the adoption and development of socialist realism by Vietnamese critics and politicians. But he does not describe in detail how Soviet texts on socialist realism were introduced and took effect in Vietnam. The term “socialist realism” was introduced into Vietnamese literary circles firstly by Hải Triều, a Marxist critic, during the literary argument between writers who support for “art for

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<sup>45</sup> Joseph Stalin (born December 18 – died March 5, 1953), secretary-general of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1922–53) and premier of the Soviet state (1941–53), who for a quarter of a century dictatorially ruled the Soviet Union and transformed it into a major world power. Source: Ronald Francis Hingley, ‘Stalin’, *Britannica* <<http://www.britannica.com/biography/Joseph-Stalin>>.

<sup>46</sup> Cited in Politics and Propaganda Institute, *Tìm Hiểu Chủ Nghĩa Hiện Thực Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa (To Understand the Socialist Realism)* (Hanoi: Politics and Propaganda Institute, 1973). This is a training material written by the Vietnam Institute of Politics and Propaganda.

art's sake" and those who support "art for life's sake". Representing the latter, Hải Triều used the term "chủ nghĩa tả thực xã hội chủ nghĩa" (socialist realism) in 1936 and 1939 to describe writing which criticised French rule and promoted a socialist alternative.

In the article "Mácxim Goóc ky, nhà đại văn hào của Liên bang Xô viết và của thế giới đã qua đời" ("Maxim Gorky, The Great Writer of the USSR and the World Has Gone", 4 July 1936), Hải Triều and Hải Thanh define socialist realism as follows:

Socialist realism is an exact and detailed description of phenomena at the present or in the past which leads the masses to an awareness of socialism and encourages them to fight for it.<sup>47</sup>

In a subsequent article, "Văn học Liên bang Nga Xô viết" ("The Literature of the USSR") in *Hồn trẻ* (25 July 1936), Triều and Thanh continued to explain the notion of socialist realism. According to them, socialist realism differs from critical realism because it does not only reveal social evils but also sets out a way to cure them, which is socialism.<sup>48</sup> And, in the article "Đi tới chủ nghĩa tả thực trong văn chương: Những khuynh hướng trong tiểu thuyết" ("Towards Realism in Literature: Tendencies in Novels") in *Tao đàn* (16 May 1939), Triều wrote: Socialist realism admits that every work embraces an ideological tendency, but it rejects the subjective, arbitrary, mechanical and conservative ideologies which were superficially added to texts in the past".<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Hải Triều and Hải Thanh, 'Mácxim Goóc ky, Nhà đại Văn Hào Của Liên Bang Xô Viết Và Của Thế Giới đã qua đời (Maxim Gorky, The Great Writer of the USSR and the World Has Gone)', *Hồn Trẻ*, 4 April (1936). Original text: "Chủ nghĩa tả thực xã hội cốt ở sự tả một cách chân thật rành mạch, những hiện tượng quá khứ hay hiện tại, làm thế nào cho sự tả thực ấy có thể đưa quần chúng đến chỗ giác ngộ, tranh đấu để kiến thiết xã hội chủ nghĩa".

<sup>48</sup> Hải Triều and Hải Thanh, 'Văn Học Liên Bang Nga Xô Viết (The Literature of the USSR)', *Hồn Trẻ*, 25 April (1936).

<sup>49</sup> Hải Triều, 'Đi Tới Chủ Nghĩa Tả Thực Trong Văn Chương: Những Khuynh Hướng Trong Tiểu Thuyết (Towards Realism in Literature: Tendencies in Novels)', *Tao đàn*, 2 (1939), 3. Original text in Vietnamese: "Chủ nghĩa tả thực xã hội vẫn luôn luôn thừa nhận mỗi tác phẩm đều có một khuynh hướng, nhưng chủ nghĩa tả thực xã hội lại hết sức kỵ những khuynh hướng chủ quan, độc đoán, cơ giới, những tư tưởng cố định, những tín điều bất dịch mà tác giả đã vụng về ghép vào câu chuyện".

However, as Hue Tam Ho Tai points out in “Literature for the People: From Soviet Policies to Vietnamese Polemics”, in Triều’s articles, “how to conciliate various perceptions of ‘truth’ and how to serve that ‘truth’ were left vague”.<sup>50</sup>

Two years before the August Revolution which freed Vietnam from French rule, Trường Chinh, one of the earliest revolutionary figures and later President of the Congress in the Social Republic of Vietnam (1960 – 1986), wrote a key political and cultural document for the young Vietnam Communist Party: *Đề cương về văn hóa Việt Nam* (*Theses on Vietnamese Culture*, 1943). *Theses* reflects Stalin’s thought on socialist realism and Mao Tze Dong’s *Talk in Yen-an* in many ways. In the text, Chinh stated that: “The Indochinese cultural revolution has to take the task of constructing socialist culture”.<sup>51</sup> Trường Chinh argued that: “The revolution has to fight against other artistic tendencies like classicism, romanticism, naturalism, and symbolism in order to help socialist realism to victory”.<sup>52</sup> For Chinh, art and literature were part of the revolution against the French colonial regime. A year later, Đặng Thai Mai, a Marxist critic, also described socialist realism as a “literary methodology” (“phương pháp sáng tác”). In his book *Văn học khái luận* (*Introduction to Literature*, 1944), Mai stated that in the contemporary period, it is necessary to use socialist realism as the essential creative method to defeat romanticism and idealistic literature. After the success of the August revolution in 1945, socialist realism continued to be strengthened as the sole orthodox doctrine of the new arts and letters. Since then, the term “socialist realism” regularly reappears in the party policies, reports, congresses and conferences of artists. In 1948, Chinh presented a speech, “Chủ nghĩa Mác và Văn hóa Việt Nam” (“Marxism and Vietnamese Culture”) at the 2<sup>nd</sup> National Congress on Culture in the military zone Việt Bắc.

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<sup>50</sup> Hue Tam Ho Tai, ‘Literature for the People: From Soviet Policies to Vietnamese Polemics’, in *Borrowings and Adaptions in Vietnamese Culture*, 1987, 63–83, 80.

<sup>51</sup> Trường Chinh, ‘Đề Cương về Văn Hóa Việt Nam (Theses on Vietnamese Culture)’, 1943 <<http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=3261&rb=0102>> [accessed 3 March 2013]. Original text in Vietnamese: “Nền văn hóa mà cuộc cách mạng văn hóa Đông–dương phải thực hiện sẽ là văn hóa xã hội chủ nghĩa”.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. Original text in Vietnamese: “Công việc phải làm: tranh đấu về tông phái văn nghệ (chống chủ nghĩa cổ điển, chủ nghĩa lãng mạn, chủ nghĩa tự nhiên, chủ nghĩa tượng trưng v.v... làm cho xu hướng tả thực xã hội chủ nghĩa thắng”.

Trường Chinh stated that socialist realism was a creative method, and should be the leading guide for writers. When introducing socialist realism, he quoted Engel's definition of realism:

As we understand it, socialist realism is a method of artistic creation which portrays the truth in a society evolving towards socialism according to objective laws. Out of objective reality we must spotlight "the typical features in situations" [a quote from Engels] and reveal the inexorable motive force driving society forward and the objective tendency of the process of evolution.<sup>53</sup>

It is clear that during the Indochina War between the Việt Minh (the League for the Independence of Vietnam) and the French army, socialist realism was still new to many communist artists of the Việt Minh. In 1949, in Việt Bắc, the central base of Việt Minh, there was a meeting to debate over literary issues among key communist writers including Nguyễn Đình Thi, Tố Hữu, Tô Hoài, and Văn Cao. The main objective of the meeting was to remove artists' confusions over socialist realism and come to a mutual understanding of the theory.<sup>54</sup> The main questions were: how does socialist realism differ from critical realism? Can socialist realism be applied to Vietnam's current situation? Should socialist artists mention the dark side of the new society? After Vietnam won its independence from the French in 1954, North Vietnam started the socialist transformation and *kháng chiến chống Mỹ* ("War of National Salvation against the Americans"). During this period, Stalinist socialist realism officially became the orthodox doctrine for literature and arts. Among others, the national congresses of writers and artists in 1957 and 1962 took an important role in legitimating socialist realism.

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<sup>53</sup> Trường Chinh, 'Chủ Nghĩa Mác và Vấn đề Văn Hóa Việt Nam (Marxism and Vietnamese Culture)', in *Về Văn Hóa Văn Nghệ (On Culture and Art)*, 4th edn (Hanoi: Văn hóa, 1976), pp. 147–156. Translated and cited in Jamieson, p. 212. Original text in Vietnamese: "Về sáng tác, lấy chủ nghĩa hiện thực xã hội chủ nghĩa làm gốc. [...] Hiện thực xã hội chủ nghĩa là một phương pháp sáng tác văn nghệ tả những sự thật trong xã hội. Nhưng trong sự thật khách quan, phải làm nổi bật lên những tính cách điển hình trong những trường hợp điển hình (Ăngghen). Hơn nữa, nó làm cho người ta thấy được cái lẽ chuyển biến tất nhiên của xã hội, cái khuynh hướng khách quan của sự vật tiến hóa".

<sup>54</sup> The content of the conference was reprinted in Tố Hữu, *Xây Dựng Một Nền Văn Nghệ Lớn, Xứng Đáng Với Nhân Ta Với Thời Đại Ta (To Build a Great Art Which Matches Our Time and Our People)* (Hanoi: Văn học, 1973).

It is worth noting that until 1962, except individual articles and speeches on socialist realism by Vietnamese writers and politicians, there were no theoretical books in this field which were written and published by Vietnamese. The most important theoretical books on socialist realism which were published during 1945 – 1962 were translated from Russian, French or Chinese. They are: *Hiện thực Xã hội Chủ nghĩa* (*Socialist Realism*, 1951) which collects ideas of A. Tolstoy, Fadeev, Tcherbina, and Jean Freville on socialist realism, T. S. Trofimov and B. B. Kudonesov's *Chủ nghĩa Hiện thực Xã hội Chủ nghĩa Là Gì?* (*What is Socialist Realism?*, 1958), V. Tsebina and A. Ivashenko's *Những Cuộc Thảo luận về Chủ nghĩa Hiện thực Xã hội Chủ nghĩa ở Liên Xô* (*Discussions on Socialist Realism in the USSR*, 1961), *Nguyên lý Mỹ học Mác – Lênin: Chủ nghĩa Hiện thực Xã hội Chủ nghĩa* (*Principles of Marxist–Leninist Aesthetics: Socialist Realism*, 1962), Soviet Institute of Philosophy's *Nguyên lý Mỹ học Mác – Lê nin* (*Principles of Marxist–Leninist Aesthetics*, 1963) and L. I. Timofeev's *Nguyên lý Lý luận Văn học* (*Principles of Literary Criticism*, Vol. 1 & Vol. 2, 1962).<sup>55</sup>

In 1962, *Những Nguyên lý Lý luận Văn học* (*Principles of Literary Criticism*), *Tác phẩm Văn học* (*Literary Work*), and *Loại thể Văn học* (*Literary Genres*), were published as parts of a series on Literary Rhetoric and Criticism and were used as the manual for university students. The authors were Lê Đình Kỵ and Hà Minh Đức. The title of the first book is similar to L.I. Timofeev's one, which was translated and published by Lê Đình Kỵ in Vietnam in 1962. But the work of Lê Đình Kỵ and Hà Minh Đức closely resembled Timofeev's in content. In fact, both authors had studied in the USSR and graduated from Lomonosov University, which used to be the largest and most

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<sup>55</sup> Detailed information of the books: 1) Alexis Tolstoy, Fadeev, Tcherbina, and Jean Freville, *Hiện thực Xã hội Chủ nghĩa* (*Socialist Realism*), trans. Nguyễn Xuân Canh and Chân Thành (Hội Văn nghệ Việt Nam, 1951). 2) Trofimov, T. S. and Boris Bialik Kudonesov, *Chủ nghĩa Hiện thực Xã hội Chủ nghĩa Là Gì?* (*What is Socialist Realism?*), trans. Hồng Phương and Văn Tiến (Hanoi: Sự thật (Truth) Publishers, 1958). 3) Tsebina, V. and A. Ivashenko, *Những Cuộc Thảo luận về Chủ nghĩa Hiện thực Xã hội Chủ nghĩa ở Liên Xô* (*Discussions on Socialist Realism in the USSR*), trans. Lê Đình Kỵ and Vũ Thu Hiền (Hanoi: Văn học, 1961). 4) Unknown, *Nguyên lý Mỹ học Mác – Lênin: Chủ nghĩa Hiện thực Xã hội Chủ nghĩa* (*Principles of Marxist–Leninist Aesthetics: Socialist Realism*), trans. Trần Y Minh, Đỗ Mạnh Cung (Hanoi: Văn hóa Nghệ thuật, 1962). 5) Soviet Institute of Philosophy, *Nguyên lý Mỹ học Mác – Lê nin* (*Principles of Marxist–Leninist Aesthetics*), trans. Hoàng Xuân Nhị (Hanoi: Sự thật (Truth) Publishers, 1963). Its main content is also about socialist realism. 6) Leonid Ivanovich Timofeev, *Nguyên lý Lý luận Văn học* (*Principles of Literary Criticism*) – Vol. 1 & Vol. 2., trans. Lê Đình Kỵ (Hanoi: Văn học Publishers).

important university in the USSR and a common destination for Vietnamese intellectuals. The number of theoretical books on socialist realism which were published between 1958 and 1962 is notable. This reflected the Party's effort to strengthen socialist realism as an official method for arts and to stop ideological dissensus among intellectuals, which was raised by Nhân văn – Giai phẩm Movement (NVGP, which is similar to the Chinese Hundreds Flower Campaign) in 1958, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

The application of Stalinist socialist realism in Vietnam was also influenced by Chinese Communist Party's policy on literature and arts. Although Mao Tze Dong never used the concept "socialist realism", he claimed that "literature and art are subordinate to politics"<sup>56</sup>. Chou Yang, his speaker in term of literature and art, addressed at the Second Chinese Writers's Congress (1953):

The socialist elements are day by day rapidly growing and playing an increasingly decisive role in the life of the people. Powerful state-owned enterprises of a socialist nature have assumed the leading position in the national economy. The Communist Party, as the leader of the national political power, enjoys the highest prestige among the people. Marxism-Leninism and comrade Mao Tze Dong's teachings on the Chinese revolution are widely disseminated among the people throughout the country. This provides a broad and real foundation for the development of a socialist-realist literature and art".<sup>57</sup>

Later, in a report in September 1953, Chou Yang claims that Chinese writers "regard the method of socialist realism as their highest principle in the creation and criticism of all literature and art".<sup>58</sup>. Though Mao Tze Dong, Chou Yang and Chinh, it is clear that the intention of treating socialist realism as the official method for literature and art was passed from the Soviet Union to

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<sup>56</sup> Mao Tze Dong, 'Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art', 1942. Retrieved from: <[http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3\\_08.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-3/mswv3_08.htm)> [accessed 4 March 2012].

<sup>57</sup> Chou Yang, 1953. "Fight for the creation of more and better literary and artistic works", *Wen-i pao*, 19, p. 7-17; see p. 7,8. Translated into English as "For More and Better Literary and Artistic Creations", in Chou Yang, *China's New Literature and Art*, p. 1-51.

<sup>58</sup> *Wen-i pao*, 1953, 19, p. 12.

China and Vietnam. It is not clear that whether Chinh was influenced by Mao's *Yenan Talks* or not when he wrote the *Theses on Vietnamese Culture* in 1943. But Mao Tze Dong had a significant impact on Vietnamese Communist Party doctrine. There are many translations and reviews of Mao's ideas which were published since 1953 or earlier. In 1953, Trần Bá Đạt published *Bàn về tư tưởng Mao Trạch Đông: Sự kết hợp chủ nghĩa Mác - Lênin với cách mạng Trung Quốc* (*About Mao Tze Dong's Thoughts: The Integration of Marxism-Leninism and Chinese Revolution*), a book which summarizes Mao's thoughts on revolution, communism in general and on literature and art in particular. This book was translated and reprinted twice by Sự thật in Vietnam in 1953. In 1959, *Mao Trạch Đông bàn về văn nghệ* (*Mao Tze Dong on Literature and Art*), a collection of Mao's thoughts of literature and art was translated by Hồ Tố Ngọc and published in Vietnam. A year later, the book *Giương cao hơn nữa ngọn cờ tư tưởng văn nghệ Mao Trạch Đông* (*To Spread and Strengthen Mao Tze Dong's Thoughts on Literature and Art*) by Lâm Mặc Hàm was translated into Vietnamese and published as a part of the series *Tủ sách lý luận – hướng dẫn sáng tác* (*Literary Criticism and Writing Guide Books*). Among the articles of orthodox critics and writers who attacked Nhân văn Giai phẩm Group in the pen war 1955-1958, Mao Tze Dong's thoughts on literature and art were repeated many times to support the writers' point.<sup>59</sup>

In general, the definition of socialist realism in Vietnam is identical to the one in the USSR. Most Vietnamese materials on socialist realism which were published during 1936–1986 matched the Soviet ones in the following points. Firstly, socialist realism is a more advanced version of realism. Like realism, it is a mode of writing which reflects faithfully an actual way of life. Secondly, party-spirit (socialist vision) is the ideological foundation of every work, which can provide readers the essence of reality as well as a bright vision of the future. Lastly, the

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<sup>59</sup> For example, see Trường Chinh, "Một số Vấn Đề Về Văn Hóa Văn Nghệ" ("Some Specific Problems in Art", 1958), in *Về Văn hóa Văn nghệ* (*On Culture and Art*) (Hanoi: Văn hóa, 1976), IV, 189–220; or Trường Chinh, "Lên Án Bọn Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm" ("A Criticism of Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm Group"), in *Về Văn hóa Văn nghệ* (*On Culture and Art*, 1958) (Văn hóa, 1976), pp. 221–224.

protagonist of socialist writing is the Hero both/either on the battlefield or in agricultural and industrial labour.

What we intend to clarify here is to answer the following questions: why was socialist realism so important in Vietnam during 1945–1986 as well as in the USSR and China? And why among other literary genres, did *kí* come to play such an important role in socialist literature? Before answering these questions, it is necessary to understand the factors in Vietnamese cultural tradition which preceded the acceptance of Stalinist socialist realism into Vietnam.

#### **2.1.4. On sincerity and individualism: from the Confucian Man to the Collective Man**

Stalin's conception of realism had been preceded by other cases in which Vietnamese writers had been influenced by their own tradition and European realisms. Before the Indochina War against the French (1945 – 1954) and the Vietnam War (1954 – 1975), the period 1930 – 1945 can be considered as the golden age of Vietnamese realist literature which was influenced by nineteenth-century critical realism in European literature. Investigative reportage by Vũ Trọng Phụng, Tam Lang, Ngô Tất Tố, and realist fictions by Nam Cao, Nguyễn Công Hoan, among others, were at the heart of the literature at that time. This realist movement in its broadest, non-Stalinist sense is considered one of the greatest achievement of Vietnamese literary modernization (1858 – 1945). It became the premise for Soviet socialist realism to be adapted easily when it was first officially introduced into Vietnamese literature around 1945. However, what made Stalinist socialist realism first accepted among Vietnamese literati was the Confucian tradition which values collectivism and conformity. I will clarify that connection through a comparison between the conception of “sincerity” in Stalinist socialist realism and Vietnamese Confucian *chân*,

Firstly, it is necessary to understand the concepts of truth, truthfulness and sincerity in the traditions of Western and Eastern philosophy and literature. The meaning of truth varies in

different fields such as rhetoric, philosophy and science and discourse studies. Aristotle distinguished rhetoric from philosophy and science by arguing that philosophy and science sought truth while rhetoric sought the appearance of truth. Therefore, truth of proposition (in rhetoric), absolute truth (in religion and philosophy) and objective truth (in philosophy and sciences) are said to be different. To Aristotle, rhetoric was the art of discovering the 'available means of persuasion in a given case' (Rhetoric 1355b)<sup>60</sup>. This belief was one of the reasons which made rhetoric to be considered subordinate to philosophy and sciences for centuries. The first scholar who paved the way for postmodernism to claim that all truths, even the ones by philosophy and science, are rhetorical, was Friedrich Nietzsche: "Nietzsche departed from this tradition on the question of truth itself – the question of whether there could be true beliefs and therefore right actions in any absolute sense. He argued instead that truth was perspectival, historical, and that beliefs were never proven but only persuaded".<sup>61</sup> He claimed the death of God by believing that "there was no Truth and that the goal of pursuing the Truth was only a supreme rhetorical ploy, he then saw that what was presumed to be the means of pursuing Truth and Justice – that is, power, residing in institutional and personal authority – was the actual goal, the only goal. The Will to Truth, he concluded, is the Will to Power".<sup>62</sup> Nietzsche explained that "the myth of Truth" exists because people want to believe in something and they feel good about persuading others, which is a form of pursuing power and the desire to belong to communities. In place of one singular truth, Foucault speaks of particular "regimes of truth". Following Nietzsche, scholars of discourse studies have blurred the lines between rhetoric, philosophy and sciences by considering them all as discourses. The notion of objective and universal truth has been undermined. The line of Nietzsche's followers includes poststructuralists (e.g. Michel Foucault), postmodernists (e.g. Jean-François Lyotard) and neo-pragmatists (e.g. Richard Rorty). In "Truth and Power" (1977), Foucault said: "Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of

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<sup>60</sup> Aristotle, quoted in Stephen R. Yarbrough, *After Rhetoric: The Study of Discourse Beyond Language and Culture* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 16.

<sup>61</sup> Yarbrough, 17–18.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 18..

constraint. And it includes regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which accepts and makes function as true".<sup>63</sup> Foucault pointed out what may happen when rhetoric and philosophy are too concerned with "reality" as the believed foundation of truth and the source of force. It is dangerous if a false or deceptive form of rhetoric may become the source of power. Discourse studies, in contrast, is not concerned with "reality" as such: its spirit is to accept "the way things are".

Truth now is understood to be a social construction rather than an accurate picture of an independent object world. Postmodernism and discourse studies' belief in the rhetorical essence of truth is reflected in the way postmodern writers blur the lines between fiction and nonfiction. Tim O'Brien, one of the most prominent American war writers, revealed that he prefers imaginative truths to external facts. For O'Brien, it is impossible to get to an accurate imitation of objective reality in writing because "writing nonfiction or fiction, we're aware that we're editing; we're aware that our subjects are exaggerating, or that we may be exaggerating, to get a larger truth..."<sup>64</sup> He believes that "[t]he facts, in Vietnam, make liars of us all"; therefore, conversely, "prominent lies can turn into profound truths, for the moment".<sup>65</sup>

Changes in the meaning of sincerity and authenticity in recent decades closely correspond to changes in the perception of truth. Authenticity and sincerity are confused terms, which have been often mistaken for each other. Among others, the definitions of sincerity and authenticity by Kerry Sinanan and Timothy Milnes in the introduction to *Romanticism, Sincerity and Authenticity* (2010) are clear and strong:

The question of authenticity, after all, is fundamentally a matter of being: as Hartman notes, authenticity contrasts with "imitation, simulation, dissimulation, impersonation,

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<sup>63</sup> Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. by Paul Rabinov (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), pp. 51–75, 72–3.

<sup>64</sup> Timothy J. Lomperis, "Down the Slippery Slope: Tension between Fact and Fiction," in *Reading the Wind: Literature of the Vietnam War* (Duke University Press, 1987) pp. 41–62.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 59.

imposture, fakery, forgery, inauthenticity, the counterfeit, lack of character or integrity”.

Sincerity, on the other hand, is described by Bernard Williams as one of the two main virtues of truthfulness. Truthfulness, he argues, implies a respect for the truth that involves both accuracy and sincerity: thus, “you do the best you can to acquire true beliefs, and what you say reveals what you believe”. Authenticity is a state, sincerity a practice.<sup>66</sup>

In short, sincerity is a virtue of the author (being true to himself) while authenticity is a virtue of texts in their relation to reality (true to experience, for example, or to facts). For a long time, sincerity and authenticity were considered as the virtues of an author and the experience represented in a literary work, which guarantee the truthfulness and rightness of the work. In Vietnamese, there is no equivalent word for “authenticity”. Instead of authenticity, what measures the connection between literary works and reality is *thật* or *chân thật* (truthfulness)<sup>67</sup>. In Vietnamese cultural and literary tradition, *chân thật* (sincerity) attached to the concept *Đạo* (the Way).<sup>68</sup> Vietnamese medieval writers believed that literature must carry *Đạo* and that writers have to be *chân thật* in order to get to the essence of reality and help readers acknowledge and follow righteousness. *Chân thật* originates from the word *chân*, which has its counterpart “*cheng*” in Chinese culture. A thousand years under the rule of the Chinese left a

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<sup>66</sup> Sinanan and Milnes, 4.

<sup>67</sup> Hoàng Phê, *Từ điển Tiếng Việt (Vietnamese Dictionary)* (Hanoi: Từ điển Bách khoa, 2010) 194, 1188.

<sup>68</sup> Same word in Chinese: *Tao* or *Dao*. *Đạo* has multiple meanings. One of its usages is to refer to ethics. *Đạo* means “the Way”, or sometimes, “doctrine” or “principle”. In a greater philosophical context, *Đạo* signifies the primordial essence or fundamental nature of the universe. “Confucian masters focus on how to apply the principle governing Heaven and Earth to human life and society and on how to find the Way to maintain or restore the harmony of the world. [...] The universal Way is understood to originate from Heaven and Earth and therefore to be the source of the meaning and value of human life. It is believed to have been manifest in the wisdom of the ancient sage-kings, in the doctrine of Confucius, and in the way of life of good people. Understood as such, the Way is the foundation of a harmonious universe, a peaceful society and a good life, and without it the transformation of the universe would break down, human society would fall into chaos, and the state would weaken and collapse. Although Confucians recognise that whether or not the Way prevails in the human world is not entirely a matter for human beings but is more or less predetermined (‘It is the Destiny (ming) if the Way prevails. It is equally Destiny if the Way falls into disuse’, Lunyu, 14: 36), they nevertheless believe that within the framework of human destiny, individuals are endowed with responsibilities to practice the Way in their own life”. From Xinzhong Yao, *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 139

heavy influence on Vietnamese language and culture. *Chân* in Vietnamese has the same meaning as Confucian *cheng*, which can be explained as *thật/thực* (true, truthful), *sự thật* (truth, truthfulness) or *chân thật* ("sincerity", "trustfulness" and "trustworthiness"). The word *chân lí* (Truth) also originates from *chân*.<sup>69</sup>

Chinese *cheng* and Vietnamese *chân* are often rendered as "sincerity" by western scholars. However, *cheng/chân* differ to "sincerity" to some certain extent. Yanming An, through a comparison of sincerity and *cheng*, shows the philosophical difference between the two concepts as follows:

In the European medieval ages, as well as in ancient times, sincerity was a secondary value, dependent on or affiliated to factual or religious 'truth'. It could be either positive or negative in reference to its service or disservice for the truth. After the later trend of Romanticism, sincerity was released from its entanglement with factual or religious truth, and turned to be a value by itself. The renewed 'sincerity' contained a tension between individuality and universality, meaning 'to be true to one's (individualistic) self', and, in the meanwhile, standing as a general criterion to evaluate and judge people's thinking and conduct. This may lead to either negative or positive consequences in a society. In contrast, 'true' and 'self' in Confucian *cheng* respectively refer to the universal true feeling and the universal human nature. It is an independent value from the very beginning, the root or substance of all the other virtues, and the sole path to the solution of the contradiction between knowledge and action. In principle, it precludes any probability of 'doing bad sincerely', and therefore, in theory, will never lead to negative social consequences.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> See Yanming An, "Western 'Sincerity' and Confucian 'Cheng'", *Asian Philosophy*, 14.2 (2004), 155–69, p. 157; and Hoàng Phê, "chân", "chân lí", "thật", "thực", "sự thật", *Từ điển Tiếng Việt (Vietnamese Dictionary)* (Hanoi: Từ điển Bách khoa, 2010), 193, 1188, 1245.

<sup>70</sup> An, 168.

In Western tradition, just as conventional notions of truth were questioned long before poststructuralism or postmodernism, notions of sincerity have been held up to critical scrutiny for a long time. For example, in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), Lionel Trilling shows that since the Renaissance, Shakespeare through the character Iago saying “I am not what I am” already doubted the sincerity of literature. The word “sincerity” derived from the Latin word *sincerus* and first meant exactly what the Latin word means in its literal use – clean, or sound, or pure”.<sup>71</sup> Trilling also points out that this doubt of the sincerity of literature in particular and language in general was marked by Ludwig Wittgenstein’s “linguistic turn” in the first half of the twentieth century. In *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), he asserts that philosophy “is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language”.<sup>72</sup> Sincerity and authenticity in their absolute meaning are impossible due to the essence of language and the act of writing. Truth is rhetorically built, a social construction and sincerity and authenticity no longer guarantee truthfulness in literature. Trilling asserted that in recent centuries, sincerity had been replaced by authenticity, and the modern meaning of authenticity is “to stay true to oneself” due to the gap between genuine experience/feeling of an individual and the objective reality. Therefore, the meaning of sincerity in western tradition has a connection with skepticism and individualism. Meanwhile, Chinese *cheng* and Vietnamese *chân* has a lot to do with Confucian conformity and collectivism. Their validity has “nothing to do with factual or religious ‘truth’”, and they contain “no individualistic element” because the conditions for “to be true to oneself” (*cheng/chân*) are to “please the parents” and to “understand goodness”.<sup>73</sup> It is noteworthy that Confucianism pays little attention to science and nature. While it emphasizes the importance of self cultivation through learning, it does not encourage skepticism. Learning is not to invent new things or find out new knowledge but to acknowledge the predetermined Way, in other words, the order and

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<sup>71</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1972), 12.

<sup>72</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, quoted in Trilling, 33.

<sup>73</sup> An, 162–163.

the principles of the society.<sup>74</sup> David Marr summarizes five cardinal virtues for Confucian men which are "benevolence" (nhân), "righteousness" (nghĩa), "ritual" (lễ), "knowledge" (trí), and "sincerity" (tín). Among them, benevolence is the most important:

"Benevolence" was clearly the most important, occasioning intricate debate and refinement among Chinese writers over two millenia. For Vietnamese of the nineteenth century, however, benevolence seems to have taken on qualities of abstract, even mystical goodness, often limited to the king alone. By contrast, "righteousness" had much more concrete implications, which even the most lowly subject was expected to understand. Righteousness meant doing what was correct rather than what was of immediate personal gain, of accepting one's obligations within the system—in short, of practising self-denial for the greater good. "Ritual" meant careful attention to social forms, to decorum, as well as intricate ceremonies directed toward Heaven, the ancestors, local deities, and assorted wandering spirits. "Knowledge" emphasized the judging of human character in order to maximize other ethical traits; it was never an end in itself, nor did it focus on nature. "Sincerity" meant the cultivation of trust, the elimination of scheming and suspicion between ruler and subject, father and son, and so on; it seems to have been the least discussed of the cardinal virtues.

It can be seen that in Vietnamese Confucian feudal society, the most important virtues of a man were of social ethics. He had to self-cultivate to live in harmony with his family, his community and his country. He had to conform and please his parents, his king and his country.<sup>75</sup> "I", therefore, was suppressed by "We". In Vietnamese medieval literature, private feelings and concerns were mostly absent or had to be revealed secretly and fiction was considered low-class.

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<sup>74</sup> M. T. Stepaniants, trans. Trần Nguyên Việt, *Triết Học Phương Đông (Introduction to Eastern Thought)* (Hanoi: Khoa học Xã hội, 2003), 145.

<sup>75</sup> Trần Trọng Kim, a famous Vietnamese scholar of Confucianism, points out that Confucianism takes high regard of loyalty. See Trần Trọng Kim, *Nho Giáo (Confucianism)* (Văn học, 2003), 44.

As Marr points out, sincerity seems to attract less attention of Confucian scholars. Truth, in Confucian society, is less referred to scientific truths but to *Đạo (the Way)* which a Confucian man follows to cultivate himself and to conform and benefit his society.<sup>76</sup> In western literature, since Romanticism, a literary work is considered to be authentic if it is true to the writer's self, whereas in Vietnamese literature, truthfulness is the concept which replaces authenticity. If in Vietnamese Confucian feudal society, the truthfulness of a literary work was decided on how it conforms to the Confucian Way, in Vietnamese literature during 1945–1986, it was decided on how well it conformed to Stalinist socialist realism.

My argument in this dissertation is that the ways in which Stalinist socialist realism found its way into Vietnamese culture and literature were influenced by Vietnamese Confucian traditions of perceiving sincerity, truthfulness and Truth. This dissertation also has an ambition to find out how *kí* writers, along with the wake of individualism, and under the influence of postmodernism, have resisted that institutionalization of sincerity and truth.

#### **2.1.5. Socialist realism as Truth**

In the meeting with writers at Gorky's house (October 1932), Stalin said: "An artist should first of all show our life truthfully. If he complies with the task he will not fail to single out the factors which lead us to socialism. This I should call social art, socialist realism".<sup>77</sup> It is noteworthy that in Stalin's statement, there is a rhetorical strategy to identify socialist realism with truthfulness, and truth with socialism. This rhetorical strategy can also be seen in Trường Chinh's speeches and texts, which were created to legitimate Stalinist socialist realism.

Why Truth matters to socialist realism? It is natural that when a new regime is being established, it is necessary to prove that it is an advanced and suitable one to the society. When

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<sup>76</sup> In *Understanding Vietnam*, Neil L. Jamieson also points out that while individualism is what American children are taught, conformity is what children in Vietnamese Confucian society had to learn. See Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (London–Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 217.

<sup>77</sup> Cited in Politics and Propaganda Institute.

applying socialism to Russian society, the Soviet Communist Party needed to legitimate its power by proving that it was a better regime for the masses. Being confused by the chaos at the time of the socialist transformation, the masses were hungry for truths: they needed to know the inner essence of reality and to have an ideal to follow. Which one should they believe in: capitalism, feudalism or socialism? To sustain the masses' belief in socialism, art and literature was utilized as a propaganda's tool. Socialist literature was believed to be opposite to bourgeois and feudal literature. As the products of bourgeois society, such literary tendencies as naturalism, mysticism, modernism and romanticism were considered to be unable to reveal the essence or truth of reality. Therefore, they were considered to be hostile to the masses' advancement. There was a similar situation in Vietnam during 1936 – 1986.

During the First Indochina War and the Vietnam War, the political, cultural and economic situation in Vietnam was highly complex. The Vietnamese Communist Party (CPV) had to face many difficulties which were raised by foreign enemies as well as different revolutionary ideologies. To lead the masses to socialist society and win the territory back from the French, and later from the American–puppet government in South Vietnam, CPV had to legitimate its power by asserting that socialism was the only Truth and the inevitable way to get to a better society. This was demonstrated in many orthodox talks and texts. Hồ Chí Minh asserted that “there is only one way for the Vietnamese nation to achieve freedom, which is proletarian revolution”.<sup>78</sup> At the Congress of Army Writers in 1959, Trường Chinh claimed that “For us, the most revolutionary way is socialism”.<sup>79</sup> The letter of the Central Committee of the Labour Party of Vietnam which was sent to the Fourth National Congress of Artists in 1968 continued to assert that “Writers and artists must consider socialism and communism as the best objective and ideal, and our country, our people and the revolution as the most noble things to devote to; culture and ideology must

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<sup>78</sup> Ho Chi Minh, *Anthology of Ho Chi Minh*, Volume 4 (Hanoi: National Politics Press, 2000), 50.

<sup>79</sup> Trường Chinh, ‘Một số Vấn đề Về Văn Hóa Văn Nghệ (Some Specific Problems in Art)’, in *Về Văn Hóa Văn Nghệ (On Culture and Art)* (Hanoi: Văn hóa, 1976), iv, 189–220, 166. Original text in Vietnamese: “Đối với chúng ta, cách mạng nhất là theo chủ nghĩa xã hội”.

become their battle, and literature and arts must become their sharp weapon”.<sup>80</sup> In another book published in 1967, he emphasized that “Socialist realism is the best methodology for literature and art. [...] Socialist realism is also the best methodology for criticism”.<sup>81</sup>

In 1951, the book *Hiện thực Xã hội Chủ nghĩa (Socialist Realism)* was published in the military base of the Việt Minh. It included several translated texts on socialist realism by Russian and French writers, who are Alexis Tolstoy, Tcherbina, Fadéiev, Jean Fréville. It is the first officially published theoretical book on socialist realism in Vietnam. Looking at the selected texts in the book provides us with insight into the meaning of socialist realism to the socialist transformation in Vietnam as well as in Russia and other socialist countries. In the article *Marxism and Literature* which was originally the introduction to *Marx and Engels, Literature and Art* (1936) Jean Fréville, a famous French communist writer and historian, shows why “truth” was so important to socialist literature:

Since the reactionary classes want to maintain their power to rule the society, they need to make up and distort the truth. In contrast, the revolutionary classes must know the truth in order to improve it. While revolutionary literature turns towards reality and is based on scientific analysis, reactionary literature runs away from it by hiding in idealistic philosophy or religion.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Central Committee of the Labour Party of Vietnam, “Thư Của Ban Chấp Hành Trung Ương Đảng Lao Động Việt Nam Gửi Đại Hội Văn Nghệ Toàn Quốc Lần Thứ IV (Letter from Central Committee of the Labour Party of Vietnam to the 4th National Congress of Literature and Arts 1968),” in *Về Văn hóa Văn nghệ (On Culture and Art)*, 4th edn (Văn hóa, 1976), 40. Original text in Vietnamese: “Đối với anh chị em văn nghệ sĩ của ta, chủ nghĩa xã hội, chủ nghĩa cộng sản phải là mục đích và lý tưởng đẹp đẽ nhất; Tổ quốc, nhân dân và cách mạng là đối tượng phục vụ cao quý nhất; văn hóa và tư tưởng là chiến trường; tác phẩm văn học, nghệ thuật là vũ khí sắc bén”.

<sup>81</sup> Trường Chinh, “Phấn Đấu Cho Một Nền Văn Nghệ Dân Tộc Phong Phú, Dưới Ngọn Cờ Chủ Nghĩa Yêu Nước và Chủ Nghĩa Xã Hội (To Fight for A National Literature and Art Which Is Rich and Conformed to Patriotism and Socialism),” in *Về Văn hóa Văn nghệ (On Culture and Art)*, ed. by Anonymous, 4th edn (Văn hóa, 1976), pp. 183–190, 186. This was originally a book published by Sự thật Publishers in 1967. Original text in Vietnamese: “Hiện thực xã hội chủ nghĩa là một phương pháp sáng tác văn nghệ tốt nhất. [...] Hiện thực xã hội chủ nghĩa còn là một phương pháp phê bình văn nghệ tốt nhất”.

<sup>82</sup> Jean Fréville, “Chủ nghĩa Mác và Văn học” (“Marxism and Literature”, 1936). In Alexis Tolstoy et al., *Hiện Thực Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa (Socialist Realism)*, trans. Nguyễn Xuân Canh and Chân Thành Hội Văn nghệ Việt

In the article, Fréville further explains the truth-carrying quality of socialist realism. He asserts that socialist realism “serves the truth but does not take advantages of it” (61).

“Only the revolutionary classes see the advantages of telling the truth [...] Writers who co-operate with the exploiting classes are unable to fully describe the truth [...] To understand the world’s reality, it is necessary to see with the eyes of the advanced class, which is the proletarian class which has no motivation to fake or hide the truth of reality”.<sup>83</sup>

For Fréville it is socialism which enlightens the proletariat class who could not see the essence of reality before. Socialism is the natural revolutionary stage of human society. In order to truly investigate and describe the reality, writers need to embrace socialism as the essential ideology to orient their writings. Such statements as “socialism is the natural revolutionary tendency”, “socialism should be the worldview for writers”, “socialism is the Truth” are popular throughout other texts in *Hiện thực Xã hội Chủ nghĩa (Socialist Realism)*. For example, in *Nghệ thuật và Lao động (Art and Labour)*, Fadéiev, President of the Soviet Writers’ Union, stated that Soviet literature predicts a “new born truth”: socialism.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, in the article *Nhiệm vụ Văn học (The Mission of Literature)*, Tcherbina asserted that “Leninism reaches the highest level of Russian and worldwide culture. It completes the long exploration of the greatest thinkers over thousands years”<sup>85</sup> and suggested that to “more exactly express Leninist–Stalinist theory about the truth of

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Nam, 1951), 65. Original text in Vietnamese: 'Trong khi các giai cấp phản động muốn giữ quyền thống trị bắt buộc phải uốn nắn lại sự việc và tô son điểm phấn cho chúng, thì các giai cấp cách mạng cần phải biết rõ sự thật, để cải tạo sự thật. Văn học cách mạng, quay về thế giới bên ngoài, cần phải dựa trên sự phân tích khoa học; trong khi ấy thì văn học phản động lẫn trốn vào triết lý duy tâm hay tôn giáo'.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 63. Original text in Vietnamese: 'Chỉ có những giai cấp cách mạng là thấy cái lợi trong việc nói sự thật (...) Các văn sĩ cố kết với giai cấp bóc lột không thể nào mô tả được sự thực, mà cũng không thể nào mô tả nó được một cách đầy đủ (...) Muốn bao quát thế giới, phải nhìn thế giới với con mắt của giai cấp tiến bộ, của giai cấp không có gì cần phải giấu giếm, nể nang, giả mạo, – với con mắt của giai cấp vô sản'.

<sup>84</sup> Alexis Tolstoy et al., *Hiện Thực Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa (Socialist Realism)*, trans. Nguyễn Xuân Canh and Chân Thành Hội Văn nghệ Việt Nam, 1951), 65. Original text in Vietnamese: “Nó báo hiệu một chân lý xã hội chủ nghĩa mới”.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid, 22. Original text in Vietnamese: “Chủ nghĩa Lê–nin, mức cao nhất của văn hóa Nga và văn hóa thế giới, hoàn thành công trình tìm tòi hàng bao nhiêu thế kỷ của những bộ óc vĩ đại nhất trong nhân loại”.

Bolshevik principles and the variety of political ideals in our current Soviet literature and art, focusing on describing the Person who is building communism in every Soviet citizen is the most important mission”.<sup>86</sup>

In *The Mission of Literature*, both Tcherbina and Jean Fréville make a contrast between socialist realism and other bourgeois literary tendencies. Tcherbina writes:

Modern bourgeois culture has been a tool of the ruling bourgeois class. The ugliness of racism, the triumph of the lowest and most brutal instincts, and mysticism – these are the basis of current bourgeois literature, theatre and film, especially in the United States. The robber, the swindler, the traitor and the bourgeois: these are the protagonists of bourgeois literature and art all over the world [...] foreign reactionary literature praises the corruption of mankind and thinks of them merely as two-legged animals<sup>87</sup>.

In *Art and Labour*, Fadéiev expresses a similar thought:

In fact, bourgeois literature is no longer an authentic literature because it has lost the main object of art: human beings. There are more and more works of the most brutal naturalism which despise human value and confuse readers with their chaotic and depraved forms<sup>88</sup>.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, 30. Original text in Vietnamese: 'Để diễn tả một cách đúng đắn hơn học thuyết Lê-nin Xít-ta-lin về chân lý của nguyên tắc bôn-sê-vích và sự phong phú của những lý tưởng chính trị trong văn nghệ Xô viết hiện nay, chú trọng làm nổi bật con người xây dựng chủ nghĩa cộng sản trong người công dân xô viết là một việc tối quan hệ”.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid, 25–26. Original text in Vietnamese: “Văn hóa tư sản cận đại từ lâu đã biến thành một dụng cụ trong tay một bọn đại tư sản. Tư tưởng thù hằn của chủ nghĩa vị chủng, sự đắc thắng của những bản năng hạ cấp nhất và súc vật nhất, chủ nghĩa thần bí – đó là nền tảng của văn học, sân khấu, điện ảnh tư sản hiện giờ, nhất là ở Mỹ. Tên trùm ăn cướp, tên lường gạt, tên phản phúc, tên tư sản, là những vai chính của văn nghệ tư sản các nước....văn học phản động ngoại quốc đi ca ngợi sự sa đọa của con người và hạ thấp họ xuống hàng một con vật hai chân”.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 33. Original text in Vietnamese: “Thật ra nền văn học tư sản cận đại đã hết là một nền văn học với nghĩa đúng của nó. Vì nó đã mất đối tượng chính của nghệ thuật: con người. Càng ngày chúng ta thấy càng nhiều những cái thứ chủ nghĩa tự nhiên thô bạo nhất nó hạ thấp giá trị con người cộng với một hình thức văn nghệ đồi trụy rối loạn, rất khó hiểu với nhân dân”.

Along with this is the worship of highest communist leaders, Lenin and Stalin, who were made to be models for protagonists in socialist realist literature.

Lenin and Stalin, our two great historical figures, are the role models for everyone to follow. Stalin taught us to live and work according to Lenin's teachings. The best works in Soviet art present such heroes as Lenin, and were described by Stalin in his speech on the election day of 11 December 1937: "Our people need their representatives to be such politicians as Lenin. They need them to be lucid, firm, and brave in fighting against the masses' enemies and to steadily go ahead in dangerous situations, and to be clever and patient when dealing with the most complicated issues as well as to be sincere, honest and truly love our people, just like Lenin did."<sup>89</sup>

And Tcherbina asserted that "Stalin is the Lenin of our own days!" (28). This cult of personality, which was a result of Stalinism, remained popular in Russian, Chinese and Vietnamese culture for a long time, especially in the early period of socialist transformation. For example, in the poem "Đời đời nhớ Ông" ("Viva Stalin", 1953), Tố Hữu addresses Stalin as the dearest and most noble one:

My baby, how lovely your first word: Stalin

[...]

Love my father, my mother and my spouse

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid, 28. Original text in Vietnamese: "Lê-nin và Xít-ta-lin, hai nhân vật vĩ đại của lịch sử là những tấm gương sáng cho mọi người noi theo. Đồng chí Xít-ta-lin dạy chúng ta sống và làm việc theo những giáo huấn của Lê-nin. Những tác phẩm hay nhất trong nghệ thuật Xô viết thể hiện một kiểu người Lê-nin, được Xít-ta-lin mô tả như sau trong bài diễn văn đọc ngày tuyến cử 11-12-1937: 'Nhân dân phải đòi đại biểu mình thể hiện đầy đủ con người chính trị kiểu Lê-nin, đòi họ cũng sáng suốt và cương quyết, cũng can đảm trong đấu tranh và thắng tay với kẻ thù của nhân dân, đòi họ cũng vững tiến không sợ hãi, không dao động trong những trường hợp hiểm nghèo, cũng khôn ngoan và kiên nhẫn trong khi giải quyết những vấn đề rắc rối nhất, cũng chân thành ngay thẳng và yêu nhân dân như Lê-nin'.

But I love you, Stalin, ten times more than myself<sup>90</sup>

And “Sáng Tháng Năm” (“A May Morning”, 1951), another poem by Tố Hữu, pictures Hồ Chí Minh as a National Father and a “revolutionary sun”:

You shine as the sun  
And enemies are frightened bats  
Flying unsteadily around your feet  
[...]  
You are the Father, the Uncle, the Brother,  
The Great Heart which filters our blood  
Nothing more glorious than fighting  
Led by our Great Party and Great Father  
[...]  
If You say “go”, we go  
If You say “win”, we win  
The world has Stalin  
We have Uncle Ho  
Freedom will be ours  
The world will be at peace.<sup>91</sup>

This poem and many others of Tố Hữu stayed in textbooks of elementary, secondary and high schools in Vietnam for a long time.

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<sup>90</sup> Tố Hữu, *Đời đời nhớ Ông* (Viva Stalin), March 1953, reprinted in Tố Hữu, *Việt Bắc* (Văn nghệ, 1954), 19. Original text in Vietnamese: “Yêu biết mấy, nghe con tập nói/ Tiếng đầu lòng con gọi Stalin! (...) Thương cha, thương mẹ, thương chồng/ Thương mình thương một, thương ông thương mười”.

<sup>91</sup> Tố Hữu, *Sáng tháng năm* (A May Morning) (first published in 1951), reprinted in Tố Hữu, *Việt Bắc*, 4. Original text in Vietnamese: “Người rực rỡ một mặt trời cách mạng/ Mà để quốc là loài dơi hốt hoảng/ Đêm tàn bay chập choạng dưới chân Người (....) Người là Cha, là Bác, là Anh/ Quả tim lớn lọc trăm dòng máu nhỏ/ Không gì vinh bằng chiến đấu dưới cờ/ Đảng chói lọi Hồ Chí Minh vĩ đại! (...) Bác bảo đi, là đi/ Bác bảo thắng, là thắng/ Việt Nam có Bác Hồ/ Thế giới có Xta-lin/ Việt Nam phải tự do/ Thế giới phải hoà bình!”

In summary, it is clear that the texts which are mentioned above have a consistent argument: Socialist realism is seen as the new literature of the masses because of its truth-carrying quality and because it is based on an advanced worldview which is socialism; socialist realist literature aims to depict socialism as the Truth for the masses to follow; and communist leaders are representatives of the Truth.

It is not a coincidence that the leading state publisher in the USSR was named *Pravda* (*Truth*). The newspaper was started by the Russian Revolutionaries during the pre-World War I days and emerged as a leading newspaper of the Soviet Union after the Russian Revolution. The newspaper also served as a central organ of the Central Committee of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union between 1912 and 1991. After the dissolution of the USSR, *Pravda* was closed down by the then Russian President Boris Yeltsin. The first and most important publisher in the North Communist Vietnam was also named “Sự Thật” (“Truth”). It was established on 5 December 1945 (four months after Vietnam won the independence from France), and recently its name has changed into “Nhà xuất bản Chính trị Quốc gia – Sự thật” (“Truth the National Publishers of Politics”). Besides, the first official newspaper of Vietnam after gaining independence from the French in 1945 was *Sự Thật*, which in 1951 was renamed as *The People’s Newspaper* (*Báo Nhân dân*), the most important official voice of the Vietnam Communist Party and government nowadays.

## **2.2. Nhân văn Giai phẩm Affair: efforts to escape socialist realism**

Immediately after Vietnam won independence from the French and started the socialist transformation in the North, several artists and writers who served in the Indochina War against the French under the lead of the Vietnam Communist Party started to feel that the way politics was controlling art and literature inhibited their creativity. They grouped together to voice the need of freedom for art and literature through two main journals *Nhân văn* (*Humanism*) and *Giai*

*phẩm* (*Fine Works or Masterworks*)<sup>92</sup>. The movement (Nhân văn Giai phẩm, NVGP) was named after the two journals. They were productive from 1955 until suppressed by the Party in 1958.

NVGP was initially formed by the need of freedom by art and literature itself and later encouraged by the reassessment of Stalinist art and literature in Russia after Stalin's death (1953) which officially started in February 1956 and the Hundred Flowers Campaign (1956–1957) in China, which happened somewhat later but had a shorter life. The movement emerged among the soldier writers in March 1955, when Trần Dần and Tử Phác, with the support of Hoàng Cầm and Lê Đạt, criticized *Việt Bắc*, a poetry collection of Tố Hữu, for its distance from reality and lack of creativeness. Hữu was a well-known and influential poet, and also the Vice Minister of Propaganda at the time. This criticism raised a lot of controversy because Hữu's poems had long been popular among the masses and in schools. It was considered to be a canon of socialist realism. In April 1955, Dần and Phác submitted a "Proposal for a New Cultural Policy" which asked for the freedom of literature and arts in general and for soldier writers in particular. They were arrested and detained for three months at barracks as a punishment (June to September 1955). However, they did not stop there: in January 1956, the first issue of *Giai phẩm* (*Giai phẩm mùa xuân*), edited by Đạt and Cầm, was published, introducing brave opinions on freedom of literature and arts. One month later, Dần and Phác were arrested for a second time, and Đạt was inspected by the military political section. The journal was seized. Dần attempted to commit suicide in prison but was saved and then released along with Phác by General Nguyễn Chí Thanh, Head of the Department of Politics (a body of the Ministry of Defence). Under the orders of Hữu, Vice Minister of Propaganda, state-sanctioned criticism was directed towards Dần's poem *Nhất định thắng*. However, not long after that, there were several consecutive signs of democracy in the USSR and China: in the USSR, Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin's successor, denounced his legacy and

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<sup>92</sup> There are some other journals of NVGP which are *Đất mới* (*New Land*) which was able to produce one volume before removed by the authorities, and *Văn* (*Literature*) which followed orthodox policy in the beginning, but later supported NVGP, for which it was closed by the authorities in January 1958. Sharing the same fate was also *Tự do diễn đàn* (*A Forum of Freedom*) which was closed in 1958 as well.

initiated a process of de-Stalinization in the 20<sup>th</sup> Congress of the USSR Communist Party 924 (24 February 1956), and, on 27 May 1957, by a speech titled “On Handling of the Contradictions Among the People”, Mao Tze Dong started the Hundred Flowers Campaign which encouraged citizens to openly express their opinions of the communist regime. One month later, in June 1956, an insurrection of workers began in Poland. The Vietnamese Labour Party reflected these changes in the USSR and China by allowing more criticism of the regime, which resulted in the establishment of newspapers and journals by artists and writers who supported freedom of expression. For example, *Giai phẩm* and *Nhân văn*, two journals of art and literature, were founded on 29 August and 20 September 1956 respectively. These publications played the role of an open forum for intellectuals and artists to speak out their disagreement with the Land Reform and the restriction of freedom to art and literature. The important figures of the movement are the lawyer Nguyễn Mạnh Tường, Dr. Đặng Văn Ngữ, the scholar Đào Duy Anh, the philosopher Trần Đức Thảo, the painter Bùi Xuân Phái, the writer Trương Tửu, the poets Trần Dần, Hoàng Cầm, Phùng Quán, Quang Dũng, Văn Cao, Nguyễn Hữu Đang and Lê Đạt. But the journals’ life was short: after the government’s decree No. 282/SL which narrowed the freedom of journalism was signed on 9 December 1956, *Nhân văn* and *Giai phẩm* and another journal titled *Tự do diễn đàn* (*Forum of Freedom*) were closed. The campaign against *Nhân văn* *Giai phẩm* Group was officially started in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress of Artists (20 – 28 February 1957) in Hanoi, in which Trường Chinh appealed for the elimination of the NVGP group. In July 1957, Mao Tze Dong ordered the suppression of the Hundred Flowers Campaign. The Communist Party sent officials to China to learn how to deal with the movement. After they came back, the Party decided to close down the journals and imprisoned many intellectuals and artists who took part in the movement. Some were sent to re-education camp or made to undertake self-criticism<sup>93</sup>. After the Renovation (Đổi

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<sup>93</sup> This summary of NVGP affair was based on the chronicle of NVGP by Thụy Khuê, a Vietnamese exiled writer whose book *Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm và vấn đề Nguyễn Ái Quốc: Biên khảo* (Falls Church, VA: Tiếng Quê Hương Press, 2012) is an elaborate investigation of the affair. Retrieved from: <<http://thuykhue.free.fr/tk04/nhanvan.html>> [Accessed 6 September 2013]. The other sources include Zachary Abuza, *Renovating Politics in Contemporary Vietnam* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc.,

Mới) in the late 1980s, many of the imprisoned intellectuals were quietly rehabilitated. Many of the writers and poets in the late 1990s and 2000s were honoured with state awards by the government. Although most scholars referred NVGP as dissidents who opposed the CPV and socialism, I share Peter Zinoman's opinion that they did not actually want to eliminate socialism. In fact, the movement was to increase freedom of expression and ask for a reform of socialism in Vietnam.<sup>94</sup>

As mentioned earlier, NVGP started with the criticism of *Việt Bắc* (1954), a collection of poems by Tố Hữu, which reflects and praises the First Indochina War by Vietnamese people under the lead of the Communist Party. The book was praised as a masterpiece of socialist literature in the most popular orthodox newspapers (*Nhân Dân* and *Văn nghệ*). On 4 March 1955, Trần Dần and Tử Phác held a seminar on *Việt Bắc* among soldier writers, which accused the collection of being unfaithful to reality and poor in terms of literary creativeness. The seminar's content was put into a special issue of the journal *Văn nghệ* devoted to criticism of *Việt Bắc*, inspiring many other criticisms of the collection to appear in different journals and newspapers in the following few months. In order to protect his reputation, Hữu reacted by organizing two seminars on *Việt Bắc*, in which the typical conservative critics praised his work. One month after the seminar, Dần and Phác submitted *Dự thảo chính sách văn hóa mới* (A Proposal of New Policies on Culture) which voiced the desire for freedom of expression on the part of soldier writers. The two events were in fact closely connected to each other.

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2001).; Peter Zinoman, 'Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm and Vietnamese "Reform Communism" in the 1950s: A Revisionist Interpretation', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 13.1 (2011), 60–100.; Lại Nguyên Ân and Alec Holcombe, 'The Heart and Mind of the Poet Xuân Diệu: 1954–1958', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 5.2 (2010), 1–90.

<sup>94</sup> Zinoman, 'Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm and Vietnamese "Reform Communism" in the 1950s: A Revisionist Interpretation'.

It is noticeable that in the argument over *Việt Bắc*, the worst “truthfulness” and “reality” were the key words. They can be seen in this brief news on *Nhân dân*<sup>95</sup> on 17 April 1955:

Following the two previous seminars, on 14 April 1955, the third seminar on Tố Hữu’s *Việt Bắc* was held by the Literature Department of the Vietnamese Association of Literature and Arts. Attending the meeting were many poets, writers and ones who love poetry and arts. “Truthfulness” was the hot topic during the seminar. The discussion of *Việt Bắc* is to be continued.<sup>96</sup>

In the article “Tập thơ Việt Bắc có hiện thực không?” (“Questions On the Truthfulness of *Việt Bắc*”) in *Văn nghệ*, No. 65 on 11 March 1955, Hoàng Yến commented:

it can be seen that Tố Hữu’s poems nowadays are not as good as before. It is because he has not brought into his works the fighting spirit of our era to make our hearts melt. As the life experience is not profound enough, many parts of the collection are stereotyped.<sup>97</sup>

Sharing Hoàng Yến’s opinion, poet Hoàng Cầm accused *Việt Bắc* of lacking a foundation in real experience, and therefore being unable to reveal deeper levels of the soul or to provide anything except general images which can be seen anywhere. Besides, the routine of using exaggeration

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<sup>95</sup> *Nhân dân* (the People/the Masses) is one of two most important newspapers and official voice of the Vietnam Communist Party, which was established on 11 March 1951 in the military zone Việt Bắc.

<sup>96</sup> Original text in Vietnamese: “Tiếp theo hai cuộc họp trước, tối thứ năm 14-4-1955 Ban văn học của Hội Văn nghệ Việt Nam đã triệu tập cuộc họp thứ ba để thảo luận về tập thơ Việt Bắc của Tố Hữu. Đến dự, cũng như trong hai cuộc họp trước, có đông đủ anh chị em quen biết trong ngành thơ và một số anh chị em yêu thơ hoặc hoạt động trong các ngành nghệ thuật khác. Cuộc thảo luận rất sôi nổi vẫn xoay quanh vấn đề tính chất hiện thực trong thơ Tố Hữu. Cuộc thảo luận vẫn tiếp tục”. Reprinted in *Tư Liệu Thảo Luận 1955 về Tập Thơ Việt Bắc* (Records of the Discussion on ‘Việt Bắc’ in 1955), ed. by Lại Nguyên Ân (Hanoi: Văn hóa Thông tin). Retrieved from: <<http://phebinhvanhoc.com.vn/?p=3667>> [Accessed 3 September 2013].

<sup>97</sup> Original text in Vietnamese: “ta thấy thơ Tố Hữu ngày nay còn bé hơn thơ Tố Hữu trước kia. Bé vì Tố Hữu chưa thổi được vào thơ ngọn lửa hừng hực chiến đấu của thời đại để đốt cháy lòng người đọc. Bé vì chất sống chưa thật sâu sắc nên ý thơ nhiều đoạn còn giả tạo công thức”. Reprinted in Lại Nguyên Ân. Retrieved from: <<http://phebinhvanhoc.com.vn/?p=3632>> [3 September 2013].

when describing leader figures is another limitation.<sup>98</sup> In Dần's words, it expresses individualism and the cult of personality<sup>99</sup>

Nguyễn Văn Phú in his article "Tranh luận về tập thơ *Việt Bắc*: Vài điểm non yếu trong nghệ thuật tập thơ Việt Bắc" ("*Việt Bắc*: Some Limitations in Poetics") in *Văn nghệ*, No. 69 (21 April 1955) argued that in terms of poetics, *Việt Bắc* does not meet the criteria of socialist realism.

I look only to the poetic side to see whether *Việt Bắc* is successful or not, and whether it is typical of socialist realism. Though the artistic aspect is not the main standard by which to judge a work, it remains an important one. In my opinion, Tố Hữu's poetics are neither rich nor flexible, and this lessens the political content of his poetry as well<sup>100</sup>.

Nguyễn Viết Lãm took sides with Tố Hữu by an article titled " Tư tưởng và tình cảm trong tập thơ Việt Bắc có hiện thực không?" ("Ideology and Feelings in *Việt Bắc*: Truthful or Not?") in *Độc lập*, No.96 (23 April 1955), which asserted that Tố Hữu's poetry constituted romantic realism, a high level of socialist realism. There were some other articles which supported Tố Hữu as well, but it is visible that these voices were weaker and less persuasive.

Not only was *Việt Bắc* criticized as an improper representation of socialist realism. Phùng Quán's novel *Vượt Côn Đảo* (*Côn Đảo Prison Break*) also received criticism. During several seminars among soldier writers, the novel was accused of untruthfulness for portraying the prisoner as a simple-minded hero. For example, Dần said that the hero in *Vượt Côn Đảo* is a

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<sup>98</sup> See Hoàng Cầm, "Tập thơ Việt Bắc thiếu chất sống thực tế", *Văn nghệ*, No. 67 (1 April 1955). Reprinted in Lại Nguyên Ân. Retrieved from: <<http://phebinhvanhoc.com.vn/?p=3652>> [Accessed 3 September 2013].

<sup>99</sup> See Hoàng Cầm, "Tiến tới xét lại một vụ án văn học: Con người Trần Dần" (To Reassess A Literary Affair: Trần Dần's Personality), *Nhân văn*, No.1, (20 September 1956), 2–4. Can be seen online at: <<http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=7812&rb=0102>> [Accessed 3 September 2013].

<sup>100</sup> Reprinted in Lại Nguyên Ân. Retrieved from: <<http://phebinhvanhoc.com.vn/?p=3761>> [Accessed 3 September 2013]. Original text in Vietnamese: "Tôi chỉ đứng vào phía nghệ thuật để tìm hiểu xem nghệ thuật thơ Tố Hữu đã thành công hay chưa? Và đã trả lời nổi nội dung hiện thực xã hội chủ nghĩa chưa? Tiêu chuẩn nghệ thuật không phải là chính yếu, nhưng là một tiêu chuẩn quan trọng. Tôi cho rằng nghệ thuật thơ Tố Hữu chưa được phong phú cho lắm nên có ảnh hưởng đến nội dung chính trị, muồn sâu sắc mà không đạt được".

headless and heartless one.<sup>101</sup> It is not a coincidence that *Việt Bắc* and *Vượt Côn Đảo*, the two works which were published in 1954 and well received by orthodox criticism (both of them received the awards from the Vietnamese Literature and Art Association in 1955), became the targets of NVGP writers. For them, to improve the political mechanism that controls literature and art and fight for its freedom, the first thing to do is to undermine its faulty products.

It is necessary to point out that during the argument over *Việt Bắc*, the writers who criticized it still sincerely wanted to contribute to a socialist literature and art and supported the Party in the socialist transformation. What they demanded in their criticism was a democratic literature which was not controlled by the Party's propaganda. They believed that literature and art should fight for a better society by not only giving hope and praises towards that transformation but also pointing out the limitations and wrongdoings which also happen during that process. In order to do it, art and literature should be free.

In his diary *Notes 1954–1955*, Trần Dần wrote:

What is to blame is the system! It is as heavy as mountain. It surrounds us, above us, under us, in front of and behind us. [...] Where is the Party? What a shame: the Party is not in us, in every single one, in every working and fighting one, and in every one who shed his blood through his writing. The Party is not there yet, only the counter-revolutionary darkness has covered everything.

Only if the Party stays in every person can the "system" be destroyed. That's what I think and act: The Party is in me. I would like to destroy the "system" [...] Recently, there have been two "battlefields": 1) *Vượt Côn Đảo*, 2) Tố Hữu's poetry. I like these debates, not

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<sup>101</sup> See Vũ Tú Nam, *Kỉ niệm dọc đường văn* (A Diary: Memories of My Writing Life), (Hanoi: Hội Nhà văn Publishers, 2010), 80. Original text in Vietnamese: "14–3–1955. Tranh luận về Vượt Côn Đảo lần ba ở trường Nguyễn Trãi, vì câu lạc bộ Đoàn Kết mắc bận. Họp tới 11 giờ, vẫn gặng 2 ý kiến: Trần Dần phê phán: "Nhân vật trong Vượt Côn Đảo là người cụt đầu, không óc không tim" (!) Ông Hoài Thanh phát biểu trân trọng về cuốn sách. Lê Đạt rất bức".

because of the works and the writers themselves but because a greater meaning is at stake. These arguments promote the freedom of criticism. This would make the Party became part of everyone<sup>102</sup>. Let's fight for realism and human values<sup>103</sup>.

As Dàn many times expressed to his friends, he still believed in the Party and socialism. What he fought again is “the system”, which is nothing else than the factionalism among leaders of cultural section.

First time ever in the Vietnamese socialist literature, “truthfulness”, the key value and standard of socialist realism was reconsidered. Intellectuals and writers had not doubted the sincerity and authenticity of socialist realism as a method yet, but they started to show their disappointment with the canonicalization of propaganda literature and the strict censor policy towards works which depict the bad sides of the socialist transformation. As Huy Phương, pointed out in “Phê bình và đả kích, một mặt của chủ nghĩa hiện thực xã hội” (Criticism: A Part of Socialist Realism) in *Văn nghệ*, No. 142 (11 October 1956):

In our country, within the past 10 years, we have been lacking that courage. (...) Those one-sided works cannot touch the masses’ soul. Readers feel depressed because the content of those works is not familiar to them. At another side, it spreads the easily self-satisfaction and laziness, and the fear of facts among the writers, which may encourage

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<sup>102</sup> Trần Dàn, *Ghi 1954–1960*, ed. Phạm Thị Hoài, Văn Nghệ publishers, 2001). Original text in Vietnamese: Đáng trách là cả một cái HỆ THỐNG! Nó nặng như núi. Nó ở trên có, ở dưới có. Ở ngang có. Đứng trước, đứng sau đều có nó (...) Đứng ở đâu? Thương ơi! Đứng chưa ở chúng mình, ở từng người một. Ở những người nào có lao động. Có đấu tranh thực. Có rỏ máu trên một vần thơ, một nét bút. (...) Chỉ khi nào Đứng ở từng người, từng cánh tay mình, thì mới tan được “hệ thống”. Tôi nghĩ và tôi làm: Đứng ở tôi. Tôi phá Hệ Thống. (...) Độ này đang có hai chiến trường khá sôi sục: 1) Vượt Côn Đảo, 2) Thơ Tố Hữu. Tôi thích những cuộc tranh luận này. Không phải vì bản thân những quyển sách và những tác giả ấy. Mà vì ý nghĩa nó rộng ra nhiều mặt khác. Phát huy phê bình tự do. Nâng nhau lên, làm cho Đứng vào từng người một. Giương cao: lá cờ hiện thực; giá trị con người”. Can be seen online at:<  
<http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=1526&rb=0102>> [Accessed September 2013].

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

the bad habits and activities to bloom in the dark, due to lacking the light from the freedom of speech<sup>104</sup>.

By questioning the sincerity of a praised piece of socialist realism (*Việt Bắc*), Dần and Phác and their supporters showed how political impulse distorted and made propaganda works become canons of socialist realism as a way to control literature and art. The criticism was important itself because the courage to criticize orthodox texts represented the freedom of speech, which was lacked in a military literature.

Trần Dần is considered as unofficial leader of NVGP, who fuelled the movement with brave activities and rebellious works which were much different to literary canons at the time. Besides, his tragedy of being isolated from literary circles and society is typical for the fate of NVGP people.<sup>105</sup> Though Dần was not arrested, he was isolated for the rest of his life. He died in 1998, leaving an enormous literary legacy including novels and poems which can be seen as literary revolutions in Vietnamese literature in terms of techniques, styles and contents. Although his works were unable to be published until 1988, he was still persistent to write experimental

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<sup>104</sup> Huy Phương, 'Phê Bình và đả Kích, Một Mặt Của Chủ Nghĩa Hiện Thực Xã Hội (Criticism: A Part of Socialist Realism)', *Văn Nghệ*, 142 (1956). Original text in Vietnamese: "Những tác phẩm một chiều ấy không thể đi sâu vào lòng quần chúng. Người đọc chép miệng thấy tác phẩm xa lạ với mình. Một mặt khác nó gieo rắc một tâm lý thỏa mãn và dễ dãi đến mức lười biếng, một tâm lý bưng bít và sợ hãi sự thực, tạo điều kiện cho những tệ tục càng mạnh mẽ phát triển trong bóng tối của công luận". Reprinted in *Tư liệu thảo luận 1955 về tập thơ Việt Bắc* (Records of the Discussion on *Việt Bắc* in 1955), ed. Lại Nguyên Ân (Hanoi: Văn hóa Thông tin Press, 2005). Can be seen online at:

<<http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=13737&rb=0102>> [Accessed September 2013].

<sup>105</sup> A summary of Trần Dần's life:

In 1955, Trần Dần took the lead in the criticism of *Việt Bắc* and the Proposal of New Cultural Policies. He was arrested and forced to join the Land Reform activities in order to be ideologically re-educated. Later, his poem "Nhất định thắng" on the periodical *Giai phẩm Mùa xuân* (1956) received severe criticism from conservative critics. Trần Dần was arrested the second time. He committed suicide in prison but saved. General Nguyễn Chí Thanh was informed of his case and decided to release Trần Dần. From August 1956 to December 1956, following the USSR de-Stalinism and Chinese Hundred Flower Campaign, Vietnam Communist Party decided to provide more freedom of speech. Many left-wing journals and newspapers were released during this period. Trần Dần was vindicated. From December 1956 to June 1958, the Party closed the presses of NVGP and arrested key leaders. Several meetings and congresses were held with the attendance of hundreds of artists and writers to criticize NVGP group. Trần Dần was sent to work at farms and factory as a way of re-education. He died in 1998 and was posthumously granted the State Award of Literature and Arts in 2007.

fiction and poetry. His work since NVGP to his death represented for an effort to remove Stalinist–Maoist socialist realism, which has become a collective memory in literature and art.

Before joining the Vietnam Communist Party in the defensive war against the French in 1947, Dần was a leader of a symbolist poetic movement named *Dạ đài* in Vietnam. After having become a soldier writer, Dần started to feel uncomfortable with writing propaganda literature. In his notes on poetic composition in 1954, he already questioned the sincerity and truthfulness of socialist realism literature and asked for a multi–sided representation of life:

I have completed writing the book *Người người lớp lớp*. It is a book about Điện Biên Phủ Battle. However, I was already sick of it because it lacks the truth of the war, and it lacks my personal truth as well. It is not war, and it is not me. Nothing is greater than the Truth. There is nothing support politics and our life better than a great Truth which is well presented and fully presented. I used to want my poetry as fierce and dark as a nightmare, later I preferred it to be as real and concrete as an idle talk about chicken, or a soldier’s “handmade” poem, and now I would love a poetry which combines both. It is multi–sided but also single–sided. [...] I strongly believed that a communist is an open–minded one, without any prejudices. [...] Therefore, now I would love to compose poetry which mentions political issues in a non–political way. On the contrary, it may reflect political issues while presenting non–political area.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Trần Dần, ‘Ghi Chép về Thơ, 1954 (Notes on Poetic Composition, 1954)’, *Tienve*, 2001 <<http://www.tienve.org/home/viet/viewVietJournals.do;jsessionid=BFE1A199DDB6C8E752637CA01743437B?action=viewArtwork&artworkId=339>> [Accessed 3 March 2013]. Original text in Vietnamese: “Tôi vừa viết xong cuốn Người người lớp lớp. Viết về chiến tranh ở Điện Biên Phủ đấy. Nhưng mà tôi đã chán rồi. Tại vì rằng tôi ít thấy sự thực của chiến tranh trong đó quá. Và vì rằng tôi ít thấy sự thực của bản thân tôi trong đó quá. Chưa phải là chiến tranh, và chưa phải là tôi. Cho nên tôi nói rằng, không gì lớn bằng Sự Thực. Không có gì phục vụ sát chính trị, phục vụ sát trước mắt hơn là Sự Thực thật lớn lao, thật trọn vẹn, thật lâu dài. Trước kia tôi thích Thơ như một cơn mộng ác hỗn độn, về sau tôi lại thích Thơ nó thực như là chuyện con gà, như bài nói của anh cán bộ, như lời ca dao của anh đội viên, cho nên bây giờ tôi thích một thứ Thơ nào đó rất loạn nhưng lại rất bình... Rất nhiều chiều góc bề diện, nhưng lại chỉ có một chiều góc bề diện. Mà tôi rất tin rằng người cộng sản là một người đại linh động, không có công thức, định kiến, khi ẩn khi hiện, nay không mai có, lại vừa có vừa không. [...] Vì vậy bây giờ tôi muốn một thứ Thơ nào đó nó nói về vấn đề

After the criticism of *Việt Bắc* and the submission of the *Proposal of New Cultural Policies*, Dàn wrote “*Nhất định thắng*” (“*Victory Is Going to Be Ours*”), which was published in January 1956. The poem, which reflects Dàn’s literary principle, immediately accused of having bourgeois viewpoints because in the poem, he shows the confusedness and worry of the ordinary people who were leaving the North for South Vietnam in 1954. His poem was unusual in comparison to canons of socialist poetry because of its multi-sided view of the 1954 Migration. After NVGP was suppressed (1958), Dàn’s new experiments in poetry and fiction continue to undermine socialist realism as a method. He offered new reception of “chân lí” (truth) the key principle of Stalinist socialist realism: “Chân lí là một lỗi thời không buông tha nhân thế” (“Truth is an expired product which keeps sticking to mankind”) or “hiện thực là một hư cấu từ đầu chí cuối, từ dưới lên đầu” (“Reality is a fiction from head to toe”), or “tôi từ chức tiến sĩ. phó bác sĩ. sử kí. chân lí. thẩm mỹ. thi sĩ” (“Doctor, professor, historian, truth, aesthetics, poet – I resigned from all”).<sup>107</sup> Instead of noble concepts as “truth”, “aesthetics”, “ideal” of socialist poetry, Trần Dàn absorbed into his poetry the opposite which are secular objectives, slangs, swear words. He renewed poetry and Vietnamese languages with many experiments in grammar and vocabulary.<sup>108</sup> He also opposed socialist novels by creating an experimental novel named *Những ngã tư và những cột đèn* (*The Crossroads and the Street Lamps*, 1964) which is a combination of political, detective, love novel. It both recalls and satirizes novels of critical realism, socialist realism and existentialism. The protagonist of the novel is a playboy, an anti-hero who has no talent, and no ideal, no life principle to follow.

Dàn’s writings represent the resistance against the assimilation of propaganda literature, in other words, the resistance of individual memory against institutionalized memory, which

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chính trị bằng một cách không chính trị gì cả. Ngược lại, nó nói những cái không chính trị mà lại rất chính trị”.

<sup>107</sup> Trần Dàn, ‘Thơ Lẻ (Random Verses)’, ed. by Phạm Thị Hoài, *Talawas*, 2003. Retrieved from: <<http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php/showFile.php?res=901&rb=0202>> [Accessed 3 March 2013].

<sup>108</sup> For example, see Trần Dàn, ‘Jờ Joạcx’, *Talawas*, 2002. Retrieved from: <<http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=50&rb=0202>> [Accessed 3 March 2013].

discourages subjectivity and creativity. It is noteworthy that Dền did not write *kí* since NVGP affair. It remains unclear why he did not choose *kí* to show his rebellion against Stalinist socialist realism: whether it is because that *kí* was believed to contain truths only therefore it is politically sensitive, or because he did not believe in its transparency and sincerity? Other writers of NVGP also did not write *kí*. Instead, poetry, fiction and plays were their favourites, which enabled them to use metaphors and other literary techniques to represent the reality in more flexible and diversified ways.

### 2.3. The 1960s debate over fictional elements in *kí*

The obsession with truth of Stalinist socialist realism was also represented in the 1960s debate over whether *kí* could contain fictional techniques or not.

Before this debate which was published on the journal *Văn học* during 1966-1967, the term *kí* had never been used to refer to a lot of subgenres. Vũ Ngọc Phan in his 1942 book defines *phóng sự, kí sự, hồi kí, truyện kí, du kí, tùy bút*, however, he does not put them under the umbrella term *kí*. The term *kí* was used to translate the Soviet genre *oçerk* (means “sketch” or “reportage”) which appeared in Leonid I. Timofeev and Natan Vengrov’s *Từ điển thuật ngữ văn học* (*Dictionary of Literary Terms*, published in Vietnam in 1955) and Boris Polevoy’s *Viết kí sự* (*Writing Reportage*, published in Vietnam in 1961). Timofeev defines *oçerk* as “a type of narrative prose” which “is different to other genres as novels, medium-length stories and short stories in the way it accurately describes factual events and people”.<sup>109</sup> The definition, although it refers to Soviet reportage, is quite broad, which might have influenced North Vietnamese critics to use the term *kí* to refer to many types of literary nonfiction. This period is also the time Soviet socialist realism was adopted into Vietnamese art and literature and became the orthodox doctrine,

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<sup>109</sup> Original text in Vietnamese: “Kí là một trong những thể loại của văn xuôi tự sự. Nó khác với các thể loại khác (tiểu thuyết, truyện vừa, truyện ngắn) ở chỗ nó mô tả một cách chính xác các sự kiện xảy ra trong cuộc sống thật và những người tham gia vào các sự kiện đó là những con người có thật trong cuộc sống” in Leonid Ivanovich Timofeev and Natan Vengrov, *Từ Điển Thuật Ngữ Văn Học* (*Dictionary of Literary Terms*) (Hanoi: Giáo dục, 1955), 93–94.

influencing both the theory and practice of literature. The obsession with “truth” of socialist realism, which is analysed in this study, put literary nonfiction genres, along with realist novels<sup>110</sup> into the centre of Vietnamese literature during the war.

The first time that the term *kí* was widely used as an umbrella term for many literary nonfictional genres in Vietnamese literature was in a meeting on the issue of *kí* between writers in the newspaper house of *Tạp chí Văn học* (*Journal of Literature*) in Hanoi in 1966. The meeting fuelled a debate between North Vietnamese socialist writers over the possibility of fictional elements and techniques in *kí*, which attracted much attention and were reported by the journal over the course of the year that followed. Here and there before the meeting, the term *kí* had been used to refer to a few types of literary nonfiction such as literary reportage, memoir, and so on. However, Vũ Đức Phúc, one of the writers who attended the meeting, was the first one who provided an overview of all the subgenres of *kí*. In his report “Bàn về các thể *kí* trong văn học từ cách mạng tháng tám đến nay” (“On the Subgenres of *Kí* in Vietnamese Literature since the August Revolution”), which later was published on *Văn học* (Vol.6, 1966), Phúc put *phóng sự* (investigative reportage), *kí sự* (historical reportage), *bút kí* (a genre which is a combination between reportage and literary essays), *tùy bút* (literary essays), *nhật kí* (diary), *hồi kí* (memoir), *du kí* (travelogue) under the category of *kí*. Since 1965, the Party launched competitions to write about “người thật, việc thật” (“real people, real events”) and assigned writers to do it as well. In this period, writers and critics started to use the term *truyện kí* (which, at first, was used to refer to biography by Vũ Ngọc Phan in *Modern Writers* in 1942<sup>111</sup>) to loosely refer to autobiography, memoir or even autobiographical fiction, which praise heroes of the war or the socialist transformation. *Truyện kí* was considered as a subgenre of *kí* as well.

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<sup>110</sup> In fact, the “realist” novels of socialist realism seem rather to be the combination of realist techniques and the revolutionary romanticism than the continuation of the tradition of nineteenth century critical realism.

<sup>111</sup> This information was previously mentioned in this chapter.

Although the writers differed in the attitudes toward the possibility of fictional elements and techniques in *kí*, they all acknowledged *kí* as an important genre in Vietnamese socialist literature. The 1966 debate, which content was updated in the literary journal *Văn học*, was in fact a continuation of the propaganda to ensure that writers made use of literary nonfiction to support the resistance war (in other words, the Vietnam War) and the socialist transformation. It followed and supported the competitions to write about real people, real events which were started in 1965. During this process, some translations of Chinese articles on *baogao wenxue* (literary reportage) were also published in *Văn học*. Besides, while introducing and explaining the genre *kí*, North Vietnamese writers often cited the definition of Soviet *oçerk* and referred to prominent Soviet *oçerk* writings as examples for young writers of *kí* to follow. These sparked further connections between Vietnamese *kí*, Chinese and Soviet literary reportage and the doctrine of socialist realism, which I will explore further in Chapter 2.

Vũ Đức Phúc's categorization of *kí* remained influential for a long time in literary circles, and its influence can be seen in numerous critical and theoretical works on *kí*, for example Hà Minh Đức's *Kí viết về chiến tranh cách mạng và xây dựng chủ nghĩa xã hội* (*Kí on the National Defence and the Socialist Transformation*, National Army Publishers, 1980); or Nguyễn Xuân Nam's *Từ điển văn học* (*Dictionary of Literature*, Volume 1, Social Sciences Publishers, 1983) as well as in several university manuals. In *Lí luận Văn học* (*Literary Theory*, Volume Two), Trần Đình Sử et al define *kí* as a genre which is in between literature and journalism and other documentary genre. It always follows latest and most concerned contemporary issues of the society. *Tính xác thực* (accuracy) of the events described in *kí* is considered as the most important characteristic of this genre. *Kí* flexibly combines different literary modes which are narrative, lyric, and argument with scientific method.

## 2.4. The replacement of investigative reportage

### 2.4.1. The triumph of *bút kí*, *tùy bút*, *kí sự* over investigative reportage

Several recent researchs, for example, Đỗ Hải Ninh's "Ký trên hành trình đổi mới" ("The Change of Reportage Literature in the Vietnamese Literary Renovation", 2006) and Nguyễn Ngọc Minh's PhD dissertation "*Kí như một loại hình diễn ngôn*" ("*Kí as Discourse*", 2013) share the idea that during the period 1945-1975, phóng sự (investigative reportage) was absent and replaced with *kí sự* (historical reportage), *bút kí* (a combination between travelogue, historical reportage and literary essays), *tùy bút* (literary essays) and *truyện kí*. What are the differences between *kí sự*, *tùy bút*, *bút kí* and investigative reportage, which caused their different destinies in the time of socialist realism in North Vietnam?

Tầm Dương explains the differences between historical reportage and investigative reportage as follows:

Historical reportage is close to investigative reportage. [...] They are similar in terms of focusing on events and less use of the lyrical elements. However, while events take a more important role in investigative reportage, feelings and opinions take more account in historical reportage. Historical reportage often cover the whole event chronically.<sup>112</sup>

He also defines *tùy bút* as the subgenre in which the lyrical is the most condensed, in comparison to other subgenres of *kí*. "In *tùy bút*, the event/people/thing only plays the role of inspiring the writer to reveal his inner feelings. [...] *Tùy bút* does not focus on telling a story but provides readers with a lot of unique images and thoughts. *Tùy bút* is close to poems written in prose".<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Tầm Dương, 'Về Thể Kí (On the Genre of Kí)', *Văn Học*, 2 (1967), 6–7, 6. Original text in Vietnamese: "Kí sự là một loại kí rất gần với phóng sự. [...] Những điểm giống nhau đó là kí sự cũng chú trọng đặc biệt đến sự và cùng có ít yếu tố trữ tình. Nhưng đã là anh em (dẫu là sinh đôi) thì vẫn có điểm giống nhau: nội dung hiện thực trong kí sự ít có nghĩa vấn đề như ở phóng sự nhưng yếu tố trữ tình lại tương đối nhiều hơn. Kí sự thường trình bày một vấn đề theo diễn biến thời gian và thường là trọn vẹn cả một quá trình".

<sup>113</sup> Tầm Dương, 7. Original text in Vietnamese: "Tuỳ bút là loại kí trữ tình nhất. Trong tuỳ bút, ngoại giới chỉ là phụ, chỉ là một cái cớ để người viết bộc lộ nội tâm [...] Sự việc trong tuỳ bút khá tản mạn, tác giả dung nhiều liên tưởng tượng, dẫn người đọc đi rất xa trong không gian và thời gian, dung nhiều biện pháp tu từ

*Bút kí* can be seen as a flexible combination between historical reportage, travelogue and *tùy bút*. However, similar to *tùy bút*, *bút kí* only uses historical event or the journey to reveal the writer's opinions and feelings. From the definition of *kí sự*, *bút kí* and *truyện kí*, it can be seen that it is not the investigation but the demonstration of feelings and thoughts are the main contents of these genres.

In her dissertation, Minh explains this phenomenon from the perspective of genre and ideology. She points out that under socialist realism, *kí sự*, *bút kí* and *truyện kí* returned to the poetics of epic and myth. Instead of the investigative quality of investigative reportage, the epical and poetical became the main content of socialist *kí*. While investigative reportage requires independent, subjective approach to reality, socialist realism *kí* ask writers to conform to the orthodox ideology. Therefore, there was not a chance for investigative reportage to develop during the period 1945-1986. She also examines how travelogue was transformed into *bút kí*: "The journey is no longer to discover a new world, but to prove a predetermined truth".<sup>114</sup> For example, "in *The Farming Soldiers*, Tô Hoài opens with the present event, his visit Kazakhstan and admires of the prosperous life there, and refers back to the painful past of the country, and come back to the present at the end of the piece. This structure is to emphasize the writer's proud and belief in the socialist transformation in this friend country and Vietnam".<sup>115</sup> Minh argues that in socialist *kí*, the self of the narrator has to transform into a collective self, in this way, socialist *kí* highly resembles epic and myth. The Quest and resurrection ritual which create the structure of myth and epic also control the plot and the way which characters are presented

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sáng tạo những hình ảnh, liên hệ bất ngờ độc đáo. Tùy bút rất gần thơ văn xuôi, cái bản ngã của tác giả tùy bút bộc lộ gần như trong thơ trữ tình."

<sup>114</sup> Nguyễn Thị Ngọc Minh, 'Kí Như Một Loại Hình Diễn Ngôn (Kí as Discourse)' (Hanoi National University of Education, 2013), 102.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. Original text in Vietnamese: "trong Những chiến sĩ khai hoang, Tô Hoài đã mở đầu tác phẩm bằng các sự kiện trong hiện tại (chuyến thăm Cadăcxtan, cuộc sống tươi đẹp, trù phú trên đất nước), sau đó mới quay ngược trở lại quá khứ lịch sử đau thương, gian khổ của đất nước này, kết thúc tác phẩm lại quay lại với thời hiện tại... Kết cấu này nhằm làm nổi bật niềm tin tưởng, tự hào, lạc quan về công cuộc xây dựng chủ nghĩa xã hội nơi nước bạn cũng như Việt Nam".

in *bút kí, tùy bút and kí sự*. In this way, Minh meets Charles Laughlin in the discovery of the lost of 'actuality' in Vietnamese socialist *kí* and Chinese socialist reportage. Laughlin wrote:

'the forces of conformity within Chinese socialism, particularly under Mao Zedong, ultimately transformed reportage from a liberating form of leftish artistic expression into an orthodox vehicle for extolling the Great Helmsman and the Communist Party. [...] Reportage under socialism was losing its hold on 'actuality' (zhenshixing), and in this sense the highly literary quality of the genre at this point became a burden, detracting from its value. [...] Some of the more superficial conventions of socialist reportage will be familiar to readers: the depiction of warm and congenial relations between soldiers or cadres and the common people (represented by carefully crafted images of the peasant and worker); the cathartic narration and shedding of an ugly, backward past (in the 'old' China) to set off the process of education and salvation in the loving bosom of the Party; binary oppositions between the presocialist modern Chinese order and the idealized, utopian, socialist order; the extolling of heroic figures; and a didactic narratorial pose in which the narrator often directly addresses the reader or offers rhetorical questions".<sup>116</sup>

Through the mentioned research, it can be seen that the illustrative suppressed and replaced the investigative quality of *kí*. The lyrical was also increased to cover the absence of the investigative. That explains why historical reportage and literary essays won over the absence of investigative reportage and the triumph. However, international and Vietnamese scholars have left the short existence of *truyện kí* unexplained. The confusion over the different definitions of *truyện kí* in different periods and different places in Vietnam in the twentieth century is another question which inspires me to take further examination.

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<sup>116</sup> Charles A. Laughlin, *Chinese Reportage : The Aesthetics of Historical Experience, Asia-Pacific*. (London: Duke University Press, 2002), 223.

#### 2.4.2. *Truyện kí: Achilles heel of socialist kí*

Since 1964, the CPV started launching the competitions in writing about “real people, real events” (“người thật, việc thật”), for example, the completion in writing about the martyr hero Nguyễn Văn Trỗi in 1964, the one about “real people, real events” in 1966, the one about socialist heroes in 1967, the one about Hồ Chí Minh in 1969, and the competition of revolutionary and socialist memoirs in 1974.<sup>117</sup> As a result of these competitions, *truyện kí* came at the heart of North Vietnamese literature. Nguyễn Đức Thuận’s *Bất khuất* (*Indomitability*, 1965), Trần Đình Vân’s *Sống như anh* (Nguyễn Văn Trỗi As He Was, 1965)<sup>118</sup>, Nguyễn Thi’s *Người mẹ cầm súng* (*A Mother Who Fights*, 1965) received high awards and were considered as canons of socialist literature. Along with the emergence of this kind of work about real people and real events, the need to define its genre occurred. It was also the main reason for the debate in the journal *Văn nghệ* in 1960s, which became intensive in 1966, 1967, as mentioned in the previous section.

*Truyện kí* contains two words: *truyện* (story, fiction) and *kí* (to record/literary nonfiction). In 1942, Vũ Ngọc Phan was the first critic who defined *truyện kí* as biography: *truyện kí* is “to record the history of a historical figure or a famous person”.<sup>119</sup> It means that before 1945, *truyện kí* referred to biographical nonfiction. Phan’s definition of *truyện kí* faced a challenge in 1960s. It was no longer fit to define the memoirs and biographies which were produced in North Vietnam from 1945-1986. Most of them were written to fit the Stalinist socialist realism’s representation of the socialist hero. Nguyễn Ngọc Minh points out that socialist *truyện kí* apply the poetics of epic and myth: for example, Nguyễn Đức Thuận’s *Bất khuất* (*Indomitability*) has the structure of a

<sup>117</sup> See *Văn Học Việt Nam Chống Mỹ Cứu Nước* (*Vietnamese Literature in the Resistance War Against the Americans*), ed. by Hoàng Trung Thông (Hanoi: Khoa học Xã hội, 1979), 455.

<sup>118</sup> Nguyễn Văn Trỗi (1940 –1964) was a Việt Minh (National Liberation Front) bomber. He gained notoriety after being captured by the South Vietnamese while trying to assassinate United States Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and future ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. who were visiting South Vietnam in May 1963. Trỗi's widow, Phan Thị Quyen, and the writer Trần Đình Vân, authored the 1965 book *Nguyễn Văn Trỗi As He Was*. The book is about the last days of Trỗi in prison and the meetings between him and his wife. It shows little about their inner feelings and focuses on the heroic expressions of Trỗi as well as Quyen’s journey from ignorance to a sympathy with her husband and socialism.

<sup>119</sup> Vũ Ngọc Phan, 552. Original text in Vietnamese: *truyện kí* là “*kí* lại *truyện* (sự) về một nhân vật lịch sử, một danh nhân”.

myth which is about a hero in his fight against evils, darkness and the Death. *Indomitability* tells the own story of the writer, a communist cadre, in the time he was imprisoned in Côn Đảo by Diệm's government. It shows his bravery, patience, intelligence and loyalty to communism in the fight against the evil plans and tortures of the prison guards. This structure of the memoirs like *Indomitability* resembles the one of Soviet novels, as Katerina Clark demonstrates in her 1982 book, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*<sup>120</sup>.

In 1966, while Vũ Đức Phúc put *phóng sự, kí sự, bút kí, tùy bút, hồi kí, nhật kí, du kí* under the umbrella term *kí*, he did not mention the term *truyện kí*. However, he asserted that *kí* và *truyện viết về người thật* (*fiction about real people, real event*) differ to each other at the level of fictionization. He also stated that the 1962 memoirs of the heroes Lê Văn Cầu, Nguyễn Thị Chiên, Ngô Gia Khảm, Giáp Văn Cương could be called fiction, however, they are actually *kí* because of their accuracy and truthfulness.<sup>121</sup> Through the debate, it can be seen that many writers and critics were confusing to define the genre of those works. To define them as fiction is to lessen its accuracy and truthfulness of the works about the socialist heroes, in other word, to undermine the sincerity and truthfulness of Stalinist socialist realism. Tầm Dương was the first critic to use the term *truyện kí* to refer to *Indomitability*, *Nguyễn Văn Trỗi As He Was*, and *A Mother Who Fights*, and he was also the one who put *truyện kí* in the category of *kí*.<sup>122</sup> Although Tầm Dương, and later, Hà Minh Đức (1980)<sup>123</sup>, and Nguyễn Xuân Nam (1983) admitted the existence of fictional elements in *truyện kí*, they still guaranteed its accuracy, sincerity and truthfulness. Hà Minh Đức argues that *truyện kí* is a subgenre of *kí*, which contains some characteristics of fiction. Plot is

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<sup>120</sup> Clark. Zinoman has the same view that revolution prison memoirs were manipulated to create the myth of communist cadres. He claims that "In addition to drawing attention to the importance of revolutionary training and political commitment, another concern of revolutionary prison memoirs is to portray Communist prisoners as dauntless and heroic figures". Zinoman also explains the reason of this manipulation of memoir: "The party's need to assert the legitimacy of its monopoly over political power required a popular literary form that cleaned up, embellished, and celebrate the history of its heroic struggle and sacrifices". Zinoman, 'Reading Revolutionary Prison Memoirs,' 32, 39.

<sup>121</sup> Vũ Đức Phúc, 'Bàn về Các Thể Kí Trong Văn Học Từ Cách Mạng Tháng Tám đến Nay (On Subgenres of Kí since the August Revolution 1945 Up to Present)', *Văn Học*, 8 (1966), 8–12, 11.

<sup>122</sup> Tầm Dương.

<sup>123</sup> Hà Minh Đức, *Kí Viết về Chiến Tranh Cách Mạng và Xây Dựng Chủ Nghĩa Xã Hội (Kí On the Resistance War and the Socialist Transformation)* (Hanoi: Quân đội Nhân dân, 1980).

essential in *truyện kí*, while it may be optional in *kí sự* and *bút kí*.<sup>124</sup> Nguyễn Xuân Nam defines the subgenres of *kí* as follows:

*Kí* embraces a lot of subgenres, among them *kí sự* and *phóng sự* are close to documentary, and *tạp văn* (random notes), *bút kí chính luận* (political literary essays) are close to argumentation, while memoir is close to history, *tùy bút* contains a lot of lyrical elements, and *truyện kí* is close to *truyện* (fiction).<sup>125</sup>

Therefore, *truyện kí* since 1960s became the term referring to a vague combination of fiction and nonfiction. Although fictional techniques are visible in *truyện kí*, socialist critics and writers still insisted that it is nonfiction. While autobiography and biography in western society since Romanticism were going toward revealing the inner self, North Vietnamese socialist *truyện kí* were created to represent a collective self. Private life and inner feelings are absent in *truyện kí*, or if they present, they have to be the ones which conform to the institutionalized values. The protagonist of *truyện kí* must represent for the New Man of socialism, who is hardworking, patient, brave and clever either/both in fighting in battles or working in factory/farm to contribute to the socialist transformation.

If revolutionary romantic realism is where Trường Chinh shows his weaknesses in defending Stalinist socialist realism<sup>126</sup>, *truyện kí* is what typical for the poetics of revolutionary romantic realism. In the meeting with military writers in 1959, Trường Chinh asserted that revolutionary romantic realism is the highest version of socialist realism:

Is socialist realism and romanticism opposing each other? If it is bourgeois romanticism, yes. However, if it is revolutionary romanticism, no. Because socialist realism does not forbid us to dream. [...] Our imagination, on the basis of reality situation and the objective

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<sup>124</sup> Hà Minh Đức, 73.

<sup>125</sup> *Từ điển Văn Học Vol. 1*, ed. by Nguyễn Xuân Nam (Hanoi: Khoa học Xã hội, 1983), 365–366.

<sup>126</sup> See 2.1.4. “Socialist realism as Truth”.

development principles of the world, can go ahead of time and encourage us. It is not only unharmed but also advantageous because arts and literature should not limit in the honest representation of reality but also has to forecast the future to encourage people. Therefore, socialist realism at its top performance will be identical with revolutionary romanticism.<sup>127</sup>

It is noteworthy that while Chinh confirmed that it was fine to insert romantic view of future into socialist realism literature, socialist *truyện kí*, by its application of the poetics of epic and myth, provided a romantic representation about the past of the socialist heroes. Chinh's guarantee of the legitimation of revolutionary romantic realism could not cover the faulty of *truyện kí* and assure its position as a nonfictional genre. It is interesting that Chinese socialist and Soviet critics experienced the same confusion when they tried to define the genre of similar works. Boris Polevoy (1952) explained the confusion as a natural phenomenon of literature:

Recently, there has been the emergence of several works, which raised controversy over their genre. People could not tell whether they are reportage, short stories or long fiction. However, in my opinion, their emergence is natural. When writers and journalist sincerely and truthfully demonstrate the quest of a real person in the quest for socialist transformation, they could naturally go over the limitations of reportage to get closer to short stories or even novels.<sup>128</sup>

We can see the same confusion in an article on Chinese *Nhân dân nhật báo*, “Một số ý kiến về văn học báo cáo” (“Some opinions on baogao wenxue”) by Mã Thiết Định, a Chinese critic. The

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<sup>127</sup> Trường Chinh, ‘Nói Chuyện Tại Hội Nghị Bạn Viết Toàn Quân (Talk at the Meeting of Military Writers)’, in *Bước Tiến Mới Của Phong Trào Sáng Tác Văn Học Trong Quân đội (New Progress in the Writing Movements in the Army)* (Quân đội Nhân dân, 1959), pp. 21–22.

<sup>128</sup> Boris Nikolaevich Polevoi, *Viết Kí Sự (Writing Reportage)*, trans. Anonymous (Văn học, 1961), 17. First print in 1952.

translation of the article was published on the journal *Văn học* Vol. 9 in 1966.<sup>129</sup> The insistence on the accuracy and truthfulness of Soviet reportage (*oçerk*), Vietnamese *kí* and Chinese *baogao wenxue* weakened their defense of the legitimation of this kind of memoirs and biography while they could not deny the fictional techniques in the books. In recent books on literary theory and criticism, *truyện kí* are no longer mentioned as a subgenre of *kí* or the authors rather avoid mentioning it. For example, *truyện kí* is stated as a subgenre of *kí* in Trần Đình Sử and Phương Lưu's *Lí luận văn học (Literary Theory, Vol. 2, 1987)*. However, in its latest edition of the book (2008), the term is removed.<sup>130</sup>

This chapter has shown the obsession with truth in North Vietnam before 1986, which also existed in the USSR and Maoist China. It was not only expressed in political and historical discourses but also in literary ones. The intention to make a collective memory of communism as well as its tool which is socialist realism as absolute truths was reflected in the suppression of NVGP and in the effort to make *kí* a popular genre of socialist realism literature. This chapter have also clarified how Vietnamese socialist realism, which was heavily influenced by Stalinist policies toward literature and arts, manipulated the theorization and performance of *kí* in order to make it become one of the most effective kinds of propaganda. The debate on the possibility of fictional element in *kí* in 1966–1967, somewhat was a reaction to reinforce socialist realism as the best methodology for literature, which was undermined by the NVGP's claim of freedom of expression in the late 1950s.

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<sup>129</sup> Mã Thiết Định, “Một Số Ý Kiến về Văn Học Báo Cáo” (“Some Opinions on Baogao Wenxue”), *Văn Học*, 9 (1966), 5.

<sup>130</sup> See Trần Đình Sử and others, *Lí Luận Văn Học, Tập 2 (Literary Theory, Volume 2)*, ed. by Trần Đình Sử (Hanoi: Đại học Sư Phạm, 2008).

## Chapter 3

### South Vietnamese *Kí* during the Vietnam War (1954 – 1975)

In 1954, the French surrender at Dien Bien Phu led to the Geneva Accords, by which Vietnam was partitioned along the 17th Parallel into communist and non-communist parts. North Vietnam became the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, governed by the Vietnamese Communist Party; its capital was Hanoi. South Vietnam, with the support of the US, became the Republic of Vietnam (1955–75), which had its capital in Saigon. Within 300 days of the signing of the accords, any civilians who wished to leave either side could be transferred. Nationwide elections to unify Vietnam were to be held in 1956, although these in fact were never held because Vietnamese communist leaders appeared certain to win these elections, and the United States and the leaders in the south wanted to forestall this eventuality. The unification of Vietnam failed and the Vietnam War gradually escalated, lasting until the Fall of Saigon in 1975.<sup>131</sup> The Vietnam War began in 1959 between the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam (NLF, or, in the words of the US, the “Việt Cộng”) supplied by North Vietnam and South Vietnamese soldiers (Army of the Republic of Vietnam: ARVN), led by the government of South Vietnam and supported by the Americans. The US did not only support the government of the south with weapons, financial aid and military advisers but also with troops (1965 – 1973) and a bombing campaign in North Vietnam (February 1965 to October 1968). After the Tet Offensive of 1968, the US lessened its intervention in Vietnam. Despite a peace treaty concluded in January 1973, the war continued until the North Vietnamese army overran Saigon on 30 April 1975. As a result of their geographical and political separation, North and South Vietnamese literature during 1954–1975

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<sup>131</sup> This information is retrieved from: <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/229032/Geneva-Accords>> [Accessed: 2 June 2014].

developed in different ways. While North Vietnamese literature, under the influence of Stalinist socialist realism, became mono-voiced and rigid, South Vietnamese literature managed to provide multiple voices in some ways. *Kí* of South Vietnamese writers also reflects that characteristics as well as the complicated relationship between powers and literature.

Firstly, it is necessary to identify what South Vietnamese literature is. The exiled scholars who fled from South Vietnam in and after 1975 have strongly distinguished “văn học miền Nam” (“South Vietnamese literature”) from “văn học giải phóng miền Nam” (“literature devoted to South Vietnam’s freedom”)<sup>132</sup> which was written by South-originating communist writers<sup>133</sup> and denied that “literature devoted to South Vietnam’s freedom” is a part of “South Vietnamese literature”. Meanwhile, North Vietnamese communist scholars consider that South Vietnamese literature during 1954–1975 contains two parts: the urban literature in South Vietnam and the literature devoted to South Vietnam’s freedom by South-originating communist writers who worked under cover in Southern urban areas or in the battlefields in the South. Since 1954 and until recently, North Vietnamese communist criticism, under the influence of Stalinist socialist realism, has considered the urban literature in South Vietnam as “phản động” (“counter-revolutionary”), “suy đồi” (“corrupt”),<sup>134</sup> “văn học phục vụ chủ nghĩa thực dân kiểu mới” (“a puppet literature of neo-colonialism”), which aimed to turn the South Vietnamese people into

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<sup>132</sup> For example, see Phạm Văn Sĩ, *Văn học giải phóng Miền Nam (Literature Devoted to South Vietnam’s Freedom)* (Hanoi: Đại học và Trung học chuyên nghiệp Publishers, 1975).

<sup>133</sup> These writers fled north during or after the migration (1954–1955). They were trained in the north and joined the NLF. Some hid their identity as communists in order to work as writers in South Vietnamese cities. Kevin Ruane states that during 1954–1955, “an estimated 900,000 people fled south in the first months after partition, the majority of them Catholics fearful of persecution, and Washington and Saigon made considerable propaganda capital out what was portrayed as an exodus from tyranny. At the same time, around 130,000 northern-based French forces regrouped in the south, with about the same number of Vietminh troops and supporters moving in the opposite direction” (Kevin Ruane, *War and Revolution in Vietnam, 1930–75* (London: University College London Press, 1998), 38).

<sup>134</sup> See Vũ Hạnh and Nguyễn Ngọc Phan, *Một Trăm Câu Hỏi Đáp về Văn Học Thời Kỳ 1945–1975 Ở Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh (100 Questions on Literature in Hồ Chí Minh City during 1945–1975)* (Saigon: Văn hóa – Văn nghệ Publishers, 2008), p. 14; and, Trần Trọng Đăng Đàn, *Văn Hóa, Văn Nghệ Nam Việt Nam 1954–1975 (South Vietnamese Culture and Arts, 1954–1975)*, 2nd edn (Hanoi: Văn hóa Thông tin Publishers, 2000), 481.

“nô lệ tự nguyện” (“voluntary slaves”).<sup>135</sup> Against the entrenched views of both sides, I consider that South Vietnamese literature during 1954–1975 consists of all literary works which were published within South Vietnam, including the “grey” literary works<sup>136</sup> which were printed using Roneo duplicators by the writers of the Thái Độ Group and distributed without permission of the authorities, as well as works by communist writers who worked under cover in the urban areas of the South.

It is difficult to approach South Vietnamese literature (1954–1975), not only because of the lack of material<sup>137</sup> but also the prejudices about it from both sides. While northern orthodox criticism has viewed southern literature negatively, some exiled scholars and writers who fled from the south have highly praised South Vietnamese literature for its independence. For example, Võ Phiến, in *Văn học miền Nam: Tổng quan (Introduction to South Vietnamese Literature, 1988)* argues that South Vietnamese literature during this period was opposed to propaganda, and maintained its independence from the influences of the communist government in North Vietnam and the US–allied government in South Vietnam. Moreover, it even challenged them:

Literature and arts in the North unconditionally served the regime. It became propaganda for any changes of policies or plans by the government. [...] Meanwhile, in the South, when literature, arts and politics reached mutual consent, literature and arts became the supporters and reminders of the government. In contrast, they opposed the regime if it

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<sup>135</sup> For example, see Trà Linh and others, *Văn Hóa Văn Nghệ Miền Nam Dưới Chế Độ Mỹ Ngụy (South Vietnamese Culture and Arts during the Vietnam War)* (Hanoi: Văn hóa – Hà Nội, 1977), 11.

<sup>136</sup> “Văn nghệ xám” (“grey” literature) by members of the Thái Độ Group (a group of anti-war writers) will be analysed later in this chapter.

<sup>137</sup> After the North communist regime took over the South in 1975, most of the books which were published in the South during 1954–1975 (especially the literary ones) were burned or prohibited, becoming inaccessible in libraries. The material for this chapter was provided by some private collectors and from some websites. I tried to avoid using material from websites when possible. However, in some cases, these sources are necessary due to the limited accessibility of hard copies.

failed their expectations. In the South, these politics–attached literature and arts always troubled politics and themselves.<sup>138</sup>

Phiến believed that after 1945, in communist areas, investigative reportage ceased because no one was allowed to talk about social inequality and wrongdoings. Meanwhile, in southern literature, writers were free to uncover social evils as well as the wrongdoings of politicians.<sup>139</sup> Therefore, in his opinion, although in the last few years of the southern regime, urban literature deteriorated, only *kí* was still socially minded: “There were no *kí* which was against the war or tasteless, utopian. There was no *kí* which was leftist or coward. There was no communist agent among *kí* writers”.<sup>140</sup> Besides, when asserting that southern *kí* was only positive and supportive towards the regime and social improvements, Phiến intentionally left out works which were anti–war and criticised the performance of the government – for example, works by writers of the Thái Độ Group and the journal *Trình bày*.

Both these contradictory views of southern Vietnamese literature went to extremes: one considered it as the slave of powers and the other believed in its independence from politics.

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<sup>138</sup> Võ Phiến, *Văn Học Miền Nam: Tổng Quan (Introduction to South Vietnamese Literature)* (Westminster: Văn nghệ, 1988), p. 80. Original text in Vietnamese: “Ở Bắc văn nghệ phục thị chính quyền bất cứ theo chủ trương nào, chiều hướng nào, giai đoạn nào [...] Ở Nam, khi đối bên đi thuận chiều thì văn nghệ giục giã, thúc bách chính quyền, khi ngược chiều thì văn nghệ chống đối, phản kháng. Ở Nam, thứ văn nghệ có chính trị tính luôn luôn vật vã, nó làm khổ chính trị và tự làm khổ nó”. Võ Phiến, a famous writer of South Vietnamese literature before 1975, became an exiled writer after the Fall of Saigon and this book was published in the U.S. I have been unable to locate a hard copy of this book and therefore use the ebook version, which may have different pagination. This ebook was retrieved from: <<http://www.vietnamvanhien.net/vanhocmiennamtongquan.pdf>> [Accessed 20 March 2013].

<sup>139</sup> Ibid 244.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 248. Original text in Vietnamese: “Mặc cho những không đảm hư tưởng, những ước át mê li, những viễn vông, những chuyển biến suy đốn của văn chương đô thị vào những năm cuối cùng, *kí* cứ một mực dẫn thân, tích cực. *kí* không có thứ *kí* phản chiến, không có thứ *kí* viễn mơ, không có *kí* tả khuynh, thân cộng, không có tinh thần chủ bại, đầu hàng, hòa giải hòa hợp trong *kí*, không có văn công chui vô nằm vùng trong *kí*”.

### **3.1. The historical, political and cultural situation in South Vietnam, 1954 – 1975**

#### **3.1.1. Political and social situation**

Ngô Đình Diệm, the first prime minister, led South Vietnam between 1954 and 1963. Diệm's family dictatorship, the defeats at the hands of the Việt Cộng and the repression of Buddhists resulted in the loss of support from southern people. In addition, in the countryside, ambitious programmes of social and economic reform led to bribery and corruption. The program which aimed to resettle the rural population into fortified camps in order to separate them from Communist insurgents also failed. Diệm's religious policies, which supported Catholicism and lessened the influence of Buddhism, created further disorders. After Diệm was deposed in a military coup in 1963, there was a series of short-lived military governments. General Nguyễn Văn Thiệu held the position of prime minister of South Vietnam from 1967 until 1975. Despite the intensive military coups, the war against the North was continued with the material and human support of the US between 1954 and 1975.

Although Diệm's government failed and was removed by a coup which was approved by the Americans, the political situation in the South during Diệm's regime was more stable than it had been between 1964 and 1975. During two years (from the end of 1963 to early 1965), the government of South Vietnam was changed twelve times by military coups. Võ Phiến summarizes this period as follows:

It was not until the establishment of the National Affair Committee in February 1965 and the approval of the Constitution in April 1965, marking the birth of "the second republic", that the political situation in the South was more or less stabilized. Prime Minister Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's government managed to settle the situation in the South to a certain extent. Although there were no further coups, such uprisings as the Buddhists' street

demonstrations, students'school boycotts, feminist movements occurred continuously until the day the communist forces took over Independence Palace.<sup>141</sup>

Moreover, the people of South Vietnam, especially the peasants in the countryside, suffered because of the battles between the NLF's forces and the South Vietnamese soldiers and US troops. Death, injury, property destruction and uncultivated land could be seen everywhere. Corruption and the long war drained the government's budget, which resulted in high inflation, which in turn further impoverished peasants, workers and soldiers' families. The existence of the US army in South Vietnam also created more disorder. The US currency (which was much more valuable than the local one), luxury goods and different lifestyles increased social divisions, exacerbated smuggling and increased the number of prostitutes as well as threatening traditional families.

### **3.1.2. The cultural situation: literature and politics**

Between 1954 and 1975 there were several national congresses of artists in the North. But there was only one in the South: the National Congress of Artists (7 – 15 January 1957), which was held in the early days of Diệm's government. The congress discussed and set up some principles for Southern writers. The slogan of the congress was “Tự do, dân tộc, nhân vị<sup>142</sup>” (“freedom, nationalism and civil society”). The congress set the guidelines for cultural development which were: “Văn hóa dân tộc phát triển, Cách mạng quốc gia thành công” (“To develop national culture, and to ensure the success of the national revolution”), “Bài trừ tinh thần nô lệ Thực Cộng trong văn hóa” (“To remove the slavery spirit of Communism”) and “Phát triển văn hóa dân tộc và

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<sup>141</sup> Võ Phiến, 156. Original text in Vietnamese: “Mãi đến tháng 2–1965, khi Ủy ban Lãnh đạo Quốc gia được thành lập, tháng 4–65 khi hiến pháp mới ra đời khai sinh nền đệ nhị cộng hòa, tình hình mới êm thấm dần. Nguyễn Văn Thiệu ít ra đã ổn định được tình thế. Mặc dù vậy, mặc dù đảo chánh chính lý có ngừng, những chuyện Phật giáo xuống đường, bày bàn thờ ra đường, sinh viên bãi khóa, không ngủ, đốt xe, phụ nữ đòi quyền sống v.v..., những chuyện như thế cứ tiếp tục đều đều cho đến ngày cộng sản vào kéo cờ trước dinh Độc Lập”. The day “the communist forces took over the Independence Palace” means 30 April 1975, the Fall of Saigon.

<sup>142</sup> “Nhân vị”, which content is similar to “civil society” in some ways, is a theory by President Ngô Đình Diệm as a political guideline to reform South Vietnam. The theory was inspired by two Confucian concepts, which are “Nhân” (仁) and “Vị” (位).

nhân vị” (“To develop a culture based on national values and civil society”).<sup>143</sup> Delegates to the congress praised the ideological openness and free speech of southern cultural policies and criticized the North for making literature and arts subordinate to politics. However, in his speech at the opening of the congress, Prime Minister Ngô Đình Diệm also emphasized the close connection between cultural activities and politics:

But we should not forget that cultural works are being created in a complicated political situation such as this. Just as our spirit and body are connected, it is difficult to separate cultural activities from our being, or our will to freedom from the tasks and requirements raised by the current reality of the nation. [...] Therefore nothing other than your efforts to balance the freedom of cultural activities with the historical tasks of the nation, your efforts to solve these natural, cruel but productive contradictions between them, will boost this cultural renaissance movement.<sup>144</sup>

The contradiction between the congress’s guidelines and the fact that Ngô Đình Diệm’s government controlled literature and art between 1956 and 1963<sup>145</sup> is reflected in *Nhận định IV: Chiến tranh, Cách mạng, Hòa bình (Collected Essays Vol. 4: War, Revolution and Peace)* by Nguyễn Văn Trung. He argued that although in the first period of Diệm’s regime (1956–1960), literature and art started to boost under the support of the government, since 1961 to 1963, literature and arts was more about propaganda than genuine artistic value: Diệm’s government “never built up sufficient cultural policies” and “treated literature and arts as no more than political

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<sup>143</sup> *Kỷ Yếu Đại Hội Văn Hóa Toàn Quốc (Proceeding of the National Congress of Culture)* (Saigon, 1957), 9.

<sup>144</sup> Ngô Đình Diệm, “Huấn từ của Ngô Tổng thống nhân dịp lễ khai mạc Đại hội Văn hóa Toàn quốc” (“Opening Speech”), *Kỷ Yếu Đại Hội Văn Hóa Toàn Quốc (Summary Records of the National Congress of Culture)* (Saigon, 1957), p. 11. Original text in Vietnamese: “Nhưng chúng ta không nên quên các công trình trí thức phải phát triển trong những khung cảnh phức tạp. Vì tinh thần và thể xác khăng khít mật thiết với nhau nên khó mà tách biệt các hoạt động văn hóa ra khỏi thân phận con người, ý chí tự do ra khỏi những đòi hỏi của kỹ thuật chung và những yêu cầu của vận mệnh thực tại quốc gia.[...] Vậy chính những cố gắng của quý vị để quân bình các đòi hỏi của hoàn cảnh lịch sử nước nhà với tự do cần thiết cho mọi hoạt động văn hóa, chính những cố gắng của quý vị để chế ngự sự tương phản tự nhiên, khắc nghiệt nhưng phong phú ấy, sẽ đẩy mạnh phong trào phục hưng Văn hóa này”.

<sup>145</sup> The year when Diệm was overthrown and killed in a military coup.

propaganda”.<sup>146</sup> After the fall of Diệm’s government, literature and arts became more independent from politics. In some ways, southern writers managed to develop multiple voices in literature in general and *kí* in particular. However, it would be naïve to suggest that literature and arts were free from politics. The following paragraphs in this section clarify this relationship between southern literature and politics through investigating such issues as funding, censorship and prominent literary trends.

Thế Nguyên, one of the founders of *Trình bày* (*Speak Out*), a prominent leftist journal, disagreed with some literary journals and magazines – for example, *Văn nghệ* (*Literature and Arts*) and *Sáng tạo* (*Creation*) – receiving funds from the American government or organizations which aimed to establish “a system of fraud and dictatorial values” in South Vietnam. Works were published and praised in these publications not because of their own literary value but for their propagandist effects.<sup>147</sup> Nguyên Sa, an influential writer and the founder of the magazine *Hiện Đại* (*Modern*, one of three prominent literary magazines in South Vietnam during 1954–1975), also once confessed that Diệm’s government and its other successors used funds to turn writers and journalists into their puppets.

We all remember well that the governments in the past supported artists financially. Many of us, including me, did directly or indirectly receive money from them. Suppressing our guilty conscience, we quickly spent that unrighteous money by writing some easy pieces of propaganda. The marriage contract between literature, arts and politics was broken more than once. It even pushed them far apart and heightened the disagreements

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<sup>146</sup> Nguyễn Văn Trung, *Nhận Định IV: Chiến Tranh, Cách Mạng, Hòa Bình* (*Collected Essays Vol. 4: War, Revolution and Peace*) (Saigon: Nam Sơn Publishers, 1966), 168. Original text in Vietnamese: “Nhìn lại một cách phê phán sinh hoạt văn hóa, văn nghệ trong 10 năm qua, tất nhiên phải để ý tới thời kỳ tương đối có nhiều điều kiện thuận tiện cho sinh hoạt văn nghệ (1956 – 1960); từ 1961, sinh hoạt bắt đầu suy yếu, và sau biến cố 1–11, thì do những bận tâm chính trị, những xáo trộn của thời cuộc không còn cho phép nghĩ hay làm văn nghệ nữa! [...] khuyết điểm lớn lao là chưa hề đặt ra một chính sách văn hóa thực sự, hoặc có đặt ra, lại chỉ coi như một chiêu bài, đồng thời chính trị hóa văn hóa, lẫn lộn văn hóa và tuyên truyền. Khuyết điểm là coi nhẹ văn hóa và không thấy tác dụng chính trị của những công trình văn hóa thực sự”.

<sup>147</sup> Thế Nguyên, “Văn Nghệ Trước Những Mưu Đồ Bất Chính Của Hệ Thống Chiến Tranh Lạnh (Literature and Arts Against Unrighteous Schemes of the Cold War System),” *Trình bày*, 9 (1970), 15–28, 16.

between writers who received nothing or just a little and the ones who were granted a lot of money. Consequently, they argued and humiliated each other as if they were enemies.<sup>148</sup>

Nguyễn Hiến Lê, in his memoir *Đời Viết Văn Của Tôi* (*My Writing Career*, 1996) also confirmed the financial and political influence of the government on literature and journalism in the South:

After the Geneva Accords, some Northern writers who fled to the South managed to establish some publishing houses and launch some newspapers and journals with financial support from the government, boosting the development of literature and arts in the South. They were anti-communists such as Nguyễn Mạnh Côn, Mai Thảo, Doãn Quốc Sĩ, Thanh Tâm Tuyền. [...] Since about 1960, southern people started to disagree with Diệm's regime and American interference; therefore, they gradually rejected the propagandistic literature which spread anti-communism and American culture. Southern people turned their back on many propagandist publications of the government, which were well printed and sold at cheap prices, and went back to French journalism and books. The existentialist movement and the French *nouveau roman* were widely introduced to southerners.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> Nguyễn Sa, "Tình Cảnh Nhà Văn Việt Nam Những Năm Năm Mươi, Sáu Mươi (Situations of Vietnamese Writers during 1950s and 1960s)," in *Một bông hồng cho văn nghệ* (A Rose for Our Literature and Arts) (Saigon: Trình bày, 1967), 34. Retrieved from:

<<http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=8832&rb=08>>. Original text in Vietnamese: "Chúng ta đều nhớ kỹ rằng các chánh quyền dĩ vãng đã nhiều lần đến với văn nghệ. Tiền đây, báo đây làm gì. Nhiều người trong chúng ta, có tôi, đã nhận tiền trực tiếp hay gián tiếp, tiền bao thầu hay tiền bài. Rồi để cho cái tình cảm tội lỗi nằm im, chúng tôi làm láo làm lếu cho tiền bạc không sáng sủa kia được tiêu đi mau lẹ [...]. Cho nên các cuộc hôn phối gượng ép này đã hơn một lần đưa đến đổ vỡ. Sự phân hoá trầm trọng hơn: chính quyền và văn nghệ vẫn đứng ở hai phía mặt trời và hơn nữa, người cầm tiền và kẻ không có cơ hội, thẳng cầm nhiều và tay cầm ít sỉ vả và lườm nguýt lẫn nhau như quân thù quân hằn".

<sup>149</sup> Nguyễn Hiến Lê, 'Đời Viết Văn Của Tôi (*My Writing Career*)', *Văn Hóa Thông Tin* (Ho Chi Minh: Văn hóa Thông tin Publishers, 2006). Retrieved from: <<http://maxreading.com/sach-hay/doi-viet-van-cua-toi>> [Accessed 13 May 2014]. Before its publication in Vietnam, this book was also published in California in 1986 by Văn nghệ Publishers. Original text in Vietnamese: "sau Hiệp định Genève, một số nhà văn ở Bắc di cư vào Nam, ra báo, mở nhà xuất bản, được chính quyền giúp phương tiện, nhờ vậy văn nghệ miền Nam khởi sắc. Họ đều là những người chống cộng như Nguyễn Mạnh Côn, Mai Thảo, Doãn Quốc Sĩ, Thanh Tâm Tuyền. Vào khoảng 1960, dân chúng bắt đầu ghét chính sách Ngô Đình Diệm, ghét Mỹ, nên những tác phẩm

After the fall of Diệm's regime, the subsequent government's control over literature and the arts was not as complete as before. However, writers and artists were not as free to express their political points of view as Võ Phiến believed.<sup>150</sup> Censorship remained effective through the existence of the southern republic (1954–1975). Nguyễn Ngọc Lan, editor in chief of *Đối diện*,<sup>151</sup> bitterly commented that “freedom of expression was only for the depraved or “hypnotic” writings [which enslave people]”.<sup>152</sup> He coined the name “chế độ Hốt–Cắt–Đục” (the “Regime of Confiscation and Removal”) to refer to the way the southern government used censorship to manage literature and the arts, blaming it for restraining writers from freedom of expression and draining literary inspiration.<sup>153</sup> Trần Đỗ Dũng, in his review of the southern literature in the 1970s, revealed that the writers who were against censorship had to stay silent or only riskily managed to publish a few of their writings in some magazines or journals. According to him, peace, democracy, independence and resistance were still the prohibited words that poets could not mention.<sup>154</sup> Thế Nguyên pointed out that besides censorship, the government in the South also distorted and lowered the value of writings which opposed the Cold War and rejected propaganda.<sup>155</sup> Many newspapers and periodicals were banned, such as *Đối diện*, *Hành trình* and *Trình bày*. Nguyễn Ngọc Lan took two examples to demonstrate the severe censorship of the government: “The daily newspaper *Tin sáng* (*Morning News*) was confiscated seventy-eight times within seven months, and so were six continuous issues of the monthly magazine *Đối diện*

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chống cộng và tuyên truyền cho văn hóa Mỹ bị tẩy chay; không ai bảo ai mà những sách báo của các cơ quan văn hóa Mỹ, Diệm, dù in rất đẹp, bán rất rẻ cũng ít người mua. Người ta trở lại thích sách báo Pháp và báo chí đua nhau giới thiệu phong trào hiện sinh cùng phong trào tiểu thuyết mới (cũng gọi là phản tiểu thuyết) của Pháp”.

<sup>150</sup> See the introduction to this chapter.

<sup>151</sup> A leftist magazine which existed from 1969 to 1978 in South Vietnam.

<sup>152</sup> Nguyễn Ngọc Lan, “Văn Hóa Trong Tự Do (Culture and Freedom),” *Trình bày*, 9 (1970), 30–44, 34. Original text in Vietnamese: “chỉ có thứ “văn chương” hủ hóa hay ru ngủ là tha hồ bành trướng”.

<sup>153</sup> See Nguyễn Ngọc Lan, 39.

<sup>154</sup> Trần Đỗ Dũng, “Đạo Quanh Thị Trường Chữ Nghĩa Những Năm Bấy Mươi (A Review of the Literary Market in 1970s),” *Trình bày*, 11 (1971), 49–55, p. 49&51. Original text in Vietnamese: “Những nhà văn không chịu khuất phục chế độ kiểm duyệt vẫn tiếp tục phải cầm tiếng hay chỉ có thể xuất hiện một cách rất ư hiếm hoi trên một vài tờ tạp chí tương đối tự do nhờ ở một quy chế báo chí không kém phần bóp bênh và nguy hiểm. [...] Hòa bình, dân chủ, độc lập, dân tộc, tranh đấu vẫn là những trái cấm ngoài tầm tay của các nhà thơ, không kể những tập thơ roneo, nhất là của các anh em sinh viên học sinh và một số hiếm hoi những bài thơ đăng trên một vài tờ tạp chí”.

<sup>155</sup> See Thế Nguyên, 16.

(*Encounter*)”.<sup>156</sup> The fines for publications which were confiscated and sued also drained the pockets and weakened the will of the heads of those newspapers and periodicals. Some writers were even given prison sentences for politically sensitive writings.<sup>157</sup> The phenomenon of “ấn phẩm xám” (“grey works”) was also a result of the censorship policy: during the climax of the war (1968–1975) when the criticism of the South Vietnamese regime and the war increased markedly, a number of writers gathered to publish their writings using ronéo duplicators and distributed the copies without the government’s permission.<sup>158</sup>

However, after 1975, when looking back on the performance of literature in South Vietnam during 1954–1975, some prominent scholars asserted that southern writers were still offered freedom of expression at some level. For example, in *My Writing Career*, Nguyễn Hiến Lê confirms that some newspapers and magazines were quite open to publishing the works of writers with different ideologies:

The political ideologies of the key writers of *Bách khoa* (*A Hundred Schools of Thought*) are sometimes contradictory: Vũ Hạnh is communist while Võ Phiến is anti-communist. Although Đoàn Thêm, Phan Văn Tạo dislike communists and the Americans, they did not reveal their criticism [...] I, and maybe Nguyễn Ngu Ý and Lê Ngộ Châu felt sympathy with the North [...] However, all the writers of the magazine were still friendly with each other.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Nguyễn Ngọc Lan, 31. Original text in Vietnamese: “Một nhật báo như tờ *Tin Sáng* đã bị tịch thu đến 78 lần trong vòng 7 tháng. Một nguyệt san như tờ *Đối diện* bị tịch thu luôn 6 số liền”.

<sup>157</sup> See Thế Nguyên, “Nhân Một Bản Ấn Báo Chí (On the Sentence for A Journalist),” *Trình bày*, 32 (1971), 5–7. Father Trương Bá Cần was given 6-month prison sentence for writing an article which titled “25 năm xây dựng chủ nghĩa xã hội tại miền Bắc” (25 Years of Socialist Transformation in the North Vietnam) on *Đối diện*.

<sup>158</sup> The name “ấn phẩm xám” (grey works) refers to the color of the copies printed by ronéo duplicators.

<sup>159</sup> Nguyễn Hiến Lê. Original text in Vietnamese: “Tư tưởng chính trị của những cây viết nòng cốt của Bách Khoa có khi trái ngược nhau: Vũ Hạnh thiên cộng, sau theo cộng. Võ Phiến chống cộng. Đoàn Thêm, Phan Văn Tạo, không ưa cộng nhưng cũng không đả; không thích Mỹ nhưng cũng không nói ra [...] Tôi, có lẽ cả Nguyễn Ngu Ý và Lê Ngộ Châu có cảm tình với kháng chiến [...] Mặc dầu vậy, các anh em trong toà soạn vẫn giữ tình hoà hảo với nhau”.

Thụy Khuê shares Nguyễn Hiến Lê's idea that *Bách khoa* was the longest-running magazine which gathered the most contradictory political voices.<sup>160</sup> However, Nguyễn Hiến Lê also points out that *Bách khoa* was not as popular and influential as *Nam Phong* or *Phong hóa Ngày nay* because it was not funded and did not improve its appearance<sup>161</sup>.

Another scholar who shares Nguyễn Hiến Lê's thought on the censorship policy in the South is Nguyễn Văn Trung, one of the most influential intellectuals in South Vietnam during 1955–1975, founder of the leftist magazines *Đại học* (*Great Knowledge, or Higher Education*), *Đất nước* (*Nation*), and *Hành trình* (*The Journey*). He describes how censorship influenced publication in the South as follows:

Because of security reasons, books were not able to be published without permission and had to go through the process of censorship as well. Newspapers were exempted from censorship but could be confiscated and sued for violation of political or cultural regulations. If some writings were not allowed to be published openly, they were still able to be printed using ronéo duplication and sold half openly. Sometimes they were confiscated as well. Generally, a writer could express their thoughts on prohibited topics, criticize political policies or submit letters of protest to the government, without worrying about the security of his family, friends and his own.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Thụy Khuê, "Văn Học Miền Nam 1954 – 1975 ( Literature in South Vietnam 1954 – 1975)," *Văn Việt*, 2014. Retrieved from: <<http://vanviet.info/van-hoc-mien-nam/van-hoc-mien-nam/>> [accessed 10 August 2014].

<sup>161</sup> Nguyễn Hiến Lê. Original text in Vietnamese: "Tuy nhiên phải nhận rằng Bách Khoa không có ảnh hưởng lớn như Nam Phong, Phong Hoá, Ngày Nay trong dân chúng. Nam Phong ra đời ở buổi giao thời, văn hóa cũ bắt đầu chuyển mạnh qua văn hóa mới của phương Tây, số người viết ít mà số người đọc cũng ít, bao nhiêu cây viết có giá trị đều dồn cả vào tờ đó, nên không một tờ nào khác có nhiều bài đáng đọc và có nhiều độc giả như Nam Phong lại được trợ cấp nên đứng vững được, những tờ khác có ra cũng chỉ được mươi số là chết. Có thể nói Nam Phong một mình một chợ, do đó có ảnh hưởng, uy tín lớn".

<sup>162</sup> Nguyễn Văn Trung, "Hướng về Miền Nam Việt Nam (Towards the South Vietnam)," *Khởi hành*, 92 (2004). Retrieved from <<http://nguyenvantrung.free.fr/baiviet1/huongve.htm>, Accessed 15 August 2014>. Original text in Vietnamese: "Báo thì không phải kiểm duyệt nhưng có thể bị tịch thu đưa ra tòa. Trong khuôn khổ chính sách hạn chế tự do chính trị như vậy, nếu không xuất bản công khai, hợp pháp, vẫn có thể in ronéo, phổ biến bày bán ngay cả trên các sạp báo và có thể bị tịch thu. Người cầm bút viết những điều cấm kỵ, phê

Generally, there are two main kinds of writers in the South during 1954–1975: ones who supported the government of the South and the war against the North, and ones who were against both the war and the government, among them some who felt sympathy with communism. But the attitude of writers, even the ones who represented for the official voice such as Nhã Ca, or the ones who were against both the war and the government such as Phan Nhật Nam, changed over time. Therefore, it is difficult to put southern writers in simple groups based on their political tendencies. It is also imprecise to call some writers “leftist” because of the changes and overlapping of ideologies in most writers during the period. This will be shown in the following parts of this chapter.

The writers who were against the government and the war gathered in some periodicals such as *Trình bày*, *Đất nước*, *Đổi diện*, *Hành trình*, which later were banned. *Trình bày*’s guiding principles were to resist the war against the North and the American interference and to pursue social reform.<sup>163</sup> Nguyễn Văn Trung, the founder of *Đại học*, *Đất nước*, *Hành trình*, attracted many students and intellectuals with his appeals for non-communist social reform. By analysing how American aid was just a tool of neo-colonialism as well as how China and Russia attempted to control Vietnam, he urged the Vietnamese to be independent.<sup>164</sup>

### 3.1.3. The relationship between writers, literature and reality

The debates between writers who support “art for art’s sake” and ones who believe in “art for life’s sake” seem to happen in regularly critical times. Before the First Indochina War, in the final years of the French colony in Vietnam, there was such a debate (1935–1939) among Vietnamese

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phán chính sách này, chính sách kia của nhà nước, thậm chí họ nhau viết kháng thư phản đối, đăng trên báo mà không lo ngại về an ninh chính trị của bản thân gia đình bạn bè”.

<sup>163</sup> For more information, see Diễm Châu, “Lời Phi Lộ Cho Tạp Chí Trình Bày (On the Launching of *Trình Bày*),” *Trình bày*, 1 (1970), 1–2 and Diễm Châu, “Sự Tỉnh Mộng Của Thế Hệ Những Người Thiện Chí (The Disillusion of Good-Willed Generation),” *Trình bày*, 7 (1970), 71–79.

<sup>164</sup> See Nguyễn Văn Trung, *Nhận Định IV: Chiến Tranh, Cách Mạng, Hòa Bình (Collected Essays Vol. 4: War, Revolution and Peace)*, 129–131.

writers who support “art for art’s sake” and ones who supported “art for life’s sake”.<sup>165</sup> Later, the NVGP movement in the North was another version of this debate. It also came back among literary circles in the South during the Vietnam War (1954–1975). Essentially, the debates reflected what Vietnamese writers thought of the relationship between reality and literature.<sup>166</sup>

Nhất Linh, the founder of the magazine *Văn hóa Ngày nay*, was a prominent supporter of “art for art’s sake”. He claimed to be devoted to “a literature and art which are universal”.<sup>167</sup> Nhất Linh stayed away from political and social issues and focusing on purely artistic themes. However, in real life he was an active revolutionist.<sup>168</sup> Although he kept a unproblematic voice in literature, in 1960 he was involved in an attempted coup against Diệm’s dictatorial government. Besides writers who supported “art for art’s sake”, there were two kinds of writers who pursued “art for life’s sake”, in other words, the kind of art which devotes itself to social development through social engagement. The first kind was the writers who supported the government and the war against the North, for example, Mai Thảo, Lý Hoàng Phong and Dương Nghiễm Mậu. Mai Thảo<sup>169</sup> showed his support for Diệm’s government by appealing to artists and writers to engage in social activities, to “làm lịch sử” (“make history”).

An artist is never able to be an objective witness; he always plays a protagonist in the great play of life. He is an insider, with a clear responsibility. He does not merely record

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<sup>165</sup> This debate was mentioned in Chapter 1 as well.

<sup>166</sup> This was discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation..

<sup>167</sup> Cited in Thế Nguyên, “Văn Nghệ Trước Những Mưu Đồ Bất Chính Của Hệ Thống Chiến Tranh Lạnh (Literature and Arts Against Unrighteous Schemes of the Cold War System)”, 17.

<sup>168</sup> He used to side with the Vietnamese Communist Party to fight against French colony but later fled to Hong Kong in 1946 and South Vietnam in 1951.

<sup>169</sup> Mai Thảo used to be a member of Việt Minh (League for the Independence of Vietnam), which was a national independence coalition under the lead of Vietnamese Communist Party from 1941 to 1954. He left Việt Minh in 1951 and moved to South Vietnam in 1954. He was the founder of *Sáng tạo* and *Nghệ thuật*, the two magazines on literature and arts.

historical events for future generations. [...] An artist does not write history, he makes history and risks his life for it.<sup>170</sup>

Lý Hoàng Phong, in *Văn nghệ* (Literature and Arts), also criticized Nhất Linh's "art for art's sake" and encouraged art and literature to fight for freedom, revolution and engage in the nation's life.<sup>171</sup> Dương Nghiễm Mậu, another writer of *Văn nghệ*, asserted that literature and art have to reflect reality with a revolutionary spirit; and Viên Linh reflected the government's propaganda, which was against "undevelopment, separation, and communism" by fighting against "a literature which represents undevelopment, separation and communism".<sup>172</sup>

Thế Nguyên proves that most of the writers who supported "art for art's sake" and the anti-communist writers who encouraged "art for life's sake" were funded by either the Americans or the government of the South. According to him, writers were funded for "their complete submission" to the "political system and plans"<sup>173</sup> of the Americans and the government of the South. In other words, they were funded because they either ignored the political and social issues of the country or supported the Americans and the government by criticizing communism

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<sup>170</sup> Mai Thảo, "Nghệ Thuật, Sự Báo Động Khẩn Thiết Và Thường Trục Của Ý Thức (Arts and the Alarm of Our Consciousness)," *Sáng tạo*, 7 (1961), p. 3. Original text in Vietnamese: "Người làm nghệ thuật không thể bao giờ đóng vai trò một nhân chứng khách quan, hẳn không bao giờ là một nhân chứng khách quan, một kẻ xem kịch, hẳn đóng vai chính trong vở kịch lớn, hẳn là một kẻ nhập cuộc, hẳn có một thái độ, một trách vụ minh bạch, hẳn không chỉ ghi chép, thu lượm cho một viện bảo tàng hậu thế những biến động lịch sử một thời. Nghệ thuật không còn là một hình thức diễn tả tiêu cực, nghệ thuật là một hành động tích cực trong cái ý nghĩa toàn vẹn, cách mạng nhất của danh từ, người làm nghệ thuật không viết lịch sử, hẳn làm lịch sử và sống chết với nó".

<sup>171</sup> Lý Hoàng Phong, "Đứng Trước Thực Tại (Facing the Reality)," *Văn nghệ*, 9–10 (1970), p. 9. Original text in Vietnamese: "Đứng trước thực tại hôm nay, tiếng nói của văn nghệ vẫn là tiếng nói đòi hỏi tự do, đòi hỏi cách mạng, đòi hỏi gia nhập, đòi hỏi tham dự vào dòng sống của dân tộc, đòi hỏi thoát ly ra ngoài vòng bế tắc của thời đại, đòi hỏi một ý thức mới, một xã hội mới, một đời sống mới".

<sup>172</sup> Cited in Thế Nguyên, "Văn Nghệ Trước Những Mưu Đồ Bất Chính Của Hệ Thống Chiến Tranh Lạnh (Literature and Arts Against Unrighteous Schemes of the Cold War System)," *Trình bày*, 9 (1970), 16–28, 22. Original text in Vietnamese: "Với Dương Nghiễm Mậu, cây bút báo *Văn nghệ*, văn nghệ không còn là một thứ phù phiếm, xa lìa thực tại mà tự nó phải phản ánh thực tại với ý thức cách mạng. [...] Viên Linh "như để đáp lại cái khẩu hiệu "3 chống: chậm tiến, chia rẽ và cộng sản" đang được bộ máy tuyên truyền nhà nước cổ vũ lúc này": "Hành động tham chiến với thực tại khẩn trương, hành động tham chiến với văn học chậm tiến, chia rẽ, hành động tham chiến với cộng sản lũng đoạn là hành động tham chiến của anh em bạn bè chúng tôi".

<sup>173</sup> Thế Nguyên, "Văn Nghệ Trước Những Mưu Đồ Bất Chính Của Hệ Thống Chiến Tranh Lạnh (Literature and Arts Against Unrighteous Schemes of the Cold War System)," 16. Original text in Vietnamese: "sự thần phục về mặt chính trị của họ"

and praising the current government of the South and encouraging social reform under the lead of the government.<sup>174</sup> Thế Nguyên also points out that these writers, for example, Mai Thảo, Thanh Tâm Tuyền and Viên Linh, who used to praise “art for life’s sake” and call upon a social revolution under the lead of Diệm’s government after 1962, changed into enthusiastic supporters of “art for art’s sake” because from 1962 President Diệm “did not mention the word “reform” anymore and imprisoned anyone who spoke it out”.<sup>175</sup> *Vấn đề*, the literary magazine which gathered many previous writers of *Sáng tạo*<sup>176</sup>, published many articles which criticized literature which was heavily philosophical and political and praised a new literature which came back to a pure art. For them, writing should be “an act of purifying language” and should “have nothing to do with people’s life and death”.<sup>177</sup> Thế Nguyên criticised Phan Lạc Phúc’s praise of Mai Thảo’s works in the journal *Vấn đề*: Phan Lạc Phúc appreciated that Mai Thảo “turned his back to the present and searched only for the past. There was no objective reality in his works. Just his soul”.<sup>178</sup> Nguyên also shows that Viên Linh, the writer who used to demonstrate Diệm’s propaganda of “Ba chống” (“Three Enemies”), which was mentioned earlier, turned to favouring “a poetry which is out of the influence of history”. He argued that “Poetry has no mission. It is

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<sup>174</sup> For more details, see Thế Nguyên, “Văn Nghệ Trước Những Mưu Đồ Bất Chính Của Hệ Thống Chiến Tranh Lạnh (Literature and Arts Against Unrighteous Schemes of the Cold War System)”.

<sup>175</sup> Thế Nguyên, ‘Văn Nghệ Trước Những Mưu đồ Bất Chính Của Hệ Thống Chiến Tranh Lạnh (Literature and Arts Against Unrighteous Schemes of the Cold War System),’ 23. Original word in Vietnamese: “Từ sau năm 1962, không bao giờ người ta thấy tổng thống Diệm nhắc tới hai chữ cách mạng nữa, mà ngược lại là bỏ tù tất cả những ai nhắc tới hai chữ này”.

<sup>176</sup> Among them, Mai Thảo, the founder of *Sáng tạo* became the editorial secretary of *Vấn đề*.

<sup>177</sup> Thế Nguyên, ‘Văn Nghệ Trước Những Mưu đồ Bất Chính Của Hệ Thống Chiến Tranh Lạnh (Literature and Arts Against Unrighteous Schemes of the Cold War System),’ 25. Original text in Vietnamese: “Tới đây, một vụ tráo trở, “xé cờ” hết sức hi hữu đã xảy ra: các tay làm báo trợ cấp dưới thời T.T. Diệm lại tiếp tục cuộc chơi của họ trên những băng hiệu mới, nhưng lần này với những chủ trương mới: khẩu hiệu của họ bây giờ không còn phải là “văn nghệ cách mạng”, “văn nghệ là phương tiện hành động”, “văn nghệ là tham gia chống 3 thứ giặc chậm tiến, chia rẽ và cộng sản” như ở dưới thời Diệm nữa [...] mà là “hành động tinh khiết hóa ngôn từ”, “là “chữ không làm cho ai sống, không làm cho ai chết”.

<sup>178</sup> Phan Lạc Phúc, “Nhìn Mai Thảo qua *Căn nhà vùng nước mặn*”, *Vấn đề*, số 2, 1967, 65. Cited in Thế Nguyên, “Văn Nghệ Trước Những Mưu Đồ Bất Chính Của Hệ Thống Chiến Tranh Lạnh (Literature and Arts Against Unrighteous Schemes of the Cold War System)”, p. 26. Original text in Vietnamese: “văn chương của Mai Thảo “quay lưng lại hiện tại, ngẩng nhìn dĩ vãng. Không có thế giới khách quan. Chỉ có tâm hồn của riêng Mai Thảo tràn ra trên giấy”.

arnachist. It is the sorcerer, the fortune teller, and the dictator itself”.<sup>179</sup> In conclusion, Nguyễn calls Thảo, Tuyền, and Linh “đứa đánh bạc bịp” (“the cheaters”) who helped the Americans and the government of the South to “established a system of arbitrary and fraud values in order to confuse and fail an environment of free speech, which preferred talents and individual efforts to ideological stands”.<sup>180</sup> Their writing, instead of engaging people in social activities, aimed to lull them into accepting the contemporary order and sleep through the harsh reality of the war and the social issues.

The second kind of writer who supported “art for life’s sake” was the writers who were against the government of the South and the war. These writers gathered around the journals and magazines *Hành Trình*, *Trình bày*, *Đất nước*, *Đối diện*, *Đại học* and the group *Thái Độ*. Nguyễn Văn Trung praised the freedom of writing which emerged individuality with social engagement.<sup>181</sup> Diễm Châu, the editor-in-chief of *Trình bày* described the attitude of the magazine towards the relationship between writers, artists and reality as follows:

An artistic work is firstly a historical product. It is the proof of how the author perceives the world, the history of his time and himself. [...] Turning art into commercial products or embellishments in order to eliminate any danger of changing social order is the act of a minority group in power. [...] For a genuine culture for future, it is necessary to deny the commercial quality which the current system [of the South] is trying to attach to every

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<sup>179</sup> Viên Linh, *Khởi hành*, số 70, 1970, 5. Cited in Thế Nguyên, “Văn Nghệ Trước Những Mưu Đồ Bất Chính Của Hệ Thống Chiến Tranh Lạnh (Literature and Arts Against Unrighteous Schemes of the Cold War System)”, p. 27. Original text in Vietnamese: “Thơ chẳng có sứ mệnh gì ráo. Thơ là kẻ phi công dân, vô chính phủ, thầy pháp, kẻ tiên tri, nhà độc tài”.

<sup>180</sup> Thế Nguyên, “Văn Nghệ Trước Những Mưu Đồ Bất Chính Của Hệ Thống Chiến Tranh Lạnh (Literature and Arts Against Unrighteous Schemes of the Cold War System)”, 28. Original text in Vietnamese: “Như đã xác định rõ ngay từ đầu bài này, rằng đây không phải là việc có một số nhà văn đã nhận tiền, càng không phải là một cuộc tranh luận có tính cách vớ vẩn về một quan niệm văn chương, mà là vấn đề mưu toan sử dụng tiền bạc để thiết lập một hệ thống giá trị độc đoán và giả tạo “làm khó” cho một thị trường chữ nghĩa tự do, nơi ý thức hệ được coi như không đáng kể bằng tài năng và thành quả cá nhân”.

<sup>181</sup> Nguyễn Văn Trung, *Lược Khảo Văn Học – Tập 1 (Introduction to Vietnamese Literature, Vol. 1)* (Saigon: Nam Sơn Publishers, 1963), 164. Original text in Vietnamese: “tự do sáng tác không phải là muốn viết gì thì viết, vô trách nhiệm, nhưng là được tự do lựa chọn viết văn, và nhất là được tự do thể hiện cuộc đời theo lối nhìn của nhà văn, như một tác phẩm văn chương”.

artistic work. It is also necessary to refuse to make art become a decoration and cover for the degraded reality.<sup>182</sup>

The introduction to the group *Thái Độ* by the founder Thế Uyên also reflects these writers' engagement with political and social issues:

In Saigon in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a group named *Thái độ*, which used roneo duplicator to publish writings without permissions of the government and distributed them secretly. They also established a publishing house named *Thái độ* which published legally. The members held some meetings on literary and non-literary topics. Their goal was to conduct a non-communist revolution which is similar to the ones in Norway and Switzerland.<sup>183</sup>

These different attitudes towards the relationship between reality and writings show that the literature of the South is not entirely free from the influence of political ideologies and power as Võ Phiến claimed.

Although southern writers were not free from the influence of ideologies and power, they had more freedom in choosing how to write. Trần Hoài Anh, in *Lý luận – phê bình văn học ở đô thị miền Nam, 1954 – 1975 (Literary Theory and Criticism in South Vietnam, 1954 – 1975)* reveals that

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<sup>182</sup> Diễm Châu, "Văn Nghệ và Thực Tại Của Dân Tộc (Literature and Arts and the Nation's Reality)", 3–4. Original text in Vietnamese: "[M]ột công trình nghệ thuật trước hết là một thực tại lịch sử, là chứng tích của một người biểu lộ nhân quan của mình về thế giới, cảm nghĩ của người đó về lịch sử của thời đại mình và chính mình. [...] Việc biến những công trình nghệ thuật thành những sản phẩm buôn bán, những đồ vật trang trí, nhằm loại trừ mọi nguy cơ biến đổi thực tại xã hội dưới sự thống trị của thiểu số đặc quyền. [...] Tranh đấu cho một nền văn hóa của ngày mai tức là phải khước từ "tính chất hàng hóa" mà cái hệ thống đang muốn tập tành tư bản ở đây đã muốn gán cho các nghệ phẩm, là khước từ vai trò "làm đẹp", "biện minh" cho sự hiện hữu của những thực tại suy đồi. Đó cũng chính là tranh đấu nhằm thay đổi cái thực tại hủ bại của dân tộc hiện nay".

<sup>183</sup> Thế Uyên, "Nhóm Thái Độ: Những Người Lãng Mạn Cuối Cùng (Thái Độ Group: The Last Romanticists)," *Tiền vệ*, 2009 <<http://tienve.org/home/literature/viewLiterature.do?action=viewArtwork&artworkId=8666>> [accessed 5 May 2014]. Original text in Vietnamese: "Vào những năm chót 60 và đầu 70, ở Sài Gòn xuất hiện một nhóm văn hoá lấy tên là Thái độ, xuất bản một tập san in ronéo không xin phép chính quyền, phổ biến hạn chế, lấy tên là Thái Độ, một nhà xuất bản in typo cũng tên Thái Độ có xin phép Bộ Thông tin kiểm duyệt như mọi người, và tổ chức buổi những sinh hoạt khác có tính cách văn nghệ và không có tính cách văn nghệ. Mục đích là để tiến tới thực hiện một cuộc cách mạng không cộng sản, theo một khuôn mẫu tương tự các nước xã hội Bắc Âu như Na-uy, Thụy-điển".

southern writers saw a writer's own style and individuality as important. They did not accept any mandatory formula for their works. Meanwhile, in the North, Stalinist socialist realism put the importance on the ideological contents of every literary work.<sup>184</sup> For example, in "Trách nhiệm nhà văn" (*Writer's Responsibilities*, 1966), Minh Đức Hoài Trinh wrote: "We writers are free to choose what and how to write without asking anyone's permission".<sup>185</sup>

However, for writers of "art for life's sake", freedom of expression cannot be separated from the issue of writers' responsibilities and engagement to their society. Nguyễn Văn Trung in *Lược khảo văn học* (*Introduction to Vietnamese Literature*, 1963) argued that "the objects of literature are the world of human beings, in other words, the universe which is created and perceived by human beings".<sup>186</sup> For southern writers, it is impossible for literature to be an absolutely objective representation of reality but rather a subjective one because it is always a reflection through a writer's eyes.

In general, many southern writers admitted that it is impossible for literature to be absolutely objective or just a photograph of reality. Tam Ích, in *Văn nghệ và phê bình* (*Literature, Arts and Criticism*, 1969) claimed that "The act of writing and composing is not just to copy the reality like a camera does".<sup>187</sup> Despite the fact that he is an undercover communist writer, Vũ Hạnh admitted the subjectivity of literature: "A writer is unable to be objective and "cold", as

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<sup>184</sup> See Trần Hoài Anh, *Lý Luận – Phê Bình Văn Học Ở Đô Thị Miền Nam 1954–1975* (*Literary Theory and Criticism in South Vietnam 1954–1975*) (Hanoi: Hội Nhà văn Publishers, 2009), 97. Original text in Vietnamese: "Các nhà văn miền Nam rất đề cao cá tính sáng tạo và phong cách nhà văn. Nghĩa là họ rất tôn trọng vai trò của cá nhân trong sáng tạo nghệ thuật. Họ không chấp nhận tính "cộng đồng" với những "tiêu chuẩn tiên nghiệm quy định sáng tác. [...] Lí luận văn học miền Bắc giai đoạn 1945–1975 chỉ thiên về đánh giá nội dung tư tưởng của tác phẩm".

<sup>185</sup> Minh Đức Hoài Trinh, "Trách Nhiệm Nhà Văn (Writer's Responsibilities)," *Tin sách*, 46 (1966), 34. Cited in Trần Hoài Anh, p. 96. Original text in Vietnamese: "Nhà văn chúng ta là tự do chỉ có một mình với ngòi bút tha hồ muốn bố cục, muốn xếp đặt, xây dựng thế nào thì xây, khỏi phải hỏi ý kiến, khỏi phải xin xỏ ai cả".

<sup>186</sup> Nguyễn Văn Trung, *Lược Khảo Văn Học-Tập 1* (*Introduction to Vietnamese Literature, Vol. 1*), 101. Original text in Vietnamese: "đối tượng tổng quát của văn chương là thực tại nhân loại, là vũ trụ do con người hiểu và tạo dựng".

<sup>187</sup> Tam Ích, *Văn Nghệ và Phê Bình* (*Literature, Arts and Criticism*) (Nam Việt Publishers, 1969), p. 169. Cited in Trần Hoài Anh, 96. Original text in Vietnamese: "Sáng tác không phải chỉ là ghi chép lại những sự việc có thực như một cái máy chụp ảnh".

somebody said. They are somehow likely to redo the image of reality according to their own point of view”.<sup>188</sup>

The fact that southern writers acknowledged subjectivity can be seen in their ideas of sincerity and authenticity. In *Đời viết văn của tôi* (*My Writing Career*, 1996), Nguyễn Hiến Lê, a famous southern writer who was very active and influential during 1952–1975, wrote:

Sincerity has two meanings. Firstly, if there is no inspiration, do not write. All the works that my readers and I liked the best were the ones in which I was really honest to myself. I followed my feelings during the writing process. [...] Secondly, when you write something, you have to forget all canons and literary techniques, just follow your own personality. [...] I respect simplicity and also my own personality”.<sup>189</sup>

This means that, for him, sincerity means to be honest to oneself and to respect individuality in any artistic activities. This is different from the perception of sincerity by northern writers under the influence of Stalinist socialist realism: a writer’s sincerity had to fit his social role and responsibilities as well as the official political ideology.

In addition, the way southern writers perceived reality was also influenced by theories and thoughts which promoted independent thinking such as existentialism, nihilism and a refreshed Buddhism by the internationally influential monk Thích Nhất Hạnh. In *Nẻo về của ý* (*The Miracle of Mindfulness*, 1967), he encourages people to doubt any theories and systems in order to experience and find their own way in life.

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<sup>188</sup> Vũ Hạnh, ‘Mười Năm Cầm Bút (Ten Years of Writing)’, *Bách Khoa Thời đại*, 243 (1967), 81. Original text in Vietnamese: “Nhà văn không thể nào khách quan theo nghĩa lạnh lùng vô tư như vẫn hằng nghe nói. Cái nhìn của họ nhất định phải nhào nặn lại thực tại, dù muốn dù không, theo cái nhãn quan của họ về đời”.

<sup>189</sup> Nguyễn Hiến Lê. Retrieved from: <<http://maxreading.com/sach-hay/doi-viet-van-cua-toi/cach-toi-lam-viec-35691.html>> [Accessed 20 August 2014]. Original text in Vietnamese: “Thành thực có hai nghĩa. Nghĩa thứ nhất: không cảm xúc thì đừng viết. Những bài văn mà tôi đặc ý và được bạn văn cùng đọc giả thích hầu hết là những bài tôi rất thành thật với tôi, nghĩ sao viết vậy, cảm xúc ra sao thì diễn ra như vậy, [...] Nghĩa thứ nhì là khi viết, phải quên hết danh sĩ cổ kim, quên hết mọi kỹ thuật làm văn, mà chỉ theo cá tính của mình. [...] Tôi trọng sự bình dị mà cũng trọng cá tính của tôi nữa”.

Existentialism was introduced into South Vietnam in the early 1960s. It was not a coincidence that Trần Thái Đĩnh's *Triết học hiện sinh* (*Introduction to Existentialism*, 1967) and the translation of André Maurois' *Great Modern Theories* were two bestsellers during the 1960s and 1970s in South Vietnam.<sup>190</sup> In the book, Đĩnh explains existentialism in a clear and simple way. He introduces both the atheistic and theistic branches of this theory as well as its prominent thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Sartre, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Đĩnh defines existentialism as follows: "Existentialism is a theory which shows the awakening of men: an existentialist is a man who bravely confront facts and does not follow any abstract theory and believes in such things as that kings are always respectable and masters are always rightful. [...] In short, each of us is a free individual who have the right and responsibility to assess everything and everyone which we meet". Đĩnh also introduces how Nietzsche claims the death of God and religions to appreciate *Übermensch* (often translated as Superman or Overman), a kind of men who is free to exercise his own judgment and to decide how he should live:

According to Nietzsche, there is no abstract truth and there is no absolute truth, no "thing-in-itself" (truth without consequences) which is not created or influenced by someone's viewpoint. [...] Therefore, real knowledge should come from experience and be tested in practice, not by any abstract "truths" which lure man from the reality.<sup>191</sup>

<sup>190</sup> See Võ Phiến, 91. "Theo kinh nghiệm riêng của chúng tôi khi chủ trương nhà Thời Mới thì hai cuốn sách bán được nhanh nhất nhiều nhất là hai cuốn liên quan đến triết học, tức cuốn *Triết học Hiện sinh* của Trần Thái Đĩnh và cuốn *Những trào lưu lớn của tư tưởng hiện đại*, dịch của André Maurois".

<sup>191</sup> Trần Thái Đĩnh, *Triết Học Hiện Sinh (Existentialism)*, 3rd edn (ebook) (Hanoi: Văn học, 2005). Original text in Vietnamese: "Theo Nietzsche, không thể có chân lý trừu tượng, không thể có sự nhận thức tuyệt đối, sự nhận thức không của ai hết và không do một quan điểm nhất định nào hết. [...] Cho nên tri thức thực thụ nhất phải là tri thức gắn liền với thực tế, lấy thực tại làm thước đo chân lý, chứ không lấy những "chân lý trừu tượng" để ru ngủ và làm cho con người xa lìa cuộc sinh hoạt muôn màu của trường đời". Nietzsche redefines truth as follows: "The 'thing-in-itself' (which would be, precisely, pure truth, truth without consequences) is impossible for even the creator of language to grasp, and indeed this is not at all desirable [...] What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation, and decoration, and which, after they have been use for a long time, strike people as firmly established, canonical, and binding; truths are illusions of which we have forgotten that they are illusions, metaphor which have become worn by frequent use and have lost all sensuous vigour". See Friedrich Nietzsche, "On

Not only was Đĩnh's book popular in southern cities: fictions of existentialists such as Albert Camus and Jean–Paul Sartre attracted a lot of readers. Popular topics of existentialism such as the “human condition”, “authenticity”, “truth”, “idols”, the “overman” and the “absurd” were highly popular in South Vietnamese literature in the 1960s and early 1970s. They are also easy to see in the works discussed in this chapter, which shows that existentialism had a deep influence in intellectual circles in South Vietnam before 1975.

The view that truth is rhetorical and institutional and that it might institutionalize and restrict was not only provided in Trần Thái Đĩnh and other writer's books and articles on existentialism and nihilism but also presented in Thích Nhất Hạnh's book *Nẻo về của Ý* (*The Miracle of Mindfulness*) which explains his Engaged Buddhism. The book analyses the relationship between power, truth and individuals: power creates collective resemblances and considers them as truths in order to institutionalize individuals. In the book, Hạnh suggests that truth should be looked at in a new way:

Everyone evaluates himself and others by the perceptions and criteria which are created by someone else. [...] The borrowed should never be a truth. We are only able to reach truths through experience. [...] Otherwise we are all processed into products which are no different from each other by society. Power creates collective resemblances which threaten humanity and individual personality. We surrender to power because we have no courage to oppose or give up.<sup>192</sup>

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Truth and Lying in a Non–Moral Sense,” in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 144, 146.

<sup>192</sup> Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Nẻo về Của Ý* (*The Miracle of Mindfulness*) (Saigon: Lá Bối, 1967) Retrieved from: <<http://langmai.org/tang-kinh-cac/vien-sach/tap-truyen/neo-ve-cua-y>> [Accessed 16 August 2014]. Because of being unable to have the hardcopy of the original book, I used the ebook from the website. The book was first published periodically on the literary journal *Giữ thơm quê mẹ* in 1965. Mỗi người đều tự xét mình và xét đoán kẻ khác bằng những nhận thức và những tiêu chuẩn vốn không phải là của mình. [...] Những cái thước đi mượn không bao giờ có thể gọi là chân lý cả. Chân lý không thể đi mượn, chân lý chỉ có thể thực chứng. [...] Để rồi chúng ta, tất cả chúng ta đều được xã hội chế biến và khuôn đúc thành những hóa phẩm giống nhau. Guồng máy đưa tới một cái collective resemblance mà khi nhìn vào, chúng ta thấy

In conclusion, there were different views of the relationship between reality and literature among southern writers. Although some writers were devoted to “art for art’s sake” and preferred writings which were free from contemporary social issues, most agreed that literature has to be rooted in daily life, reflect its time and devote to social development. As Trần Hoài Anh states in *Lý luận – phê bình văn học ở đô thị miền Nam 1954 – 1975*, the difference between southern writers and northern ones on this issue consisted in the extent of reality which is reflected in literature. For writers and literary critics in the South, literature is able to approach and represent not a limited area of reality but many aspects of it. They did not consider literature as a simple, casual copy of reality. Meanwhile, literary criticism in the North claimed that literature had to reflect the people’s efforts to conduct socialist transformation and the defensive war”.<sup>193</sup> I agree with Trần Hoài Anh that the extent of reality in southern literature was broader; however, it is inaccurate to say that northern writers only held a simple view of reality which was heavily influenced by Stalinist socialist realism. Chapter Two shows that northern writers have different ideas on the relationship between reality and literature; however, the ideas which were opposed to the orthodox one were suppressed.

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nhân tính và cá tính con người bị đe dọa trầm trọng. Chúng ta cúi đầu đi theo, tại vì chúng ta không có can đảm chống trả lại, không có can đảm từ bỏ”. Thích Nhất Hạnh (1926–) is a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, teacher, author, poet and peace activist. He went to exile in France since 1973 and lives in the Plum Village Monastery in the Dordogne region in the South of France. Famous for his Engaged Buddhism and his peace activities, he is considered one of the most influential Buddhist monk in the western world. He was nominated to the Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King Jr. in 1967 for his efforts to stop the Vietnam War.

<sup>193</sup> Trần Hoài Anh, 80–81. Original text in Vietnamese: “Tuy nhiên điểm dị biệt giữa lý luận – phê bình văn học ở đô thị miền Nam với lý luận – phê bình ở miền Bắc, chính là ở quan niệm về phạm vi phản ánh cuộc sống của văn học. Lý luận – phê bình văn học ở đô thị miền Nam quan niệm cuộc sống được văn học phản ánh không bó hẹp trong một phạm vi hiện thực nào, mà mở ra nhiều chiều kích khác nhau của hiện thực. [...] Họ cũng quan niệm văn học không phải là sự sao chép đời sống một cách giản đơn, sơ lược theo chủ quan của nhà văn. [...] Trong khi đó, lý luận – phê bình văn học ở miền Bắc lúc bấy giờ quan niệm văn học phải phản ánh cuộc sống lao động sản xuất và chiến đấu của nhân dân đang diễn ra từng ngày từng giờ trong công cuộc xây dựng chủ nghĩa xã hội và đấu tranh thống nhất nước nhà”.

### 3.1.4. The perception of *kí* in South Vietnamese literature (1954 – 1975)

While northern writers and critics since 1945 until recently considered literary essays, investigative reportage, diary, memoir, correspondence and travelogue as subgenres of *kí*, southern writers did not group them into one umbrella term like that but considered them as different literary genres. In *Introduction to South Vietnamese Literature*, Võ Phiến shows that writers in the South did not pay much attention to theorizing *kí*. While northern writers and critics had a long discussion and debate over *kí* in early 1960s, southern writers merely inherited Vũ Ngọc Phan's theory of *kí*, which was visibly influenced by French criticism and genre theory.<sup>194</sup>

In *Nhà văn hiện đại* (*Modern Writers*, 1944), Vũ Ngọc Phan considers *bút kí* as equivalent to literary essays (including personal essays and critical essays) in Western literature. *Bút kí* had roots both in Western and Vietnamese literary traditions.<sup>195</sup> He argues that *phóng sự* (investigative reportage/investigative reportage), *lịch sử kí sự* (historical reportage), *truyện kí* (biography) as modes of narrative. These modes are different from the mode of literary essays: while the former focus on events, the latter put importance on arguments and feelings. He also distinguishes *lịch sử tiểu thuyết* (historical novels) from historical reportage and biography. He emphasizes that investigative reportage, historical reportage, and biography should not contain any fictional detail but facts only.<sup>196</sup>

Similar to Phan, Phiến differentiates the literary essay from investigative reportage, diary, memoir and travelogue. He explains that in literary essays, events are not important but arguments and feelings are. They play an important role in literary reportages.<sup>197</sup> However, he also uses *kí* as the umbrella term for the latter.

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<sup>194</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>195</sup> See Vũ Ngọc Phan, *Nhà Văn Hiện Đại* (*Modern Writers*), 2nd edn (Hanoi: Văn học, 1998), 454.

<sup>196</sup> See Vũ Ngọc Phan, pp. 542–3, 552.

<sup>197</sup> See Võ Phiến, pp. 216–217. Original text in Vietnamese: “Chúng ta chọn cái bên sáng tác hướng về nghệ thuật; còn bên kia hãy đưa về địa hạt nghiên cứu khảo luận. Đã đồng ý về nội dung rồi, xin gọi nó là tùy bút, thay vì bút kí. Vì chữ kí thấy không hợp. Ở đây chuyện ghi chép sự việc không phải là cái quan trọng. Kí và

According to Phan in *Nhà văn hiện đại (Modern Writers)*, *bút kí* is equivalent to what we call *tùy bút* [literary essays], and *phóng sự* [investigative reportage/ investigative reportage] is equivalent to what we call *kí*. In *kí*, besides *phóng sự*, we would like to include *kí sự* [historical reportage], *hồi kí* [memoir], *tạp kí* [random reportage/notes], which all focus on recording events. That is why we want to replace Vũ's *bút kí* with the term *tùy bút* in order to distinguish *bút* and *kí*. If *tùy bút* focuses on feelings, *kí* focuses on recording events; if *tùy bút* focuses on literary techniques, *kí* focuses on reality.... [...]

According to Phạm Văn Sĩ<sup>198</sup>, *kí* embraces subgenres such as “phóng sự, bút kí, tùy bút, thư, truyện kí”. That is not appropriate.<sup>199</sup>

Nguyễn Hiến Lê's memoir also reveals that southern writers did distinguish *kí* and *tùy bút*: “I did not compose any poem, but was interested in writing kinds of *kí* (travelogue, memoir) and luận [essays](*ngị luận* [critical essays], *cảo luận* [review], *tùy bút* [literary essays]) as well as articles about education and literature”.<sup>200</sup>

In summary, during 1954–1975, southern writers were different to northern ones because they did not put literary essays and biography into the same group with historical reportage, investigative reportage, memoir and travelogue under the umbrella name *kí*. Because of the lack of material, it is not clear whether southern writers used the term *kí* to group historical

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phóng sự cốt ghi nhận thực tại, đi sát thực tại. Trong tùy bút cũng có thực tại, có sự việc, có tài liệu, dĩ nhiên. Tùy bút của Phạm Đình Hồ có, tùy bút của Nguyễn Tuân cũng có nữa: có vấn đề Hiền Lương để kỷ niệm từng tấm chăn hạn; nhưng những cái đó không làm ra giá trị của tác phẩm, không phải là đặc điểm của văn loại”.

<sup>198</sup> Phạm Văn Sĩ's idea of the subgenres of *kí* reflects Northern criticism and theory of *kí* since 1960s up to recently.

<sup>199</sup> Võ Phiến, pp. 243–4. Original text in Vietnamese: “Trước kia, Vũ Ngọc Phan phân làm hai bộ môn: bút kí và phóng sự. Sau này, có người (như Phạm Văn Sĩ) gộp lại làm một, gọi chung là *kí*. Theo cái gọi của Vũ Ngọc Phan trong *Nhà văn hiện đại* thì bút *kí* tương ứng với bộ môn mà chúng tôi gọi là *tùy bút*; còn phóng sự gần tương ứng với cái mà chúng tôi xin gọi là *kí*. Trong bộ môn *kí*, ngoài phóng sự ra, chúng tôi muốn bao gồm luôn cả các loại: *kí sự*, *hồi kí*, *tạp kí*, tất cả đều có một điểm chung là nặng về ghi chép sự việc. Bởi điểm ấy, ở bộ môn trước chúng tôi đã thay chữ *bút kí* của ông Vũ ra chữ *tùy bút*, chủ ý là muốn phân biệt *bút* với *kí*, tách cái này ra khỏi cái kia. Một bên nặng về cảm nghĩ, một bên thiên về ghi chép; một bên chú trọng nghệ thuật, sáng tạo, một bên chú trọng thực tại. [...] Còn theo Phạm Văn Sĩ thì thể *kí* bao gồm ‘phóng sự, bút kí, tùy bút, thư, truyện *kí*’. Như thế e không ổn”.

<sup>200</sup> Nguyễn Hiến Lê. Original text in Vietnamese: “tôi không làm thơ, không viết tiểu thuyết, mà thích loại *kí* (du kí, hồi kí), luận (ngị luận, cảo luận, tùy bút) và chú ý tới các vấn đề giáo dục, văn học”.

and investigative reportage, memoir and travelogue or not. However, after 1975, in *Introduction to South Vietnamese Literature* (1986) and *My Writing Career* (1996), both Phiến and Nguyễn Lê, two popular writers of southern literature between 1954–1975, used the term *kí* to refer to these genres. The reason for the variety of conceptions of *ki* is in part dependent on local circumstances and in part on literary history, for in Vietnamese medieval literature, *kí* referred to any nonfictional narrative.

Although southern writers' theory of *kí* was different to one of northern writers, *kí* nevertheless remained a popular genre in southern literature between 1954 and 1975. Similar to northern *kí*, the most popular topic in *kí* in southern literature was the war. Võ Phiến asserts the abundance and diversity of *kí* on the war and distinguishes the development of *kí* into two periods: before 1963 (the first republic of the South under Ngô Đình Diệm's government) and after 1963 (the second republic of the South). He also emphasizes the close relationship between investigative reportage and the seriousness of the situation: "The more serious the political conflicts were, the more memoirs were published; the fiercer the battles were, the more investigative reportages appeared".<sup>201</sup>

Phiến even asserted that while after 1945, in the North, investigative reportage disappeared because no one was allowed to say anything about social inequalities, "*kí* is one of the specialities of southern literature during 1954–1975".<sup>202</sup> He believes that in the South, writers were free to reveal social evils as well as wrongdoings by politicians. At this point Võ seems to be one-sided: in fact, the wrongdoings by politicians were only revealed after they were no longer in power.<sup>203</sup> Phiến also argues that *kí* in the South was very sincere, accurate because it was out of

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<sup>201</sup> Võ Phiến. 246. Original text in Vietnamese: "chính trường càng sôi động hồi kí càng nhiều, chiến trường càng sôi động phóng sự càng nhiều".

<sup>202</sup> Ibid, 244. Original text in Vietnamese: "*kí* là cái đặc biệt của văn học miền Nam trong thời kỳ 1954–1975".

<sup>203</sup> For examples, see Cao Văn Luận's *Bên dòng lịch sử* (*By the Flow of History*, 1965), Lê Tử Hùng's *Bốn tướng Đà Lạt* (*Four Generals of Đà Lạt*, 1971), and *Những bí mật cách mạng 1–11–1963* (*Secrets of the Coup on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1963*, 1971).

the control of power.<sup>204</sup> However, he also betrays himself by claiming that “There was no *kí* which is against the war or sentimental, utopian. There was no *kí* which was leftist or coward. There was no secret communist agent among *kí* writers”.<sup>205</sup> The comment suggests that Võ Phiến has equated the point of view of southern writers to the official one of the government of the South. Later, some intellectuals who were also southern writers between 1954–1975 like Phiến, pointed out that how Phiến’s anti-communism influenced the way he selected and criticized works of southern writers in *Introduction to South Vietnamese Literature*. He left out, for example, writers of the journal *Trình bày* and the literary group *Thái độ*. The works of other leftist intellectuals such as Nguyễn Văn Trung and Vũ Hạnh were also not mentioned in the book.<sup>206</sup>

In summary, from Phiến’s book, it can be seen that *kí* in southern literature during the Vietnam War was a popular genre. Unlike northern literature of the same period, investigative reportage was not absent but relatively active. However, it is impossible to say that southern *kí* during the war was absolutely objective because it was independent from political influence. The following parts of this chapter will argue this case.

### 3.2. Multiple voices in South Vietnamese *kí* (1954 – 1975)

It is evident that there are two periods in the development of southern *kí* during the Vietnam War: before and after 1963. After 1963, when the battles between northern communist forces and southern ones, which had the support of the American forces, became fiercer, *kí* became more frequent. Prominent works of *kí* are: Phan Nghị’s *Vượt Trường Sơn* (*Crossing Trường Sơn Mountains*, 1967); Thái Lăng’s *Nhật Ký Người Chứng* (*Diary of A Witness*, 1967); Kiều Mỹ Duyên’s

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<sup>204</sup> See Võ Phiến, 248. Võ Phiến claims that writers of *kí*, for example, Phan Nhật Nam, did not have to follow any order or under any political pressure when writing his works. Original text in Vietnamese: “*kí* miền Nam thật đường đường chính chính. Không ai đặt ra đường lối, ra chỉ thị, cấp giấy phép cho Phan Nhật Nam đi “ba cùng” với bất cứ nhân vật nào để viết *kí* cả”.

<sup>205</sup> Võ Phiến, 247. Original text in Vietnamese: “*kí* không có thứ *kí* phản chiến, không có thứ *kí* viễn mơ, không có *kí* tả khuynh, thân cộng, không có tinh thần chủ bại, đầu hàng, hòa giải hòa hợp trong *kí*, không có văn công chui vô nằm vùng trong *kí*”.

<sup>206</sup> See Nguyễn Văn Trung, “Hướng về Miền Nam Việt Nam (Towards the South Vietnam)”; Thụy Khuê; Nguyễn Hiến Lê.

*Thiên thần mũ nâu* (*The Brown-Bereted Angels*<sup>207</sup>, 1969); Dương Hùng Cường's *Lính thành phố* (*City Soldiers*, 1969); Dương Nghiễm Mậu's *Địa ngục có thật* (*A Real Hell*, 1969); Nhã Ca's *Giải Khăn Sô Cho Huế* (*Mourning Tourband for Hue*, 1969); Trang Châu's *Y sĩ tiền tuyến* (*Military Battlefield Surgeons*<sup>208</sup>, 1970); Phan Nhật Nam's *Dấu binh lửa* (*Traces of War*, 1969), *Dọc đường số một* (*Along Road No. 1*, 1970), *Mùa hè đỏ lửa* (*Fiery Red Summer*, 1972); and Xuân Vũ's *Đường Đi Không Đến* (*The Road to Nowhere*, 1973<sup>209</sup>). There were also many fictions which are rich in *kí*-quality such as Nhã Ca's *Tình ca cho Huế đổ nát* (*A Love Song for Huế the Ruined City*, 1969), and Nguyễn Sa's *Vài ngày làm việc ở chung sự vụ* (*Few Days Working at the Military Mortuary*, 1972). The origins of these writers were varied: Phan Nhật Nam, Thái Lãng and Dương Hùng Cường were soldiers of the RVNMF; Xuân Vũ was a returner who was previously a communist soldier; Kiều Mỹ Duyên was a medical student; Trang Châu was a military surgeon; Phan Nghị and Nhã Ca worked as journalists; Dương Nghiễm Mậu and Nguyễn Sa were writers. I have chosen to examine Phan Nghị's *Vượt Trường Sơn* (*Crossing Trường Sơn Mountains*, Thái Lãng's *Nhật Ký Người Chứng* (*Diary of A Witness*), Nhã Ca's *Giải Khăn Sô Cho Huế* (*Mourning Tourband for Hue*), and Phan Nhật Nam's *Dấu binh lửa* (*Traces of War*) and *Dọc đường số một* (*Along Road No. 1*) to show that southern *kí* managed to develop a freedom of expression at some levels and also that it was unable to escape from the influence of censorship and political power. Although Phan Nghị and Nhã Ca were journalists who represented the official voice of the government, and Thái Lãng and Phan Nhật Nam were military officers, the ways they saw and presented the opponents, the southern writers, the American and South Korean forces, as well as the ordinary people are different from each other.

<sup>207</sup> Refers to the Republic of Vietnam Military Army (ARVN, the army of the South during 1954–1975).

<sup>208</sup> The book was granted the first prize by the Psychological Operations unit in 1969.

<sup>209</sup> The book was granted the national award by the government of the South in 1973. Xuân Vũ was a northern soldier, who fled from the communist army in 1971 and later wrote several anticommunist works which were well praised by the government of the South. Xuân Vũ used the metaphor "the road to nowhere" to refer to the Hồ Chí Minh trail (also known in Vietnam as the "Trường Sơn trail"), a supply route that ran from the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) to the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) through the Laos and Cambodia. The system provided manpower and material to the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (called the Vietcong or "VC" by its opponents) and North Vietnamese Army, during the Vietnam War.

### 3.2.1. Images of the opponents

Phan Nghị's *Vượt Trường Sơn* (*Crossing Trường Sơn Mountains*, 1967) is typical of the official viewpoint of the government in the way it describes the Vietcong antagonists as crafty and wicked:

Every person who lives in this “measly land”<sup>210</sup> has been carrying few cangues on his neck. Either he chooses whether to be under the lead of the government of the South or follow the Vietcong, he has to suffer from it. He can be accused by either of them. Anyway, it is less dangerous to be accused by southern officials than by the Vietcong. One summer night in 1965, the Vietcong attacked Ô Môn district. They rushed into the house of Captain Bùi Quang Kinh of the Air Division No. 116 in order to capture him. They left after having killed his mother and destroyed his house. There must be blood in all the Vietcongs acts of revenge. However, was killing an old woman a heroic deed which represents the Bolsheviks’ heroism? Since the war became wider, the “white terror” has increased and happened everywhere in the countryside and along the roads. Mines, grenades, submachine-guns, machine-guns, those killing weapons have killed countless ordinary people.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> The name “vùng đất lên sởi” (“measly land”) refers to the area in the South where the Vietcong guerrilla forces operated, making it difficult for the RVNMF to control. Later in the book, Phan Nghị explains that it originated from the name “carte rougeole” by French army: “1952–53, bọn nhà binh của thực dân Pháp đã mệnh danh những cái bản đồ trong đó ghi rõ các vị trí đóng quân của họ với những vị trí có kháng chiến quân hoạt động là “carte rougeole”, vì trông nó như một cái bộ mặt đỏ nhằng nhịt” (During 1952–1953, the French colonial military forces used the words “carte rougeole” to refer to the maps of the areas where they located both their military bases and Vietnamese resistance forces because they look like the pock-marked face of a patient with measles). See Phan Nghị, *Vượt Trường Sơn* (*Crossing Trường Sơn Mountains*) (Missing name, 1967), 26.

<sup>211</sup> Phan Nghị, 32. Original text in Vietnamese: “Người dân trong “vùng đất lên sởi” đã phải sống trong cái cảnh một cổ đôi ba chồng. Theo Quốc gia cũng khổ mà theo Cộng sản cũng có tội. Bên nào cũng có quyền hỏi tội mình hết. Nhưng Quốc gia nếu có hỏi tội thì chỉ cảnh cáo sơ sơ, chứ còn bị cộng sản hỏi tội thì cuộc đời dễ đi khai hội với giun lấm. Vào một đêm hạ tuần tháng 10 – 65 Việt Cộng đã kéo quân vào quận lỵ Ô Môn, sục vào nhà đại úy Bùi Quang Kinh chỉ huy phi đoàn 116 để định bắt sống ông vì họ tin ông mới về, Việt cộng đã hạ sát bà mẹ ông Kinh và kéo sập nhà ông rồi bỏ đi. Ấy, trong tất cả những vụ trả thù của Việt cộng đều phải có máu chảy. Nhưng, giết hại một bà lão già thì không biết rằng đó có phải là một hành động anh hùng xuất phát từ cái chủ nghĩa anh hùng tập thể mà người Bonchévick thường rêu rao hay không. Từ khi cuộc chiến tranh mở rộng, những vụ “khủng bố trắng” thường diễn ra ngày này qua ngày khác ở nơi

The book is a collection of war reportage writings about the strategic areas along the Trường Sơn Range in the South, where the Vietcong's guerrilla forces and troops operated. The ordinary people who lived in these areas were continually in danger because of the fire between the two sides. Moreover, they were caught in the middle of the civic action programmes which were conducted by both Vietcong and the local authorities under the lead of the government of the South. In Nghị's book, the Vietcong are shown not only to be bloodthirsty but also greedy. He quotes a farmer: "Vietcong's tax policy is so cruel!"<sup>212</sup>

I compared the tax bills of the farmers in this area and found out that they [the Vietcong] do not have any fixed criteria for tax. Their taxing is so arbitrary. [...] The Vietcong often charge 6% tax on the original investment; however, their way of taxing is calculated manually and casually, which makes the tax rate sometimes rise to 10%. But that is only the tax charged every time a farmer brings his harvest to market. He also has to pay the agricultural tax. For example, if a farmer harvests 100 *gĩa*<sup>213</sup> of paddy on every acre, the Vietcong will take 35 *gĩa* for tax, which will be collected in cash.<sup>214</sup>

This cruel tax policy had made many farmers and small and medium businesses leave their homes and their businesses. Nghị shows his enmity towards the Vietcong through this satiric paragraph: "Among four basic kinds of calculations which are addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, there are two which have been removed from the list of Vietcong's tax collectors, leaving

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thôn dã sau lũy tre xanh trên bờ ruộng, dọc các quốc lộ, tỉnh lộ. Mìn, lựu đạn, tiểu liên, đại liên, những dụng cụ giết người ấy đã hủy diệt biết bao sinh mạng của đám dân lành".

<sup>212</sup> Phan Nghị, 39. Original text in Vietnamese: "Cái lối đánh thuế của Việt cộng cũng ác ôn lắm!"

<sup>213</sup> A measure weighing about thirty kilograms.

<sup>214</sup> Phan Nghị, 39–40. Original text in Vietnamese: "Tôi đã so sánh mấy cái biên lai thuế của những người dân ở trong vùng này và thấy rằng họ chẳng có quan thuế biểu gì hết chọi. Đánh thuế tùy hứng. [...] Về lúa gạo thông thường Việt cộng đánh 6 phần trăm vào giá vốn, nhưng vì họ tính toán theo lối thủ công nghiệp, nên số thuế phải nộp có khi lên tới 10%. Nhưng đó mới chỉ là thuế hàng chuyển, họ còn phải chịu thuế nông nghiệp nữa. Một mẫu sản xuất được 100 *gĩa* lúa thì Việt cộng thu 35 *gĩa*. Số 35 *gĩa* này sẽ quy thành tiền, và nông dân phải nộp cho Việt cộng".

only addition and multiplication. The more the multiplication is used, the better”.<sup>215</sup> It is difficult to check the accuracy of this information; however, Nghị’s viewpoint is typical for the propaganda of the government of the South, which describes the Vietcong as bloodthirsty and greedy. In the time when both sides were trying to attract southern people to their sides, it is not likely that the Vietcong applied this cruel tax policy in the areas which still officially belonged to the government of the South.

Captain Phan Nhật Nam in his two memoirs *Dấu binh lửa* (*Traces of War*, 1969) and *Độc đường số 1* (*Along Road No. 1*, 1970), which are a combination of memoir and literary reportage written during the eight years of his military career from 1961 to 1969, does not only show his disappointment with the Americans and the government of the South but also a negative attitude towards the Vietcong. In the battlefield, the Vietcong are described as “inhuman” and “soulless”:

There were footsteps coming closer: the Vietcong were going to “clear” the battlefield! I heard them cursed and shot. The sounds were dry and fast. They abused and shot our injured soldiers. They had never made me feel hatred and disgust like this. Deaths were normal in wartime. However, it was inhuman to abuse and kill an injured enemy. They were soulless animals. We captured opponents many times. We shared foods and cigarettes with them. We in the air force are famous for being tough. However, we never abused captured opponents, much less injured ones. But the Vietcong were soulless people, they forgot human feelings”.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Ibid, 57. Original text in Vietnamese: “Trong bốn phép toán: cộng, trừ, nhân, chia thì đã có 2 bị loại ra khỏi bộ môn này, chỉ còn lại tính nhân và tính cộng. Cộng nhân nhiều bao nhiêu, càng tốt bấy nhiêu”. (57)

<sup>216</sup> Phan Nhật Nam, 16. Original text in Vietnamese: “Có chân người xì xầm đến, Việt cộng đi thanh toán chiến trường! Tiếng chửi mắng chen lẫn tiếng nổ khô và gọn. Chúng chửi mắng hoặc bắn chết thương binh. Chưa bao giờ tôi căm thù và ghê tởm bọn chúng đến ngần này. Chiến tranh là luật của sống chết, nhưng khi người đối địch với mình ngã xuống thì ai nỡ lòng nào để hành hạ và giết chết. Lũ chúng nó, loài không có linh hồn. Đã bao lần chúng tôi bắt được tù binh, kẻ cho thuốc lá, người cho cơm ăn, những người lính Nhảy dù xưa nay vẫn có tiếng là cứng rắn nhưng chưa một lần nào chúng tôi hành hạ tù binh, hướng gì tù bị thương. Nhưng ở đây, bọn Việt cộng như một kẻ vô linh hồn, chúng quên mất tình người..”.

In Nam's books, the Vietcong are shown to be either wicked or pitiful and passive. However, they are also victims of the war and have to suffer the horror of death, poverty and other hardships of the war: in *Along Road No. 1*, the Vietcong are represented either by a lost and unarmed foot-soldier who suddenly shows up with a dazed face from the bush,<sup>217</sup> or a Vietcong who is "dead skinny and so frightened that unable to say anything" and two under-sixteen-year-old Vietcong with frightened faces, who were "still holding some cooked rice in their mouths when they were pulled out from a pond".<sup>218</sup>

If Nghị keeps a cold and ironic attitude towards the Vietcong, Nam tries to explain why they became so brutal and enduring during the war:

You had still to fight in order to help the political witches to have better cards on the gamble of negotiation. [...] Your minds which were filled with hatred and excessive and single-minded zeal were led by a utopian plan which was created by the leaders who were bound with the past's glory and the lame belief that they were some kinds of superman who could save the nation [...] Although we fought lamentably, our hearts were still free. Meanwhile, you were just some robots who were sunk in the dark abyss of illusions. Moreover, you were helpless robots.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid, 26. Original text in Vietnamese: "Trong lá xanh hiện ra một người mặc quân phục màu xanh đeo ba-lô mặt mày ngơ ngác. Y là một binh sĩ của tiểu đoàn bộ binh, chúng tôi không biết tại sao anh ta đi lạc và không có súng". (From the bush a man in green military uniform with a dazed face suddenly showed up. He was a foot-soldier. We did not know why he was lost and unarmed).

<sup>218</sup> Ibid, 16. Original text in Vietnamese: "Đại đội 72 báo cáo: Bắt được một tù binh Việt cộng, tên người gầy rạc, nét mặt kinh hoàng không thể trả lời với chúng tôi được một câu hỏi, nét mặt hốt hoảng của hai tên địch chưa quá mười sáu tuổi lồi lên từ một đám bèo, một tên còn đang ngậm một búng cơm". ("Company No. 72 reported that they had captured a Vietcong who was dead skinny and so frightened that unable to say anything. [...] [I also remembered] the frightened faces of two not-over-sixteen-year-old Vietcong who were still holding some cooked rice in their mouths when they were pulled out from a pond").

<sup>219</sup> Ibid, 106. Original text in Vietnamese: "Các anh còn phải chiến đấu để cho đám phù thủy chính trị đặt những lá bài thối cáy lên canh bạc hòa đàm [...] Đầu óc đầy thù hận cuồng tín được dẫn dắt vào một mục tiêu không tưởng, vô vọng. Mục tiêu được thiết kế, hoạch định từ trí não những lãnh tụ bị bao cứng bởi hào quang quá khứ, những người có lòng tin tưởng què quặt rằng, chính mình, một loại siêu nhân mà lịch sử dân tộc cần đến... Chúng tôi chiến đấu trong bi đát nhưng vẫn còn tự do nơi trái tim, trong khi các anh chỉ là một lũ người máy mê muội sâu vực đen của ảo tưởng. Tệ hơn nữa – Một lũ người máy bất lực".

This perception of the Vietcong as wicked, inhuman and robot-like can be also seen in Nhã Ca's *Giải khăn sô cho Huế* (*Mourning Headband for Hue*, 1969). The majority of the Vietcong "are emotionless",<sup>220</sup> according to Old Minh, a character in the book. This view of the Vietcong is also demonstrated in Chapter Three of *Mourning Headband*. This chapter shows a contradictory scene in the early days of their occupation of Huế: while the ordinary people hid themselves in their houses in order to survive the fire between ARVN, US forces and the Vietcong, and an ordinary person hiding in the bush was killed because he was mistaken for an enemy by some Vietcong soldiers, some female Vietcong still enjoyed learning to ride motorbikes which were left by people who ran away from the city. Ca calls it "bệnh dịch hân hoan của các anh giải phóng" ("the disease of happiness among the liberation soldiers")<sup>221</sup> because they were happy with their victory while the whole city was living in such a dreadful and alarming atmosphere. Moreover, Ca depicted the northern liberation forces as deceitful and greedy:

In the morning, they were still shy and cautious towards local people. However, just after a secret order from their higher authorities, in the afternoon, they suddenly changed into very friendly soldiers who were eager to get along well with the people. Many bags of rice, traditional cakes and sugar-preserved fruits from Huế's households, which were prepared for New Year celebration, were loaded into the trucks by the liberation soldiers.

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<sup>220</sup> See Nhã Ca, *Giải Khăn Sô Cho Huế* (*Mourning Headband for Hue*) (Saigon: Đông Dương Thời Báo, 1969). Retrieved from <<http://www.vietnamvanhien.net/GiaiKhanSoChoHue.pdf>> [Accessed 8 October 2013]. I had a copy of the book which was printed in 1969. However, it was not complete. This is why I have used the online version of the book. Original text in Vietnamese: "Ông Minh cười: "Con người cộng sản làm gì có tình cảm. Chúng nó chỉ có mục đích là thắng, diệt, tiến tới. Tao ở với chúng nó lâu rồi tao biết" (Old Minh smiled and said: Communists are apathetic. Winning, killing, going forward are all they aim for. I knew it because I used to live with them for a long time". In the book, Old Minh was a peace activist who supported neither the northern nor the southern government. He is the only one real hero who, despite the ceaseless fire from both sides, is able to save ordinary people and injured soldiers.

<sup>221</sup> Nhã Ca.

According to them, they just temporarily borrowed them for the use of the liberation troops.<sup>222</sup>

In another part near the end of the book, Ca ironically summarizes the Tet Offensive as follows: “The liberation troops only “freed” blood and took away the light and small items such as watches, pens and other lovely petite accessories “by mistake”.<sup>223</sup> Her bad impression of the Vietcong is also reflected in this metaphor of the liberation flag: “I saw some liberation flags in the corner of the house, over which flies swarmed. They emitted an unbearable stench”.<sup>224</sup>

In summary, if in northern propaganda literature under Stalinist socialist realism, the opponents (the Americans and the RVNMF soldiers) were portrayed as animal-like, in Phan Nghi, Phan Nhật Nam and Nhã Ca’s *kí*, Vietcong tend to be represented as machine-like. While Nghi always keeps a critical and ironical tone while mentioning Vietcong in his book, Nam and Ca try to explain the reasons for the brutality and coldness of the Vietcong. For Nam, the reason is the influence of a political theory and system (communism) which drained the common sense of the Vietcong, making them become merely fighting machines: “Alas! You were drained until you were empty of human values. We understood and felt so sorry for you! Your brutality and cruelty must have originated from suppressed desires and dreams”.<sup>225</sup> Here is another example in *Along Road No. 1*:

Your skins were not those of human beings: they were so strangely pale that you look unreal. You were looking at us without vitality and feelings. You were the secret and dull

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid. Original text in Vietnamese: “Buổi sáng họ còn e dè với người dân, nhưng tới trưa tới chiều, một nội lệnh được truyền tai rất nhanh, họ thay đổi thành những chiến sĩ rất nhũn nhặn thương dân sống hòa hợp với dân dễ dàng. Những bao gạo từ trong các ngôi nhà cùng với bánh tét bánh chưng, mứt bánh dày ứ trong mấy ngày tết được mang ra sân chất lên những chuyến xe vận tải để chở lên miệt trên, mà theo các anh giải phóng thì họ mượn tạm cho quân đội giải phóng”.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid. Original text in Vietnamese: “Các anh giải phóng chỉ giải phóng xương máu và cầm nhầm những thứ nhẹ nhàng như đồng hồ, bút máy, những đồ vật nhỏ nhỏ, xinh xinh, hay ngộ nghĩnh”.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid. Original text in Vietnamese: “Tôi thấy bên góc nhà mấy cái cờ giải phóng đầy máu, một vài chú ruồi vẫn còn bâu ở đấy. Mấy chiếc cờ tiết ra một mùi tanh khó ngửi”.

<sup>225</sup> Phan Nhật Nam92. Original text in Vietnamese: “Nhưng hồi ôi các anh bị giản lược đến quá nhiều, các anh thiếu đến độ cạn mòn nhất, chúng tôi hiểu và thương các anh nhiều lắm. A! Những hung bạo, những sai lệch về nhân ái chắc cũng có ở đâu đây, cũng bắt nguồn từ những ước muốn sôi bỏng bị chèn ép”.

hollows made by the years which you had spent in the jungle. Your eyes were also not of human beings any more. They functioned physically but their owners had lost human senses and feelings. Now I can understand why you were so aggressive in battle: it was because that was when you were awake.<sup>226</sup>

Different to Nam, Ca distinguishes the minority of the good communist soldiers from the cold and greedy majority. In the scene mentioned above, while other soldiers happily enjoy learning how to ride a motorbike, a soldier named Thu seems lonely among his comrades:

The female soldiers enjoyed it and laughed happily but the young soldier did not. His eyes were fixed on some women who were rushing out of their houses crying for help: "Help! Please save my son! Help! Please help my father, my husband!"

Some female soldiers on motorbikes passed him and shouted joyfully: "There are so many motorbikes here. We are going to have some after the final victory". One shouted to him: "Our comrade Thu is so hard-working!" Her imitation of the local accent was so unbearable. The young soldier frowned. [...] Sadly, he raised his rifle at the tree in front of him as if he wanted to shoot something. No shot. The female soldiers laughed and went downhill in a flash.<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> Phan Nhật Nam, 91. Original text in Vietnamese: "Da các anh không phải da người, trắng xanh bạc thếp đến lịm, một màu sắc không thật, không có. Các anh nhìn chúng tôi không cảm giác, không ý niệm, các anh là khoảng trống, bí ẩn, u uất, buồn bã do năm tháng đầy đặc trong rừng, trong lá. Mắt của các anh hết còn là mắt người. Đây chỉ là đôi ngươi khép mở khi thức, ngủ. Đúng như vậy, vì các anh đã đánh mất ý niệm của thị giác, của tất cả giác quan con người. Các anh hết tính người. Bây giờ tôi có thể hiểu tại sao các anh hung hăng khi tác chiến. Tôi biết rồi... Đây là lúc các anh đang sống lại".

<sup>227</sup> Nhã Ca 62. Original text in Vietnamese: "Mấy cô cười đùa thiệt vui nhưng anh lính trẻ không cười. Mặt anh lăm lăm lì lì nhìn xuống con dốc đang có mấy người đàn bà chạy ra đường kêu cứu: "Cứu con tui với, bớ làng bớ nước ơi. Cứu chồng cứu cha tui".

Mắt cô nữ cán bộ lướt qua mặt anh, cười cười nói nói:

"Trong này nhiều xe quá, thắng lợi rồi mình có xe đi".

Một cô nói lớn:

"Đồng chí Thu tích cực quá hì!"

Cô ta nhại giọng Huế rất khó nghe. Anh lính trẻ cau mày. [...] Không hiểu bực tức hay buồn bã chuyện gì, anh ta đưa súng lên nhắm thân cây trước mặt như muốn bắn. Không có tiếng đạn nổ. Mấy cô nữ cán bộ cười xòa, thoáng cái họ đã xuống tới lưng chừng dốc".

At the end of *Mourning Headband*, another local expresses what he thinks about Vietcong:

“They also know to pity people. They saved my son who was injured by shrapnel from a broken fieldgun. A young northern soldier sadly said to me: “Please don’t hate us. We just obeyed orders from higher authorities. We are separated from our families. We are also poor and hungry. We are so sad to see people die like this”. [...] There, they are also pitiful and they also hate the war like us, right?”<sup>228</sup>

Ca’s view of the opponents is more complicated. While Phan Nghị and Phan Nhật Nam show their strong criticism of Vietcong, Ca uses an ironical tone when she tells the stories of the majority of Vietcong, as the previous paragraph states. However, by demonstrating that a minority of Vietcong were victims of political power and the war, that some people were humane and lonely among the cold, brutal and greedy majority. Ca seems to manage to keep the objective viewpoint which is expected of *kí*. However, is this memoir truly impartial? I will return to this question later in this chapter.

While Nghị, Nam and Ca show their criticism of the Vietcong in their works clearly, in *Diary of a Witness*, Thái Lãng shows his leftist viewpoint by not mentioning anything about Vietcong despite the fact that he worked in an area where there were also Vietcong guerrilla forces and troops, as in Nghị’s *Crossing Trường Sơn*. This attitude towards Vietcong was also expressed in his fictions, for example, *Trong một ngày của một người* (*A Day in A Man’s Life*, 1970).

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid . Original text in Vietnamese: “Họ cũng biết thương người, họ cứu thằng còn tui bị miểng đại bác. Một anh lính Bắc Việt trẻ đã than thở với tui: “Các bác nghĩ lại đừng ghét bỏ tui cháu. Tui cháu chỉ biết thi hành theo lệnh trên. Tui cháu cũng xa gia đình, đói khổ. Nhìn cảnh đồng bào chết như thế này, tui cháu cũng khổ đau lắm”. [...] Đó, họ cũng tội, họ cũng oán chiến tranh lắm chứ”.

It is noteworthy that more extreme northern criticism of South Vietnamese literature (1945–1975) before 1986<sup>229</sup> suggests that the way South Vietnamese literature depicts the Vietcong is a form of psychological warfare:

To intimidate readers, the reactionary hack writers often excessively depicted the Vietcong as bloodthirsty. They turned the Vietcong into “the hateful beast” and “the scared beast” in order to spread doubt and fear; moreover, the illogical hatred toward communism in anti-communist works, either fiction or drama, contains an obvious lie: “the Saigon government is absolutely good and the Vietcong is absolutely bad”. It is necessary to destroy the latter to protect the former. “The Vietcong” in these writings, therefore, does not originate from reality but is purely a product of propaganda. The criteria of literature which are authenticity, sincerity or objectivity were nothing to those writers, moreover, they were taboos.<sup>230</sup>

Evidently, the criteria of socialist realism, which are “sincerity”, “authenticity” and “objectivity” were not only used to evaluate northern literature but also the opponent’s one. Interestingly, that northern propaganda literature, under the influence of Stalinist socialist realism, also describes the Americans and South Vietnamese soldiers and officers as bloodthirsty animals.<sup>231</sup> It is accurate that Nghi’s investigative reportage and some southern propaganda films and literature did

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<sup>229</sup> In Vietnam, the reception of South Vietnamese literature (1945–1975) has positively changed.

<sup>230</sup> Thạch Phương, “Văn Nghệ Phản Động, Mũi Xung Kích Trên Mặt Trận Văn Hóa và Văn Nghệ (Reactionary Literature and Art: The Pioneer in the Cultural Battle),” in *Văn hóa, văn nghệ miền Nam dưới chế độ Mỹ-Ngụy (South Vietnamese Culture and Arts under the US Puppet Regime)*, ed. by Trà Linh and others (Hanoi: Văn hóa, 1977), pp. 246–335, 265. Original text in Vietnamese: “Để gây tác động mạnh đến tâm lý, tăng cường độ rung rợn và khủng khiếp đối với người đọc, một thủ thuật thường thấy của bọn bồi bút phản động là sự “lạm phát” hình tượng máu trong khi miêu tả về người cộng sản, người cán bộ kháng chiến. “Con ngựa cầm thù” và “con ngựa sợ hãi” được kẻ địch sử dụng cùng một lúc phóng vào trận địa tư tưởng, trận địa tâm hồn quần chúng, nhằm gieo rắc sự ngờ vực, hoang mang và cao hơn, tạo nên sự oán ghét, lòng căm thù vô lý đối với cách mạng. Đọc những “tác phẩm” mang chủ đề chống cộng, từ tiểu thuyết đến kịch, từ truyện ngắn đến truyện dài, người ta dễ nhận ra được sự đánh tráo khái niệm thô bạo này: “Quốc gia là tốt tuyệt đối, cộng sản là xấu tuyệt đối”. Hai cái đó đối lập nhau như nước với lửa. Phải diệt cái thứ hai để bảo vệ cái thứ nhất. Cho nên, nhân vật gọi là “cộng sản” hay “cách mạng” ở đây là hình tượng cần có chứ không phải hình tượng vốn có trong hiện thực. Những tiêu chuẩn của nghệ thuật như tính chân thật, sự trung thực của ngòi bút, chân lý khách quan đối với họ không những là chuyện phù phiếm, mà còn là điều tối kỵ”.

<sup>231</sup> See Chapter 2. Võ Phiến, an anti-communist southern writer, also pointed out some northern propaganda portrayed South Vietnamese soldiers and the Americans as cannibals. See Võ Phiến, 7.

portray the Vietcong as bloodthirsty and greedy animals. However, although Ca and Nam also depict the Vietcong as emotionless machines, they either explain it with the influence of environment and ideological power or try to separate the good minority from the bad majority. In other words, their works offered multiple voices in some ways. However, in general, the impressions of the Vietcong in these writings still reflect the Saigon government's anti-communism. In southern literature during 1945–1975, the works which openly show positive impressions of the Vietcong did not have the chance to be published because of censorship.

#### **4.2.2. Images of the American and other allied forces**

That Phan Nghị represents the official viewpoint of the government of the South is also expressed in the way he sees the American and South Korean forces, which joined the Vietnam War as the RVN's allies. It is not a coincidence that in *Crossing Trường Sơn*, Phan Nghị explains the motives of the American interference in the South Vietnam at least twice. While anti-war writers strongly exposed the war crimes by the American forces to the ordinary Vietnamese people<sup>232</sup> and saw the RVN government's co-operation with the Americans nothing than “trò rước voi về dày mồi” (“letting the wolf into the fold”)<sup>233</sup>, Nghị praises the generous support of the Americans and distinguishes them from the corrupt southern officers:

All the American aid is of good quality, including weapons and human resources for the war against communists. The supporters only want their aid to reach the poor in order to improve their life. In no way would they be so stupid enough to let corrupt officers to steal from them and turn their gains into international bank deposits or stocks as in the

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<sup>232</sup> For example, see Editorial board, “sơn Mỹ, Cực Điểm Của Một Chính Sách Tội Ác (Sơn Mỹ: The Extreme of an Evil Policy),” *Trình bày*, 1971, 3–6; Thế Nguyên, “Văn Nghệ Trước Những Mưu Đồ Bất Chính Của Hệ Thống Chiến Tranh Lạnh (Literature and Arts Against Unrighteous Schemes of the Cold War System)”; or Thế Nguyên, “Văn Nghệ Trước Những Mưu Đồ Bất Chính Của Hệ Thống Chiến Tranh Lạnh (Literature and Arts Against Unrighteous Schemes of the Cold War System)”.

<sup>233</sup> Nguyễn Ngọc Lan, “Bánh vẽ Hay Kẹo Mỹ: ‘Hòa Bình Trong Sức Mạnh và Ưu thế’ (The American Candies as Fine Illusions: ‘A Peace with Wealthiness and Advantages’),” *Tia sáng*, 1970, 4.

time of Nhu and Diệm. How sad it is that the disbursement process sometimes did not happen in the way it was expected, making the aid unable to reach the right people.<sup>234</sup>

Also, while the journal *Trình bày*, by criticizing the mass massacre in Sơn Mỹ by an American troop, reveals the hidden motives of the American support to Vietnam as follows:

The American military interference is a dubious scheme regardless of the legitimate aspirations of the Vietnamese. Therefore, that they “misunderstood” the situation of the revolutionary war in Vietnam, and that they made light of the life of Vietnamese people are just the inevitable results of such a policy.<sup>235</sup>

Nghị claims the motives of the Americans in the Vietnam War are noble and generous:

The people and soldiers of the other side have been blocked in the maze created with the “people’s war” theory and the “a-war-to-free-the-South” propaganda. Therefore, they could not understand anything about the situation of the South and why the Americans had to come here. They are not the successors of the French colonists either they would never become the owners of our country. They came here with only one noble mission, that is to save a brother country from the invasion of communism.<sup>236</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Phan Nghị, 18. Original text in Vietnamese: “Mọi thứ viện trợ của Mỹ đều tốt hết, kể cả những cuộc viện trợ súng đạn người ngợm để đánh cộng sản. Người đưa viện trợ tất nhiên không có gì mong muốn hơn là sự viện trợ của mình tới được tay dân chúng nghèo khổ, nâng cao mức sống của họ, khiến cho đời sống của họ đỡ phần lem luốc chứ không đời nào lại ngu dại đến cái mức muốn cho những viện trợ ấy chui vào kết sất của mấy thằng mặt lớn tai to bụng bự để chúng có thể chuyển ngân ra ngoại quốc hay mua cổ phần của những công ty lớn tại các nước Tây phương, như dưới thời Nhu Diệm người ta đã từng làm. Nhưng đau đớn thay, cái phần thi hành lại có những rắc rối tơ tình, nó khiến cho viện trợ không tới tay người dân được”.

<sup>235</sup> Editorial board, 6. Original text in Vietnamese: “sự hiện diện quân sự của Mỹ tại Việt Nam đã là một mưu toan mờ ám, bất chấp những nguyện vọng chính đáng của người Việt Nam, thì việc họ “hiểu nhầm” hoàn cảnh chiến tranh cách mạng tại Việt Nam, việc họ coi rẻ sinh mạng của người Việt Nam cũng chỉ là kết quả tất nhiên của chính sách đó mà thôi”.

<sup>236</sup> Nghị, 50. Original text in Vietnamese: “Những người dân và người lính ở phía bên kia chiến tuyến mù mịt trong cái thiên la địa võng của lý thuyết chiến tranh nhân dân và chiến tranh giải phóng với cái đường lối tuyên truyền một chiều và nhồi sọ, tất nhiên không hiểu một tí gì về nội tình miền Nam và nguyên nhân thúc đẩy người Mỹ có mặt ở đây. Họ không phải là hậu thân của người Pháp. Cũng như không bao giờ họ có thể là chủ nhân ông của đất nước này, mà chỉ tới đây với một sứ mạng cao cả giúp đỡ một nước anh em trong hàng ngũ Thế giới Tự do để chống lại làn sóng xâm lăng của cộng sản”.

Nghị's defence is typical of the RVN government's propaganda of the American intensive military interference in South Vietnam. It is worth noticing that *Vượt Trường Sơn* was written in 1966–1967 and published in 1967. This is the time of the direct American involvement in South Vietnam: from March 1965, the American government ended the advisory years (1955–1964) and started the period of the “local war” (or “limited war”) strategy (1965–1968). The American government enhanced its role in the Vietnam War by providing more American military consultants, American soldiers and hired South Korean troops, as well as more weapons and financial support for the South's government in order to end the war. The presence of a large amount of American soldiers also brought along PX (Post Exchange) culture: as Stanley Karnow writes, “the main PX [Post Exchange], located in the Saigon suburb of Cholon, was only slightly smaller than the New York Bloomingdale's...”<sup>237</sup> It heavily transformed the economy and increased prostitution and corruption in the society of South Vietnam<sup>238</sup>, leading to more criticism and moves against the Americanization of the war. The bitterness of seeing this presence undermine traditional values and families can be seen in the autobiography of Dương Hùng, *Cường Lĩnh thành phố* (*City Soldiers*), when the narrator witnesses a close comrade's happy family broken because the wife, in order to save the family from poverty, goes to work for an American office and is seduced by an American man. The rule of luxury and money over morality and the great distance between the living standards of the American soldiers and the Vietnamese soldiers and ordinary people as well as the bombing and other unintentional and intentional war crimes by the American forces, which heavily influenced the lives of ordinary people, all increased the South Vietnamese's inferiority complex and anxiety over the large-scale US intervention in Vietnam.

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<sup>237</sup> Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, 2nd edn (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 453.

<sup>238</sup> With the presence of the American forces during the escalation, South Vietnam was inundated with manufactured goods from the U.S. Because of the war, lots of people lost their homes and their lands and suffered from poverty. Meanwhile, many military officers and government officials became corrupt by taking advantages of American aid and the illegal trading of American goods, which were favoured by city people. Soldiers' families also became victims of corruption and inflation when soldiers' salaries were not enough to support their families. Because of poverty, many families were broken when the women married Americans or became prostitutes for the American forces.

And Nghị, although his viewpoint of the American is typical of the government's one, was unable to ignore the side-effects of this presence of the American forces on Vietnamese society. However, the way he wrote about prostitution in *Crossing Trường Sơn* is different from Nam and Lãng: "Wherever American forces go, follow the Sờ Nách Ba [snack bar] and laundry shops".<sup>239</sup> There is a word-play here: "sờ Nách", the pronunciation of "snack" in Vietnamese, sounds similar to a phrase which means "touching someone's armpits", referring to the fact that those snack bars were in fact places of prostitution. The following paragraph is how he describes the country prostitutes who followed the American troops for a living:

Sờ Nách Ba is just a temporary tent. The only trait which makes it different from other kinds of tents is that it is decorated with showy colours and some young girls who have just started learning how to make up and wear high heels. Poor them, who have just been familiar with walking barefoot or riding on cattle, now they have to adapt to the civilized world, no wonder they were still clumsy at it. When they are on high heels, they look so similar to the Chinese communist advisers, who came to help the Việt Minh in 1952, on their Sterling bikes, travelling on the Cao-Bắc-Lạng and Hà-Thái-Tuyên roads<sup>240</sup>. On the bikes, their bodies were twisted, making their butts look like a horse's ass.<sup>241</sup>

By comparing the prostitutes to the Chinese communist advisers, who were the allies of the opponent (northern communist), and comparing the Chinese communist advisers to horses, Phan Nghị animalizes the bodies of the prostitutes, putting distance between them and the ordinary

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<sup>239</sup> Phan Nghị, p. 135. Original text in Vietnamese: "Lính Mỹ đi tới đâu, Sờ Nách Ba và tiệm giặt ủi đi theo tới đó".

<sup>240</sup> The roads which connected provinces in North Vietnam and close to the border between China and Vietnam. Phan Nghị witnessed it because he lived in the North before he fled to the South in 1954.

<sup>241</sup> Phan Nghị, 136. Original text in Vietnamese: "sờ Nách Ba chỉ là một túp lều dựng lên tạm bợ, nó chỉ đặc biệt hơn những túp lều khác ở chỗ có trang hoàng lòe loẹt xanh đỏ tím vàng, với mấy cô gái mới tập đánh phấn, thoa son và đi giày cao gót. Khốn khổ cho các em, vốn chỉ quen đi đất, cưỡi trên lưng trâu, lưng bò, nay bỗng dưng phải hòa mình vào với nếp sống văn minh tránh sao khỏi sự bỡ ngỡ! Hóa cho nên, trông các em đi guốc không khác gì nhìn mấy ông cố vấn Trung Cộng – tới giúp Việt Minh vào năm 1952 – đi xe đạp Sterling, trên những con đường Cao-Bắc-Lạng, Hà-Thái-tuyên; cái thân hình của họ cứ vẹo đi và cái đít thì cong tợn như đít ngựa".

southerners. The way he sees these prostitutes' bodies reveals that the rise in prostitution clearly threatened patriarchal values. This also reflects how he perceived the side-effects of the presence of American army in South Vietnam: in this case, to look at something humorously is also to accept it or to gloss over it. While other writers blamed the American forces for the degradation of southern society, Nghị seemed to accept it as an inevitable side-effect.

The propaganda voice in *Crossing Trường Sơn* is also reflected in the way Nghị depicts the South Korean soldiers:

South Korean Prime Minister Kwon Chung said that the Korean soldiers joined the Vietnam War in order to protect their own country. They consider Vietnam, another Asian country which is also separated, as the front line of the war against communism. And they hope that the failure of Vietcong would advantage the reunion of Korea.<sup>242</sup>

By quoting this, and referring to the soldiers of “sư đoàn Mãnh Hổ” (“the Tiger Division”) as “những người chiến đấu cho hòa bình”<sup>243</sup> (“fighters for peace”), Nghị shows his view of the South Korean forces not as fighters for rent but as generous allies who also work hard for a great goal: to remove communism. Nghị spends one fifth of his book depicting the South Korean soldiers from many aspects: in battle, in social work and in private life. In battle, they were brave and skilful as “những ông vua của chiến trận” (“kings of battle”) who managed to win over an outnumbering enemy.<sup>244</sup> They did not just fulfil the duties of a soldier but also worked hard for

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid, 272. Original text in Vietnamese: “Thủ tướng Nam Hàn Kwon Chung đã nói rằng những người lính Đại Hàn chiến đấu ở Việt Nam là để tự bảo vệ cho mình. Họ nhìn Việt Nam, một quốc gia Á châu khác bị chia cắt, như một tuyến đầu của cuộc chiến đấu chống Cộng ở phía Bắc, và họ hy vọng rằng sự thất bại của Việt Cộng sẽ đem lại những yếu tố tất thắng cho sự thống nhất xứ sở của quốc gia Triều Tiên”.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid, 267.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid, 308. Original text in Vietnamese: “Mặc dù quân địch mạnh gấp bội, nhưng các chiến sĩ Đại Hàn đã nêu cao tinh thần quyết chiến quyết thắng đẩy lui địch. Trong đêm tối mịt mù như bưng lầy mắt, ánh lựu lê loang loáng. Những đốm đạn lửa bay vèo vèo trong không gian. Người ta lao mình vào vòng lửa. Những tiếng thét xung phong rung rợn. Binh sĩ thủy quân lục chiến quả đã xứng đáng là những ông vua của chiến trận. Họ đã áp dụng cả môn võ Thái cực đạo trong lúc cận chiến. Mang cái truyền thống của những chiến thắng Yando, Sindo, các chiến sĩ dung cảm ấy đã hoàn toàn nắm vững được tình thế sau hai tiếng đồng hồ xung sát, khiến cho địch phải tháo chạy tơi bời”.

the benefits of the Vietnamese people who had suffered because of the war: “The wounds of the war have been cured by the Korean soldiers”.<sup>245</sup> They helped the elders do farm work and rebuilt houses which had been destroyed by the war,<sup>246</sup> and they helped poor young couples to get married and settle down.<sup>247</sup> And to save the children who lost their families because of the war, they created orphanages:

The South Korean soldiers who are from a snowy country have warmed this land which has been exhausted by the war. [...] Those orphans now are living comfortably like the children from rich urban families. They are sent to primary and secondary schools. Their bedrooms are clean and well-equipped. They have beds, blankets, mosquito-nets and mattresses. Even radios.<sup>248</sup>

Their generosity is also expressed in the way they treat the people who live in the opponent’s areas. Their medical centre is for all ordinary people irrespective of where they were from, regardless of whether it was a communist or non-communist area: “In the market, South Korean soldiers set up a medical centre in order to cure the local people of both areas. [...] In the area of social work, it is inappropriate to consider political viewpoints”.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> Ibid, 269. Original text in Vietnamese: “Vết thương của chiến tranh đang được những người lính Đại Hàn băng bó lại”.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid, 292–4. Original text in Vietnamese: “Tất cả những gia đình nông dân neo người chỉ còn ông già bà lão đều được họ tới làm giúp. Xay lúa, giã gạo, quạt thóc và cày cấy. Trước khi cầm súng đánh cộng sản, họ cũng là nông dân”; and “Ngoài việc giúp dân làm ruộng, họ còn giúp dân làm nhà cửa. Trên những mảnh đất tàn hoang vì binh lửa, những người lính Đại Hàn, mình trần trụi trực, mồ hôi đổ xuống cái lưng cánh phản trông đen nhánh, đang làm việc tui bụi”.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid, 298. Original text in Vietnamese: “Cô dâu chú rể đều thuộc những gia đình nghèo khổ. Họ không có đủ tiền để thành lập gia đình. Những người lính Đại Hàn đã đóng vai trò ông Tư bà Nguyệt để se duyên cho họ nên vợ nên chồng: giúp gạo, giúp tiền và các phương tiện khác. Đám cưới đã diễn ra tưng bừng mà những người lính Đại Hàn đã đại diện luôn cho cả quan viên hai họ”.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid, 291. Original text in Vietnamese: “Các chiến sĩ Đại Hàn ở cái xứ tuyết lạnh kia đã đem tình thương reo rắc trên mảnh đất cần cỗi vì chiến tranh này. [...] Những trẻ mồ côi ấy ngày nay được sống với tiện nghi như những đứa trẻ con nhà giàu ở thành thị. Được đi học ở các trường Tiểu học, Trung học. Phòng ngủ của các em sạch sẽ, khang trang. Chăn màn, giường, đệm. Lại có cả máy hát”.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid, 302. Original text in Vietnamese: “Ngay trong chợ, binh sĩ Đại Hàn có đặt một trạm y tế để chữa bệnh cho dân chúng cả hai vùng. [...] Trong lãnh vực công tác xã hội không thể có vấn đề ngăn chia giới tuyến”.

In *Crossing Trường Sơn*, the Korean soldiers are also described as an army which is not only disciplined and enthusiastic but also artistic: the password to go through the gate of their base is the name of a famous poet (Kim Sa Cát) and the word “Yo Đê Sen” (“female students”). The talk between the journalist (Phan Nghị) and the captain about the sad Korean folk songs also shows that, in the author’s eyes, Korean soldiers are proud and sentimental people, who are still sad about being colonized by China and Japan in the past.<sup>250</sup> Nghị shows the Korean soldiers not as soldiers for rent but as proud and humane friends, or as brothers who share the same boat: “I suddenly remembered what a South Korean, who shared the same tent with me, said: “Our country is in the same situation as yours. Ours used to be dominated for many years. And we had to cheer many kinds of invaders”.<sup>251</sup>

Nghị admits the fact that there were financial reasons for the military intervention of South Koreans in the Vietnam War, which were already widely known internationally and domestically:

Western journalism has shown a negative attitude towards South Korean support to Vietnam. In the article titled “Fighting Tiger for Rent” in *The Economist* on 25<sup>th</sup> February 1966, the author points out that by joining the Vietnam War, South Korea is benefitting politically and financially, especially in terms of labour export. Last year, South Korea earned 15 million dollars from exports to Vietnam, in which steel and cement made up the greatest part. And this figure increased in 1966.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid, 320. Original text in Vietnamese: “Nhưng mà những bản dân ca nhạc Triều Tiên sao mà buồn tê tái. Tôi hỏi Lý tướng quân: “–Nhạc Đại Hàn sao mà buồn quá vậy?” Lý tướng quân vội đưa hai tay lên vuốt vào mắt làm điệu như người khóc rồi mỉm cười mà rằng: “sau bao nhiêu năm bị nước Tàu, bị Nhật bản đô hộ, dân chúng còn vui làm sao được!”

<sup>251</sup> Ibid, 284. Original text in Vietnamese: “Tôi thốt nghĩ đến lời nói của anh bạn đồng nghiệp Đại Hàn ở chung lều:” Hoàn cảnh nước tôi không khác gì nước anh. Cũng bao nhiêu năm bị đô hộ. Và phải hoan hô biết bao nhiêu là hạng người”.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid 283. Original text in Vietnamese: “Bởi thế báo chí Tây phương, ngay cả những báo bạn đã nhìn sự giúp đỡ của Đại Hàn tại Việt Nam với một con mắt soi mói. Tạp chí “The Economist” số ra ngày 25 tháng 2 – 1966 trong cái tiêu đề “Fighting tiger for rent” đã có một đoạn đại ý nhấn mạnh rằng: “Trong cuộc chiến

However, he admits this in order to defend South Korea: “Anyway, to us, South Korea is still better than other friendly countries who have only taken advantage of the war. They have treated it as a great opportunity for trading or a reference source for studying anti-guerilla strategies”.<sup>253</sup>

In summary, by portraying the American and South Korean forces as great allies who were not only disciplined, brave and well-trained but also generous, helpful and warm-hearted, Phan Nghị’s *Crossing Trường Sơn* is typical of the government’s propaganda representations of the American and South Korean forces in South Vietnam. The work reflects and/or contributes to build up the collective memory about these allies.

Although Nhã Ca and Phan Nghị both were journalists, the way she saw and depicted the American forces in her memoir of the Tet Offensive which titles *Giải khăn xô cho Huế* (*Mourning Tourband for Huế*, 1969) is different from Nghị’s one in *Crossing Trường Sơn*. The memoir displays Ca’s own experience in the Tet Offensive as well as other stories which she collected during and after the event. The Tet Offensive was a major offensive launched by the North Vietnamese Army and other Vietcong forces on January 31, 1968. These forces conducted a coordinated series of attacks on more than 100 cities and towns in South Vietnam. The objectives of the offensive were to foment rebellion among the South Vietnamese population and encourage the United States to scale back its support of the Saigon regime. Though U.S. and South Vietnamese forces managed to hold off the Communist attacks, the offensive, especially the lengthy Battle of Huế, shocked the American public and further promoted the anti-war movement. After the 25-day battle of Huế, most of the city was ruined and many civilians and soldiers from both sides were killed. The historical documents of each side provide different number of casualties for the Communists, the

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tranh ở Việt Nam, Nam Hàn không những có lợi về phương diện chính trị mà còn cả về kinh tế và những sự cung cấp nhân công nữa. Năm ngoái Nam Hàn đã xuất cảng 15 triệu Mỹ kim hàng hóa, nhất là thép và xi măng sang Việt Nam, và trong năm 1966 số hàng xuất cảng còn tăng thêm hơn nữa.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid, 284. Original text in Vietnamese: “Nhưng trên thực tế dù sao Đại Hàn đối với chúng ta cũng có nhiều ân tình hơn một vài quốc gia bạn khác chỉ biết giúp đỡ bằng mồm với những sự lăm le lợi dụng buôn bán và coi cuộc chiến tranh hiện tại như một nguồn lợi để khai thác, để học tập chiến thuật chống du kích”.

ARVN and the American forces, as well as Huế civilians<sup>254</sup>. However, they all prove that the battle of Huế was one of the bloodiest single battles during the Vietnam War. Despite heavy casualties for the Communists, the Tet Offensive proved to be a political victory that marked the turning point of the Vietnam War, starting the American withdrawal from the region. In late 1968, President Johnson announced to the U.S. people that he intended to seek a negotiated peace settlement in Vietnam. The new president Richard Nixon began troop withdrawals in the beginning of 1970 and the last American soldier left Vietnam in 1973. From 1970 Nixon applied a new policy which was known as “Vietnamization”. The plan was to build up the ARVN, so that they could take over the defence of South Vietnam. The U.S. continued to support South Vietnam financially until the Fall of Saigon in 1975. Ca was a popular southern writer and journalist of VOV (Voice of Vietnam). When she came back home to attend her father’s funeral, she accidentally experienced the Tet Offensive in which she and her family tried to flee from the city under the rain of bombs and bullets. A year after the event, in late 1969, Ca wrote and published the memoir *Mourning Headband* and was immediately awarded the national prize for literature by the government of the South.

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<sup>254</sup> See Lê Minh, “Tấn Công Huế Trong Tết Mậu Thân 1968 Diễn Ra Như Thế Nào, (How the Battle of Huế in the Tet Offensive 1968 Happened)” *Tiền phong Online*, 2008 <<http://www.tienphong.vn/xa-hoi/tan-cong-hue-trong-tet-mau-than-1968-dien-ra-nhu-the-nao>&#x2013;109682.tpo> [accessed 28 May 2014]. *Tiền phong Online* is the official voice of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union. In this article, Lê Minh states that the Communists had about 3,000 killed, while there were about 10,000 ARVN and U.S. troops had been killed. Meanwhile, according to Willbanks and Schulimson, North Vietnamese forces had between 1,042 and 5,000 killed and 89 captured in the city and in the surrounding area. The number of U.S. Marines and soldiers killed during the fighting was 216 with 1,609 wounded. The number of ARVN troops killed was 421. Another 2,123 were wounded, and 31 were missing. More than 5,800 civilians had lost their lives during the battle and 116,000 were left homeless out of an original population of 140,000. See Jack Schulimson and others, *The U.S. Marines in Vietnam: 1968, the Decisive Year* (Washington, D.C: History and Museums Division, United States Marine Corps, 1997), 213, 216; and James H. Willbanks, *The Tet Offensive: A Concise History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 44–45. The idea of a massacre at Huế is controversial. Official documents and journalism of the US and the government of South Vietnam assert that many Huế civilians were slaughtered by the Communist forces and buried in mass graves. North Vietnamese Communists and other international and American journalists and scholars confirm that this was a myth created by the US and Saigon government’s propaganda: the Communists had to bury many Huế civilians who were killed by the US bombs along with their own dead in those mass graves. One of their proofs was that the Saigon government forbade international journalists from visiting excavations of the alleged graves.

While Nghị praised the Americans as a great ally, Ca noticed their cold and frigid attitude toward the life of Vietnamese ordinary people in wartime:

On the first day of the battle, the American troops went to An Cựu to check the situation, then came back and stayed quiet, letting the Vietcong do whatever they wanted. When they took a turn in the road, someone behind Đại Càng Temple fired at them. The American troops halted. Some soldiers entered the nearest house and dragged out a young man. He was a student of Quy Nhơn College of Education who just came home to see his family. He could speak English. He showed his ID and talked to the Americans. But they did not care. A shot, and the poor man fell down, his body wasted. The Americans left in their trucks for Phú Bài.<sup>255</sup>

Although she acknowledges that “There is no rule in wartime. Everyone could doubt each other”,<sup>256</sup> Ca still shows her bitterness over how the American soldiers killed Vietnamese people solely to preserve their own safety: “The Americans might burn a hamlet down, destroy a house or fire at a shelter which was full of women and children just because they heard a strange sound”.<sup>257</sup> It is clear that in *Mourning Headband*, the Americans are no longer the generous and warm-hearted saviours depicted in *Crossing Trường Sơn*. Moreover, Ca does not only depict them as a cold ally but also sees the ordinary American soldiers as victims of the war and the cards in a gambling match played by politicians:

And among the scattered sand bags and huge wooden bars, lay a dead American. He layprone, his face to the road. Next to his face, one of his hands was holding something

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<sup>255</sup> Nhã Ca, 260. Original text in Vietnamese: “Ngay ngày đầu tiên nổ súng, quân Mỹ cũng lên được tới An Cựu coi tình hình để rồi sau đó về nằm yên một nơi cho Việt cộng hoành hành. Khi đi ngang qua khỏi ghẹo, một phát súng ở đâu phía sau Miếu Đại Càng bắn ra. Đoàn quân Mỹ dừng lại, một vài người Mỹ đi vào nhà gần nhất lôi ra một thanh niên. Anh này biết nói tiếng Anh, là một giáo sinh trường sư phạm Quy Nhơn về thăm nhà. Anh đưa giấy tờ, nói chuyện với người Mỹ. Nhưng họ đâu cần biết. Một phát súng nổ, người thanh niên tội nghiệp ngã xuống đất, co dúm người lại. Người Mỹ leo lên xe lái về Phú Bài”.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid, 267. Original text in Vietnamese: “Chưa hết, chiến tranh còn vô tội vạ lắm. Mọi người có quyền nghi ngờ nhau”.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid. Original text in Vietnamese: “Bên phía quân Mỹ chỉ nghe một tiếng động, một âm thanh nhỏ đột luôn cả một xóm, giật sập một nhà, rĩa từng lần đạn vào một căn hầm lúc nhúc đầy đàn bà trẻ con”.

tightly. Curiously, I looked closer and found out that it was a small photo of a young American woman holding a little girl, cheek to cheek. Both of them were smiling beautifully in a fruitful garden. The American man was still very young. He must have been under thirty. His blond hair was heavily stained with blood.<sup>258</sup>

How Ca thinks about the relationship between South Vietnam and the American ally can be summarized by examining a scene at the end of the memoir: some American soldiers enjoy making fun of the fleeing people and a sinking dog:

Some American soldiers who guarded in the ends of the bridge were laughing when they looked at the bewildered flock of people fleeing from Huế. They wank, they imitated them and sometimes fired in the air to tease them. The gun shots frightened the people even more and scared them away. The laughter of the Americans pursued them. Men ran away along with dogs, and dogs ran away along with men. Where were they from, such many dogs following the flock running away from the city? A black dog was pushed so hard that it fell into the edge of the bridge. A shot, and the dog whined in pain and fell into the stream. There was a riot of laughter. Some black and white Americans standing on the bridge continued to shoot in order to prevent the dog from swimming back to the bank. The dog was swept away farther and farther. It whined so pitifully. They kept shooting but had no intention of killing it. They just wanted to keep it away from the bank. The fleeing people cried loudly and miserably while running. The louder the cry was, the harder the laughter. The people fell down and tried to stand up, and fell down again. Is this the image of our nation: a dog trying to get to the bank of the river? How pitiful our country was: the status of a Vietnamese was beneath a joke, lower than that of

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<sup>258</sup> Ibid, 200. Original text in Vietnamese: “Và giữa những bao cát bị đào lên, giữa những thanh gỗ lớn, xác một người Mỹ nằm sấp, mặt nhìn ra ngoài đường. Tay anh ta đưa ra trước mặt và nắm chặt lại. Tôi tò mò nhìn kỹ, thì ra đó là một bức ảnh nhỏ in hình một người đàn bà tây phương đang áp má bên một đứa bé gái bụ mẫm. Cả hai mẹ con cùng cười, tươi thắm giữa vườn trái cây tươi tốt. Người Mỹ còn trẻ lắm, anh ta chưa tới ba mươi tuổi, mái tóc vàng hoe dính bê bết máu”.

a dog. [...] Now the dog sank and was swept away, along with the blood which already reddened the whole river.<sup>259</sup>

The scene is metaphorical: the sinking dog is referred to as the country, which became the toy in the game of bigger countries. The American ally, who is shown as generous and enthusiastic in Nghi's *Crossing Trường Sơn*, now becomes distant and cruel when witnessing the miserable Vietnamese caught between life and death. It is noteworthy that although this view of the Americans is very different from the propaganda in Phan Nghi's book which was published in 1967, Nhã Ca's *Mourning Headband* was still granted the national award for literature by the government in 1970. One may claim this proves the South Vietnamese government's commitment to freedom of expression. In fact, however, this reflects a change in the government's attitude toward the Americans. After the Tet Offensive in early 1968, the American government began a withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, which was completed in 1973. Jeff T. Hay summarizes it as follows: "After Tet, the primary American strategy was no longer to win the war but to find a way to withdraw from the quagmire honourably".<sup>260</sup> Therefore, the Tet Offensive shocked the South Vietnamese not only because of the horror itself but also because of its aftermath, which was abandonment by the Americans. They felt betrayed and as if they were merely pieces in a game played by larger countries. The way the Americans were presented in this

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid, 205. Original text in Vietnamese: "Mấy anh lính Mỹ gác ở hai đầu cầu nhìn đoàn người chạy loạn lồi thối lếch thếch cười với nhau, chúng nheo mắt, làm trò, đôi khi đưa súng lên bắn chỉ thiên dọa nỡ. Đoàn người nghe tiếng súng là bỏ chạy, những tràng cười thích thú nổi lên đằng sau lưng. Người chạy với chó, chó chạy với người. Những con chó ở đâu chạy theo đoàn người mà nhiều thế không biết. Một con chó đen bị những bước chen lấn, chạy tràn xuống một đầu cầu mép sông. Bỗng một phát súng nổ, con chó kêu một tiếng thảm thiết, lăn tròn và rơi xuống nước. Tiếng cười ồn ào nổi lên. Mấy người Mỹ đen, Mỹ trắng đứng trên cầu tiếp tục bắn ngăn không cho con chó lội lên bờ. Con chó cứ xa dần bờ, kêu oảng oảng, hết sức thảm thương. Những viên đạn vẫn bắn tới tấp nhưng hình như không định giết con chó, mà chỉ giữ không cho nó vào bờ. Có những viên đạn bắn trệch lên bờ đường, những viên khác dội xuống nước. Đoàn người tản cư chạy tới hỗn loạn, kêu khóc rền trời. Tiếng kêu khóc càng to thì tiếng cười của một số người Mỹ bên kia sông cũng càng lớn. Ngã xuống rồi đứng dậy, đứng dậy rồi chúi nhủi. Dân tộc tôi đấy sao? Con chó đang cố lóp ngóp lội vào bờ tìm sự sống đó sao? Đáng thương cho dân tôi, nước tôi, thân phận người dân không bằng một trò đùa, không bằng một con chó. [...]. Con chó bây giờ đã chìm cả mình xuống nước, mặc cho dòng nước lạnh lẽo cuốn đi cùng những dòng máu đỏ thắm hồng mặt nước sông xanh".

<sup>260</sup> Jeff T. Hay, *The Greenhaven Encyclopedia Of the Vietnam War* (Greenhaven Press, 2004), 274.

memoir reflected that critical change in the attitude of southerners and the government of South Vietnam toward the Americans.

Captain Phan Nhật Nam, from the point of view of a soldier who directly experienced battles, shows a different attitude toward the Americans in *Traces of War* and *Along Road No. 1*. Unlike Nghị and Ca who were journalists, Nam was not heavily influenced by the official view of the government. He chose *kí* to express the sadness and horror of his experiences and to convey his despair about the government as well as to correct the way in which soldiers had been inaccurately represented by sentimental literature by psychological warfare writers or cheap writers. In *Traces of War*, he distinguishes the normal American soldiers from the American politicians who manipulated the war:

The American marines who were stationed in the forts along the river banks got noisier when they saw us passing by. It seemed that they all had the long blonde hair which marines were allowed to keep. Soldiers who served in remote areas all looked so pitiful. Their calls echoed on the river, sounding so sad and desperate. Our boat passed by, farther and farther. The shadow of the foreign soldiers gradually blurred in the rain.<sup>261</sup>

The paragraph shows how Nam saw the ordinary American soldiers: they were not superior and cold strangers but ordinary ones who were also suffering loneliness and despair because of the war. Nam shared Ca's view on the situation of men in wartime: whatever sides they belong to, they are all helpless against war violence and political schemes.

In addition, Nam shows his bitterness against the damage to southern society caused by the presence of the American army: "However, in this war, my beautiful motherland has become

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<sup>261</sup> Phan Nhật Nam, 80. Original text in Vietnamese: "Hai bên bờ đồn nhỏ nằm rải rác bảo vệ thủy đạo, lính Mỹ đứng ở bờ thấy chúng tôi đi qua, la lối ầm ĩ, hình như Hải quân cho để tóc dài, nên anh nào anh nấy râu tóc bờm xờm vàng rục. Người lính thú ở miền xa nào trông cũng tội nghiệp như nhau. Tiếng gọi của họ vang xa trên mặt sông, nghe buồn buồn như một nỗi tuyệt vọng, chiếc thuyền chạy miết, bóng người lính viễn chinh chìm dần trong màn mưa".

flashy and dirty under the hand of the great friend and ally”.<sup>262</sup> The southerners’ wrath when seeing the corruption and degradation of Pleiku, one of the southern cities which were heavily changed by American soldiers’ dollars, was reflected in the following paragraph:

Pleiku, the city of snack-bars, where there are no well-mannered people on the roads after 8 p.m., I thought. There is no point protecting it: a city of legal prostitution, of callous and depraved body trade, a city which has run out of love and affection. Yes, why do we have to protect it? Let’s ruin it as much as we like [...]<sup>263</sup>

*Traces of War* was published in 1969; however, this part of the memoir was written in 1966, during the American ground war, which was also reflected in Phan Nghi’s *Crossing Trường Sơn Mountains*. While Phan Nghi’s work reflected the government’s propaganda of the American ally, Phan Nhật Nam provided a well-educated South Vietnamese soldier’s personal view of the American army. In *Dọc đường số 1 (Along Road No. 1, 1970)*, Nam’s bitterness against the presence of an American army responsible for the moral degradation of the South turns into an anger against the the American betrayal after the Tet Offensive:

And now the Americans demand to withdraw their army from Vietnam because they feel that it is unreasonable to let their young soldiers die for a country with a capital which is in fact a huge brothel. [...] The Americans have thrown a key card named “Sovereignty” in this political gamble. But “Sovereignty” is also a magic spell for political sorcerers to ruthlessly intervene in the destiny of a foreign country. For example, they arrogantly announced that it was necessary to replace Saigon government. But what Saigon

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid 64. Original text in Vietnamese: “Nhưng quê hương đẹp đẽ của tôi trong chiến tranh, dưới bàn tay của người bạn đồng minh trở nên lờ lợt dơ dáy”.

<sup>263</sup> Phan Nhật Nam, *Dấu Binh Lửa (Traces of War)*, 63. Original text in Vietnamese: “Pleiku, thành phố của snack-bar, người tử tế không có ai ra đường sau tám giờ tối, tôi nghĩ vậy. Thành phố của dĩ điểm công khai, của dối chác dâm dật lộ liễu, thành phố hết tình người, giữ gìn làm gì? Phải, giữ gìn làm gì? Phá cho thả cửa..”.

government is if not an essential card which was created by the Americans for the last critical period?<sup>264</sup>

In *Along Road No. 1*, Nam also shows that the selfishness and indifference of the Americans in the Tet Offensive (1968) as well the brutality toward South Vietnamese people in the massacre in Sơn Mỹ (1968)<sup>265</sup> awake him from the dream of the great ally.<sup>266</sup> He bitterly reveals that one of the reasons for the failure of co-operation is the Americans' lack of respect for the Vietnamese: "There, that is how the Americans saw the Vietnamese: a semi-civilized tribe. No more, no less".<sup>267</sup> It is significant that this strong criticism of the Americans, which is similar to Ca's in *Mourning Headband*, was published only after the U.S. had shown their intention to abandon South Vietnam.

Although Thái Lăng was a well-educated South Vietnamese soldier like Phan Nhật Nam, in *Nhật kí người chứng* (*Diary of A Witness*, 1967) his view of the Americans is even more negative. Lăng was a member of the literary group Thái Độ ("Attitude"). The group was formed in the late 1960s in Saigon, gathering writers and artists who advocated non-communist reform in South

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<sup>264</sup> Phan Nhật Nam, *Dọc Đường Số 1 (Along Road No. 1)* (Saigon: Đại Ngã, 1970), 90–91. Original text in Vietnamese: "Và bây giờ người Mỹ đã đến lúc đòi rút quân về vì không gì vô lý hơn để cho những người lính trẻ chết cho một Quốc gia có thủ đô là nhà điểm không lờ. [...] "Dân tộc tự quyết" như một đồn quyền căn bản, người Mỹ đánh ra chiêu thức tự do trước một lập luận chính trị. Nhưng "Dân tộc tự quyết" cũng chính là câu thần chú để mở màn cho những bàn tay phù thủy tha hồ quyết định vận mệnh một Quốc gia khác bằng cách can thiệp thật phủ phàng như những câu tuyên bố hỗn xược... Cần thay đổi chánh phủ Sài gòn, và chánh phủ Sài gòn là gì? Nếu không là một con bài quyết liệt của giai đoạn máu lửa trước đây cũng do chính người Mỹ tạo ra".

<sup>265</sup> The Sơn Mỹ Massacre, which is normally known as Mỹ Lai Massacre, refers to the killing of between 347 and 504 unarmed civilians in South Vietnam on March 16, 1968. Mỹ Lai and Mỹ Khê are two hamlets within Sơn Mỹ village which were suspected of harbouring the 48th NLF Battalion which had retreated after the Tet Offensive. The crime was committed by U.S. Army soldiers from the Company C of the 1st Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 11<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 23rd Infantry Division. Victims included men, women, children, and infants. Some of the women were gang-raped and their bodies mutilated. Twenty-six soldiers were charged with criminal offenses, but only Lieutenant William Calley Jr., a platoon leader in C Company, was convicted. Found guilty of killing 22 villagers, he was originally given a life sentence, but served only three and a half years under house arrest. Source: Anonymous, "Murder in the Name of War – Mỹ Lai," *BBC News*, 1998 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/64344.stm>> [accessed 19 February 2013]; and: *Trình bày's* editorial board, "Sơn Mỹ, cực điểm của một chính sách tội ác (Sơn Mỹ: The Extreme of an Evil Policy)".

<sup>266</sup> See Phan Nhật Nam, *Dọc Đường Số 1 (Along Road No. 1)*, 93–95.

<sup>267</sup> Phan Nhật Nam, *Dọc Đường Số 1 (Along Road No. 1)*, 93. Original text in Vietnamese: "Đây, người Mỹ đã nhìn người Việt Nam như vậy – một lũ dân bán khai không hơn không kém".

Vietnam. They published a Roneo–printed illegal journal which was named *Thái Độ* and operated a legal publishing house which had the same name. The group was broken up after a few years by the Americans and the South Vietnamese Central Intelligence Department.<sup>268</sup> The works by the *Thái Độ* writers show a negative view of the government of the South and the American intervention in the Vietnam War. Lãng’s *Diary of A Witness* was one of few works which were published legally. However, some parts of the book were removed by the government censor. In addition, all the dates and the location names in this diary were removed, which reduced the credibility and sharpness of the work as a *kí* writing.

*Diary of a Witness* shows Lãng’s own experience as an interpreter for the American advisors in the areas where the battles between South Vietnamese soldiers and Vietcong forces happened. The position of an interpreter enables him to reveal the essence of the Vietnam War from a particularly sensitive position: he is a Southern army captain and an interpreter for the American military consultants during the period of “local war” (or “limited war”) strategy (1965–1968). These years saw more bombing both in the North and the South to prevent and destroy the Vietcong army, in which many ordinary people were victims. As an interpreter, Lãng became familiar with other hidden, dark sides of the war: what American soldiers really thought of the Vietnam War, how the local military forces and administration reacted to the “local war” strategy, and how the ordinary people who were stuck in the battle area suffered.

Joining the American consultants as an interpreter in District K.M. (it is not clear where this area actually is), the narrator is put in a place where it is easy to see both sides: the Americans (who do not know Vietnamese) and the local people (who are ignorant of English). Different languages make it difficult for them to understand each other, however, it also make it easier for both sides to lie to each other. The Americans and the local people hide their real thoughts from each other, but they do not or are unable to do it to the interpreter. From this

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<sup>268</sup> See Thế Uyên.

position, Lãng realizes that the Americans are not a monolithic group. Firstly, there are cunning “foxes”: for example, the fat medical sergeant of the advisor unit which Lãng works for. He shamelessly tells him that he joined the war because of money: his wife had asked for a new house. The sergeant claims that what the Americans do to support South Vietnam is futile because they are unable to understand the local people and the local people will end up supporting the VC<sup>269</sup> because they are Vietnamese after all. When the American medical sergeant and the narrator go to District A.V. to offer medicine to poor local people, although the medicine supply is not appropriate, it is still distributed in order for the Americans to keep up the propaganda schedule. For every different illness, the Americans provide the same multi-vitamin and promise the ignorant people that those tablets would cure them from illness. The narrator feels depressed when he thinks about smarter Vietnamese who might have been lied to with other things which are “bigger” than the multi vitamin tablets.<sup>270</sup> He bitterly concludes that: “I am a witness, a witness of suffering or a witness to the attempt to prevent malnutrition with multivitamin tablets”.<sup>271</sup>

While the fat sergeant is typical of the soldiers who join the war for money, the inexperienced young American captain represents the young Americans who, despite looking down on the materialistic motivation of the older soldiers, attend the war for adventure and military glory. The young captain and the fat sergeant have one thing in common: both of them do not care much about destroying communism and believe that all Vietnamese are untrustworthy, lazy, dull and greedy. There is a scene in which the District Chief holds a party for

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<sup>269</sup> VC is the abbreviation of Vietcong, which is often used by the Americans and South Vietnamese during the Vietnam War.

<sup>270</sup> See Thái Lãng, *Nhật Ký Của Người Chứng (Diary of A Witness)* (Saigon: Thái Độ Publishers, 1967), 15–16.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid, 119. Original text in Vietnamese: “Tôi là chứng nhân, một chứng nhân của bi thảm hay một chứng nhân giữa những viên thuốc bổ và bọn dân gầy”.

the American advisors. Both the Americans and the Vietnamese in the party warmly welcome and praise each other, but they also speak ill of the other in their mother tongues.<sup>272</sup>

And the Americans were chatting over the foods and the girls attending the party. They said:

- Their food tastes really nice but it might not be clean.
- That's right.
- Maybe we gonna get diarrhoea tomorrow.
- Who is the girl sitting next to Madam District Chief?
- Her younger sister.
- She's pretty but we still need to wash her clean before taking her to bed.
- With 5 bucks?
- Fuck, it just costs 5 bucks too even in Saigon.
- But she's a good girl.
- She's good but money will do. We can do anything with the Vietnamese for money.

They choked of laughter.<sup>273</sup>

The scene shows that both the young and old Americans of the advisory unit think little of the Vietnamese. The myth of the great ally which is seen in Nghi's book and other government's propagandas is broken here: this ally does not trust and respect its partner.

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<sup>272</sup> See Ibid, 22–23.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid, 22–23. Original text in Vietnamese: "Còn mấy người Mỹ thì bàn nhau về đồ ăn và mấy cô gái được mời dự tiệc. Họ nói:

- Đồ ăn tụi nó ngon nhưng chắc là không sạch.
  - Đúng thế.
  - Có thể đau bụng ngày mai.
  - Ăn nhiều ỉa chảy mất.
  - Cô gái ngồi cạnh bà Quận là ai?
  - Em bà ta.
  - Đẹp nhưng cũng phải tắm thật sạch trước khi cho vào giường.
  - Với năm đô la?
  - Cứt, ở Sài Gòn cũng chỉ năm đô la thôi.
  - Nhưng cô này tử tế.
  - Nó tử tế nhưng mình có nhiều tiền. Dân Việt Nam cứ tiền là xong hết.
- Họ cười sặc".

The young captain in *Diary* is enthusiastic but naïve. For example, when he sees that the District Chief is reading a book which in fact is nothing but a tasteless Chinese kung-fu fiction, he thinks that it is a book on military strategy. He says to the narrator:

“I think this district chief is very good. Although he is always busy, he still spends time on military books. Last time when I came here, I also saw him reading such thick books. An interpreter told me they were books on military strategies. It is very good: he will be successful in killing a lot of the Vietcong”.<sup>274</sup>

The American captain is not only naïve but also cruel. He forces the district chief to agree with him to bomb a location which is not certain to have VC or not. Two observers on the aerial reconnaissance helicopter No. L. 19 report to him and the district chief differently about the people in the suspected area: the Vietnamese observer thinks they are just some farmers bringing in the harvest while the American observer believes they are VC. The American captain insists: “It’s fine that District Chief thinks that they are not VC, but I still believe that an American captain who operates an L.19 will never make a mistake”.<sup>275</sup> Finally, the District Chief has to agree to bomb the location.

There is also class and colour discrimination among the American advisory unit. The black American soldier is compelled to do most of the hard work. The Japanese yellow captain is so lonely that he loses himself in wine and his memories of the two nuclear bombs dropped on the Japanese by the American forces. The national loss has become an individual loss.<sup>276</sup> By claiming that the fat medical sergeant is the real leader of the American advisory unit, the myth of the great ally by propaganda is totally broken.

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid, 11. Original text in Vietnamese: “Tôi nghĩ ông Quận này khá, ông ấy bận rộn suốt ngày và chịu khó nghiên cứu Binh thư. Kỳ trước tôi đến phòng ông ta cũng thấy ông đọc những sách dày như thế, một Thông dịch viên đã nói đó là Binh thư. Thật khá, ông ta sẽ giết nhiều Việt cộng”.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid, 13. Original text in Vietnamese: “Nếu ông Quận nghĩ rằng đó không phải là V.C cũng được, nhưng tôi nghĩ chiếc L. 19 do một Đại úy Mỹ lái và quan sát thì không thể lầm được”.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid, 90–92.

### 3.2.3. Images of South Vietnamese soldiers

The differences between Phan Nghị, Phan Nhật Nam, Nhã Ca and Thái Lãng can also be seen in the way they represent the South Vietnamese soldiers. Typifying the official viewpoint of the government, in *Crossing Trường Sơn*, Nghị portrays them as heroes. Firstly, they are the pilots of the 74<sup>th</sup> Air Division, who are both ordinary and heroic: “They fought calmly and cheerfully”.<sup>277</sup> The following is an example of how Nghị depicts a typical hero of South Vietnamese army. Hoàng Mập represents for the soldiers who gather their vindictive hatred into their daily duty because their parents were executed in the Vietcong’s land reform:

If you saw Hoàng Mập, a pilot of the 74<sup>th</sup> Air Division, loading the 50–kilos bombs into the wings of the fighter airplane, you would realize that he was the new kind of Hercules of this era. With revengeful eyes, he loaded the bombs into the airplane in a flash. He was really faster than a machine.<sup>278</sup>

The way Nghị portrays this curiously resembles northern works which employed the epic devices of socialist realism. For example, in *Ngôi sao trên đỉnh Phu Văn Lâu* (*The Star on the Top of Phu Văn Pavilion*, 1969), Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường describes a young and devoted communist soldier who becomes proud and emotional when he is assigned the job of protecting the communist flag from the fire of the American air forces in the Battle of Huế:

Việt emotionally stood up and put his left hand on the heavy machine gun, face to the sky, with his hat hanging down his back. The young soldier’s steady and proud figure was

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<sup>277</sup> Phan Nghị, p. 91. Original text in Vietnamese: “Họ đánh giặc một cách rất thần nhiên và vui nhộn. Nhưng cũng có những chiến sĩ đã dồn lòng căm thù của mình vào công việc hằng ngày.... Những người thân sinh của họ đã bị Việt cộng đấu tố đến chết”.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid, p. 92. Original text in Vietnamese: “Cứ đứng quan sát và chứng kiến lúc anh chàng Hoàng Mập, chiến sĩ Không đoàn 74, lắp những trái bom nặng 100 livres (50 ki-lô) vào cánh phi cơ khu trục, mới thấy rằng anh là một thứ Hercules của thời đại. Mắt anh long lên mặt hằn những nét căm thù. Tay anh nâng trái bom lên. Và phập! phập! phập! chỉ loáng một cái là xong hết. Thiệt đúng là nhanh hơn máy”.

silhouetted against the sunset sky, looking like a heroic statue which was made at the same time as this ancient palace.<sup>279</sup>

That Phan Nghị describes the South Vietnamese air force soldiers in battles: “They fought calmly and cheerfully” also reminds one of some northern propaganda *kí*, which depicted the war as full of hardship but also of joy and love – for example, Nguyễn Tuân’s *Đường vui* (*The Trail of Joy and Happiness*, 1949), *Tình chiến dịch* (*Love in Battlefield*, 1951) or *Hà Nội ta đánh Mỹ giỏi* (*We Hanoi Fight the American Well*, 1972).

The soldiers in *Crossing Trường Sơn* are not only brave and devoted but also mischievous and playful: they look forward to Saturdays, when they are permitted to visit Saigon. There is no discrimination but only friendship between officers and ordinary soldiers in the 74<sup>th</sup> Air Force in Nghị’s book: “The General and pilots treated each other as friends. However, when it came to discipline, there was no concession”.<sup>280</sup> It can be seen that Nghị wants to emphasize the contradiction between the Vietcong and the South Vietnamese soldiers: while he depicts the Vietcong as greedy, brutal, and untruthful, he offers not only the heroic side of South Vietnamese soldiers but also their human side. This technique is also seen in the way Nghị describes “đoàn cán bộ xây dựng nông thôn” (groups of rural development officers)<sup>281</sup>:

The rural development officers did not only do the duty of a soldier but also worked as farmers, builders, carpenters and unavoidable medical staff. [...] I was watching the

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<sup>279</sup> Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, “Ngôi Sao Trên Đỉnh Phú Văn Lâu (The Star on the Top of Phu Văn Pavilion),” in *Văn học Việt Nam thế kỷ XX, Quyển 3* ( *Vietnamese Literature in the Twentieth-Century, Part Three, Volume 8*), ed. by Trịnh Bá Đĩnh, Đoàn Ánh Dương, and Lê Thị Dương (Hanoi: Văn học, 2009), pp. 903–967, 943. Original text in Vietnamese: “Việt xúc động đứng thẳng lên im lặng, tay trái đặt lên nòng khẩu đại liên, mặt hướng theo nòng súng hơi ghếch lên cao, chiếc mũ tai bèo buông xuống sau gáy. Bóng người lính trẻ canh giữ bầu trời thành phố Huế nổi lên nền trời ửng đỏ ráng chiều vững chãi thành một khối đen kiêu hãnh, trông giống như một pho tượng đứng sững được tạc cùng một lần với dãy thành cổ này không rõ từ niên đại nào, có lẽ còn lâu đời hơn cả lịch sử của nó”.

<sup>280</sup> Phan Nghị, 101. Original text in Vietnamese: “Tư lệnh với phi công xử sự với nhau như tình bạn. Tuy nhiên lúc nào nhi nhô thì vẫn nhi nhô, nhưng khi cần phải áp dụng kỷ luật thì vẫn phạt như bình thường”.

<sup>281</sup> The groups of rural development officers were the units of the half civil, half military officers who went to the countryside to improve the life of farmers. They belonged to the Rural Development Department, which was established in January 1966 and managed by Ministry of Defense of RVN. This department existed until the fall of RVN in 1975.

female officers working on the vegetable fields. They wore camouflaged clothes, hair let down on their back, and the morning sunshine was pouring on their bright faces. Those extraordinary beauties were contributing to the great process of developing our country.<sup>282</sup>

The idealization of the South Vietnamese soldiers is even more pronounced in Kiều Mỹ Duyên's *Thiên thần mũ nâu* (*The Brown-Bereted Angels*, 1969). This *kí* work, which was written in the form of a diary, tells the story of Captain Đào Bá Phước and the soldier named Nguyễn who is the author's lover. Duyên describes Phước, who lost his life in battle, not only as a perfect military leader who treated his soldiers as his sons, cared for poor people, was brave in battle, but also a perfect family man. And Nguyễn, her lover, is a younger version of Đào Bá Phước: "I always keep his perfect image in my heart to worship".<sup>283</sup> These two heroes are depicted as the reverse of the corrupt society of Saigon.

What makes Nghi's description of the South Vietnamese soldiers different to northern propaganda is that he does not hide the soldiers' pitiful side or the corrupt side of some military officers. In *Crossing Trường Sơn*, a pilot sadly tells the narrator about his family's miserable life because of the inflation of the economy and his poor salary:

Once when I came home to see my family, my wife was extracting some paste from the pot in which she was cooking rice and mixing it with sugar to feed my baby as a replacement for milk which was very rare and expensive because of inflation. How angry I

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<sup>282</sup> Ibid, 259. Original text in Vietnamese: "Đoàn cán bộ xây dựng nông thôn vừa là những chiến sĩ cầm súng lại vừa là những chiến sĩ cầm cày, cầm cuốc, trong đó lại còn có cả những ông thợ nề, thợ mộc, những nhân viên y tế bất đắc dĩ. [...] Tôi liếc mắt nhìn mấy cô cán bộ đang di chuyển trên những luống rau. Họ mặc đồ beo, tóc xõa xuống lưng, nắng ban mai rọi chiếu vào khuôn mặt hồng hào của họ. Những cái sắc đẹp man dại ấy đang góp phần nỗ lực vào công cuộc kiến thiết đất nước".

<sup>283</sup> Kiều Mỹ Duyên, *Thiên Thần Mũ Nâu* (*The Brown-Bereted Angels*) (Saigon: Kim Anh, 1969), 75. Original text in Vietnamese: "lúc nào tôi cũng có hình ảnh đẹp tuyệt vời của người yêu để tôn thờ".

was! While I risk my life on the battlefield, my family suffers from poverty! Sometimes, feeling crazy, I just wanna [...] <sup>284</sup>

Nghị also bitterly mentions the city officials who become corrupt and low of anti-communist spirit. Instead of worrying about the nation, they put themselves first. <sup>285</sup> He also mentions few examples of corruption among officers in the army. In *Crossing Trường Sơn*, there is a sergeant who, when searching the village, snatches an old man's fishing-net. However, he is shielded by his seniors when the story is revealed. Although this corrupt side of South Vietnamese officers is presented in no more than few sentences in the book, it represents an effort to achieve credibility and objectivity in Nghị's propagandist investigative reportage.

Because in *Mourning Headband*, Nhã Ca focuses on the situation of ordinary people in the time between life and death, she only mentions the South Vietnamese soldiers in a few paragraphs. However, her preference for them is revealed in the character of Thái, her cousin who is a rural development officer. <sup>286</sup> During hard times, he protects and takes care of her and his family well. Although it is not mandatory, he wants to join the troops and to fight in battle. Ca's sympathy is also shown in the scene in which the South Vietnamese soldiers who are heading to the battlefield generously share their foods with the miserable people who are fleeing from the city:

I had never seen any soldiers who were so lovely and kind-hearted. They who were from different areas came here to die for Huế. [...] I thought of the local soldiers who fled on

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<sup>284</sup> Phan Nghị, p. 104. Original text in Vietnamese: Có lần về thấy vợ đang chặt nước cơm pha với đường thay sữa cho con vì sữa đang khan hiếm, vật giá leo thang: “Thế có giận không cơ chứ! Mình chiến đấu hùng hục, một sống hai chết ở ngoài mặt trận mà ở hậu phương bí bết như thế, lắm lúc chỉ muốn....”

<sup>285</sup> Phan Nghị, p. 263. Original text in Vietnamese: “Cái tinh thần “Tiên thiên hạ chi ưu, hậu thiên hạ chi lạc” đã bị lật ngược lại thành ra “Tiên thiên hạ chi lạc, hậu thiên hạ chi ưu”. (The principle [of officers] which is “Be the first to worry for the country's problems and the last to enjoy the country's fortune now has turned into “Be the first to enjoy the country's fortune and the last to worry for the country's problem””.

<sup>286</sup> In South Vietnam from 1966 to 1975, the Rural Development Department was a unit of the Ministry of Defence. The officers of the department were also soldiers.

the very first day of the battle and some others who took advantages of the short cease—fire to flock out to collect rice and properties from abandoned houses.<sup>287</sup>

Differently from Nghị and Ca, who focus on the heroic side of South Vietnamese soldiers, Phan Nhật Nam, who is a soldier, takes a closer look at the horror life of South Vietnamese soldiers in *Traces of War* and *Along Road No. 1*. He portrays them as helpless heroes and unavoidable victims of political games. In particular, they face the danger of losing their humanity under the influence of the brutality of the war. Firstly, Nam does not hide the bloody reality of the battles in which South Vietnamese soldiers suffered heavy losses:

We continued to collect corpses on the 11<sup>th</sup> June. Last night the rain made the corpses look more horrible. Their skin became swollen, thin and pale as if they would split if we touched them. It took four people to carry each corpse because they were all swollen with water. Two held the arms and two held the legs. The bodies were dragged on the road and laid next to each other, looking like calves. To save time, we officers also had to do this work. We were hesitant at first; however, we got used to rotten flesh after the forth corpse. I did not dare to look at my hands when I returned to the jungle: a thick and self spread of the rotten flesh had covered my hands. When we finished at 2 p.m, I wiped my hands on the ground as hard as if I would take my skin off. Although I was craving for a cigarette, I did not dare to smell my hands.<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> Nhã Ca, 185. Original text in Vietnamese: “Chưa bao giờ tôi nhìn thấy những người lính dễ thương như thế. Họ là lính miền xa đến để chết ở Huế. [...] Trời ơi, tôi nghĩ đến những người lính địa phương, một số đã bỏ đồn chạy về ngay hôm đầu, một số đợi hơi yên là xổ ra, đi vác gạo, đi vào những căn nhà bỏ không lấy đồ”.

<sup>288</sup> Phan Nhật Nam, 46. Original text in Vietnamese: “Ngày 11 tháng 6 tiếp tục nhặt xác, trận mưa đêm qua làm các thầy ma trở nên khó coi, da người chết căng mỏng tanh và trắng nhợt tưởng như đựng vào sẽ vỡ toang. Xác chết gặp nước căng phồng lên phải bốn người khiêng mới nổi. Hai người nắm cổ tay, hai người giữ đôi chân. Xác chết được kéo xềnh xệch trên mặt đường, xếp cạnh nhau như những con bê. Sĩ quan chúng tôi cũng phải làm việc này để rút bớt thời gian. Thoạt đầu còn e ngại nhưng đến xác thứ tư thứ năm lớp thịt nhũn của xác chết tiếp xúc với bàn tay hóa thành quen. Đi từ nơi để xác trở vào rừng, tôi không dám nhìn vào hai bàn tay của mình, thịt da người chết đã phết một lớp dày trên da tay. Hai giờ chiều, xác chết đã nhặt được hết, tôi chà tay xuống mặt đất như muốn bóc hẳn lớp da. Thèm điếu thuốc lá nhưng không dám đưa bàn tay lên môi”.

And here is another example:

A whole squad was shot down immediately at the beginning. This was obviously a cul-de-sac, without any way out at all. I ran back to the south and saw a horrific scene: most soldiers of 73th Company had been killed. Only two surviving squads tried to join us while returning enemy fire.<sup>289</sup>

Heavy casualty rates were not mentioned in Nghi's book and northern communist propaganda during 1945–1975, but they are to the fore in Nam's *Traces of War*. The soldiers in the book bitterly realize that one of the reasons for their losses is betrayal by their seniors and by greedy people in the big cities who benefit from the war:

Who were the ones who ordered the last bombing? They might have wanted to end our unit's death agony sooner! Fuck them! Why didn't they bomb where the Vietcong gathered? I swore in extreme anger. Twenty-four hours later, when I returned to Đồng Xoài, the flesh around my wound had become rotten and stinked. While passing the headquarter tent, I became crazy when the staff officers looked at me as if I was some strange animal.<sup>290</sup>

Despite the soldiers' sacrifice and devotion in battle, their lives are disregarded by their own seniors who command them from safe and comfortable rooms or tents which are far away from danger. It is not only their seniors who disappoint them: when they return to Saigon to suppress street demonstrations and political coups, their idealistic hopes are also broken:

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid, 48. Original text in Vietnamese: "Một tiểu đội ngã gục ngay trong giây phút đầu tiên. Hết đường, đúng là đến đường cùng. Tôi chạy lui về phía nam, một cảnh tượng đau lòng và kinh khiếp. Linh của đại đội 73 coi như chết gần hết, còn lại khoảng chừng hai tiểu đội vừa bắn vừa kéo lên phía chúng tôi".

<sup>290</sup> Ibid, 49. Original text in Vietnamese: "Không hiểu ai đã ra lệnh cho cuộc dội bom vừa rồi? Chắc hẳn những người đó muốn kết thúc thời gian hấp hối của thương binh đơn vị tôi! Tiên sư cha chúng nó, sao không dội bom ngay trên con đường nơi Việt cộng tập hợp... Tôi chửi thề với uất giận cao độ. Hai mươi bốn giờ sau khi về được bến Đồng Xoài, lớp thịt chung quanh chỗ bị thương đã thối loét hẳn đi, tôi muốn thổ huyết vì giận dữ khi đi qua lều của bộ chỉ huy hành quân, những viên sĩ quan tham mưu ngồi nhìn tôi như con vật lạ".

It was a relief for us to leave Saigon. A month was enough to break our illusions about the rear area which had betrayed us by taking advantages of our blood and tears. A month was also enough for us to see the evil of every kind of religious leaders and street protesting “kings” who in fact were full of hatred and venal desires. A month was enough to break the dreams and illusions of every young and old soldier. Now we fully understood that our blood and life had been wasted for a mendacious society.<sup>291</sup>

*Along Road No. 1* shows Phan Nhật Nam’s cynical disillusion with every kind of political and religious leaders, either communist or non-communist, either Buddhist or Catholic. For him, all “thần tượng” (“idols”) achieve their eminent position by sitting on the blood and tears of numerous ordinary people and are still unable to quench their own greed and desires.<sup>292</sup>

In Nam’s book, the South Vietnamese soldiers are no longer the heroes who “fought calmly and cheerfully” as in Nghị’s *Crossing Trường Sơn*. They are just pawns in a political game, who are betrayed by their seniors and by people in the cities. They also suffer from poverty and are crushed by brutality. Because of the war, their appearances are changed and their lives are at risk but also their humanity is in danger: “This life had changed me into a stranger: he was brutal and full of hatred. A part of my soul had died”.<sup>293</sup> The brutality is shown in the fight between Nam’s comrades and religious protesters in Saigon. Seeing that religions are exploited by the protesters, the soldiers throw their fists and weapons at the crowd with all their suppressed anger

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<sup>291</sup> Ibid, 21. Original text in Vietnamese: “Chúng tôi rời Sài Gòn trong thở dài nhẹ nhõm, một tháng ở Thủ Đô đủ để tạo thành sụp đổ tan hoang trong lòng, đủ thấy rõ sự phản bội của hậu phương, một hậu phương lừa đảo trên máu và nước mắt của người lính. Một tháng đủ để chúng tôi hiểu ti tiện hèn mọn của loại lãnh tụ ngã tắt, những anh hùng đường phố, những ông vua biểu tình theo ngẫu hứng, vua tôn giáo đầy thù hận và dục vọng... Một tháng ‘vỡ mặt’ lính non cũng như lính già. Chúng tôi bây giờ biết rõ: Máu và đời sống của mình đã đổ ra cho một xã hội lừa lọc”.

<sup>292</sup> See Phan Nhật Nam, *Dọc Đường Số 1 (Along Road No. 1)* (Saigon: Đại Ngã, 1970), 186–195.

<sup>293</sup> Phan Nhật Nam, *Dấu Binh Lửa (Traces of War)*, p. 21. Original text in Vietnamese: “Một khoảng đời đã đổi tôi thành kẻ lạ rồi... Một tên hung bạo, trí não căm hờn và thù hận. Tôi chết một phần người trong tôi”.

and disappointment as well as their brutality, which originates from the violence of war.<sup>294</sup> *Traces of War* also records the time when Nam works as a training officer at the military school: he feels depressed and vents his anger on the new recruits:

City civilians, city soldiers and the naively silly new recruits under my management, all of them could raise my unhealthy hatred and anger when I thought about the deaths of my miserable friends. I felt crazy when seeing the happiness of being alive! I vented my anger in drinking. It did not make me drunk but made me strangely violent. I used to wait at Trần Quốc Toản Street to kill someone.<sup>295</sup>

That violence is also vented on a prostitute who the narrator met in between fierce battles: “I threw a punch at her. She fell down on the bed and cried loudly”. He bitterly concludes: “This environment was some kind of adopted parent, who distorted and trained my soul into that of an animal”.<sup>296</sup>

Nam’s rough representation of South Vietnamese soldiers complies with his writing’s objectives: in the prelude to *Along Road No. 1*, he announces that he writes to correct “văn chương salon” (“salon literature”) which distorted the image of South Vietnamese soldiers. Nam uses the term “salon literature” to refer to the tasteless or propagandic works written by the writers who never experienced the real life of ordinary soldiers. He criticizes the works which simplify or distort the image of South Vietnamese soldiers:

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<sup>294</sup> Phan Nhật Nam, *Dấu Bình Lửa (Traces of War)*, 20. Original text in Vietnamese: “Trung đội tôi như trong cơn điên của thù hận và phần nộ, những người lính lao vào trong đám đông” (Our platoon, gone insane because of hatred and anger, threw ourselves into the crowd).

<sup>295</sup> Ibid, 53. Original text in Vietnamese: “Người ở thành phố, những người lính không đi hành quân, và gần gũi nhất là đám tân binh ngu ngơ hỗn độn dưới quyền, tất cả đều có khả năng kêu gọi thù hận bệnh hoạn khi tôi nghĩ đến cảnh chết khốn nạn của bạn bè — Nỗi thù hận nhìn thấy những người có hạnh phúc vì được sống! Ly rượu không phải là nguyên nhân nhưng là một tính chất, một cách diễn tả sự cuồng nộ. Tôi không say nhưng men rượu giúp những cảm xúc biến thành cực đoan hung bạo lạ lùng. Tôi đã đứng ở đường Trần Quốc Toản để đợi giết một người”.

<sup>296</sup> Phan Nhật Nam, *Đọc Đường Số 1 (Along Road No. 1)*, 16. Original text in Vietnamese: “Original text in Vietnamese: “Tập thể này là một thứ cha mẹ nuôi, bóp méo và dạy dỗ linh hồn tôi thành một thứ sinh vật – Rất lạ với đám đông, rất xa với gia đình”.

I know that soldiers have been “kidnapped” into literature many times. In those writings, the soldier is either sunk in debauchery, or heroically manages to kill at least a whole battalion of the Vietcong. He may get injured seriously: for example, losing at least an arm or a leg. The most popular is that he loses his eyesight! There are also soldiers who are stuffed with such indigestible “foods” as “God”, “human condition”. Sometimes, they are seen to curse the government.<sup>297</sup>

In contradiction to those writers, Nam intends to present the situation of soldiers without any gloss: they fight bravely but could lose in battle or be betrayed by their own people; they think, they grieve as any ordinary people; and they are also in danger of losing their humanity because of the violence of war. However, one element has been filtered out in Nam’s works: there are no cowards, no returners among ordinary soldiers. The pride of a soldier made Nam separate ordinary soldiers from the corrupt world of city people and military seniors.

Thái Lăng, who worked as an interpreter for the American advisors, focuses on the bitterness of an unavoidable witness of the comedy between the American advisors and the Vietnamese officers in which both sides suspect and lie to each other. In *Diary of A Witness*, the soldiers and the ordinary people become the victims of that political comedy. There is a scene in the work which strongly reveals what Lăng thinks about the situation of ordinary soldiers caught between the American advisors and Vietnamese officers. A soldier is reported to be seriously injured. Major K. suggests the American advisor asks for a helicopter ambulance. The American advisor does not believe the report and asks him to check it in person before he decides whether to ask for the helicopter or not. The injured soldier is carried to the headquarters after an hour. The helicopter arrives after three more hours. By that time, he has died.

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<sup>297</sup> Phan Nhật Nam, *Dọc Đường Số 1 (Along Road No. 1)*, 17. Original text in Vietnamese: “tôi đã biết lính đã bị ‘bắt cóc’ vào tác phẩm rất nhiều. Trong đó thằng lính ‘được’ uống rượu để đến nôn ra mật xanh mật vàng; đi phòng trà ‘chơi’ cave, gái điếm lu bù và giết ít nhất cả tiểu đoàn Việt Cộng, hoặc bị thương ít nhất cũng vào độ ‘chân tay biệt ly’ và ăn khách nhất là mục ‘Giã từ ánh sáng’ nhưng thường thường bị mất một mắt! có anh lính lại bị nhét vào mồm những thức ăn khó nuốt như Thượng Đế, cuộc đời, thân phận... và đôi khi còn cho lính chửi chính quyền”.

I looked at the bloody body which lay uncovered on the dry grass in front of a pagoda. The nurses, after finishing their medical aids, retreated to the shade of a tree nearby to chat and burst into laughter. The winds were blowing sand on his body. That was the dark and pitiful situation of a soldier when he was no longer able to fight.<sup>298</sup>

Unlike the unlucky soldier, the narrator experiences a different kind of suffering. Although the narrator is offered security and convenience because he works for the Americans, he feels depressed and disgusted by the relations between the American advisors and the local military leaders. The District Chief and his staff, while submitting to the orders of the Americans, mistrust and speak ill of their ally secretly in front of them. Moreover, they cooperate with speculators and merchants to exploit the American aid. Unable to escape his job as an interpreter, the narrator, while seeing through both sides, has no choice other than to lie or to remain silent: “I continued to work in depression among the strangers who were full of prejudice, and the Vietnamese who always flattered in order to take advantage of them”.<sup>299</sup>

Four writers approached the South Vietnamese soldiers differently: while Phan Nghị's *Crossing Trường Sơn* offers a propagandist view of the ARVN and Nhã Ca's *Mourning Headband* shows her sympathy towards them, Phan Nhật Nam and Thái Lãng's works demonstrate hidden negative sides in the life of South Vietnamese soldiers: heavy casualties, being betrayed by their own people, or the loss of humanity, which are absent in northern propaganda *kí*.

### 3.2.4. Images of ordinary people

While Phan Nghị, Nhã Ca, Phan Nhật Nam and Thái Lãng are different in the ways they present the Vietcong, the Americans, and South Vietnamese soldiers, they are rather similar in their demonstration of South Vietnamese ordinary people. *Crossing Trường Sơn Mountains* and

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<sup>298</sup> Thái Lãng, 136. Original text in Vietnamese: “Tôi nhìn vào cái xác đầy máu me đặt tênh hênh giữa bãi cỏ khô trước cửa chùa. Không có gì đắp lên thân thể anh ta. Mấy y tá sau khi băng bó đã quay vào ngồi dưới gốc cây gần đó nói chuyện cười sặc sụa. Từng luồng gió thổi những đợt cát phủ lên người anh. Đó là thân phận đen, tủi của người cầm súng, sau khi đã không còn cầm được súng nữa”.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid, 20. Original text in Vietnamese: “Tôi lại làm việc trong sự chán nản của mình, bên cạnh những người xa lạ đầy thành kiến. Và bên cạnh những tên người Việt luôn luôn xoắt xuýt nịnh bợ để áp phe buôn bán”.

*Mourning Headband for Huế* are typical of what these writers think of the situation of the people in wartime: they are the most miserable victims of the war.

In *Crossing Trường Sơn*, the life of the ordinary people, who live in guerrilla areas, are always at risk. Not only can they be killed by bombs and bullets, but they also suffer poverty. Rural development officers and veterinarians cannot approach them because they do not dare to work in those dangerous areas. Besides, bombs and bullets turn farmers into nomads in their own country: “They were scared of the Vietcong. However, what scared them the most were the bombs from the sky. Evidently the bombs were mean to kill the Vietcong; however, they did not have eyes to distinguish farmers from guerrillas”.<sup>300</sup> In addition, they are victims of Chinese–origin speculators.

While Nghi investigated the life of farmers who lived in the guerrilla areas, Ca had a chance to experience the extremely miserable life of ordinary people during the Battle of Huế. This is a typical scene in *Mourning Headband*:

A flock of people, about a hundred, was led by a few fathers and two Buddhist priests. They hold a white flag which was made of a ragged cloth. They were half running, half walking, like acrobats. [...] Thái stood by the road, raised his hand to stop a father: “Father, how is it going over there?” The father shook his head, foaming at the mouth. A priest who was holding an injured child whose blood was dropping on the road waved his hand to suggest we should follow them to a safer place. However, he was also too tired to speak. [...] The people were crying and praying while running. Some were calling on God, the others on Buddha. They hastily ran toward the bridge and suddenly ran backward, turning back to the bridge again. The gunfire from Phủ Cam was still intense. Some people

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<sup>300</sup> Phan Nghi, 20. Original text in Vietnamese: “Họ sợ Việt Cộng là một lẽ, mà cái sợ khủng khiếp nhất là những chùm bom từ trên trời rơi xuống. Bom ấy tất nhiên để giết Việt Cộng, nhưng nó làm gì có mắt để phân biệt được đâu là dân, đâu là du kích”.

fell behind the flock. They were crying desperately: “Father, wait for us! Father, please save us! Oh my Lord, demons are chasing us!”<sup>301</sup>

Desperately running away from the falling city which was under continuous American bombing and firing between the Vietcong and South Vietnamese, the people while trying to cross the bridge came under American fire. The scene thoroughly depicts the helplessness of men and religion in wartime. It questions the rationality of war and draws attention to the situation of the country in a wider political game: “Bombs and bullets from faraway countries, under the name of supporting the South or helping the North, were all poured down on a small city to blow up children and crush innocent men”. Ca bitterly concludes that the status of Vietnamese even worse than a dog’s one:

Is this the image of our nation: the dog who was trying to get to the bank of the river?  
How pitiful our country was: the status of a Vietnamese was beneath a joke, lower than that of a dog. [...] Now the dog sank and was swept away, along with the blood which already reddened the whole river.

The only hero among ordinary people in *Mourning Tourband* is Võ Thành Nam, an old intellectual who risks his life to save people, irrespective of which side they belong to. While most people around him were either frightened, he, with only a bicycle, goes everywhere possible to cure the wounded, bury the dead, find food and organize shelter for everyone. This solitary hero supports neither side: he used to demonstrate at the Geneva Conference (1954) to oppose the Geneva

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<sup>301</sup> Nhã Ca. Original text in Vietnamese: “Đoàn người có đến cả trăm người, dẫn đầu là mấy ông cha, một hai ông sư. Họ cầm cờ trắng, là bằng đủ thứ vải tơ tằm, lá cờ hàng phục, lá cờ sợ hãi. Họ vừa đi, vừa chạy như những con lật đật. [...] Thái đứng hẳn ra vệ đường giơ tay đón: “Thưa cha, trên rứa răng?” Ông cha lắc đầu, miệng như đang sùi bọt mép. Một tu sĩ bế một đứa bé bị thương máu chảy nhỏ giọt trên đường, đưa tay xua dấu bảo chúng tôi chạy theo, đừng đứng nguy hiểm. Nhưng ông ta cũng không nói nổi ra thành tiếng nữa. [...] Đoàn người vừa chạy vừa kêu khóc cầu kinh, kẻ đọc kinh cầu Chúa, kẻ kêu trời gọi Phật. Đoàn người chạy lêu bêu xuống cầu rồi bỗng chạy ngược trở lại, rồi đang chạy ngược bỗng trở lui, tiếp tục về phía trước. Tiếng súng từ phía Phủ Cam vẫn như mưa, vài kẻ yếu đuối chạy cuống cuống cách đoàn người khá xa, họ đang kêu gào như đang tuyệt vọng sắp chết đến nơi rồi: ‘Cha ơi, chờ con. Cha ơi, cứu chúng con. Chúa ôi, quý đuổi chúng con’”.

Accords which separated Vietnam into the North and the South. He said: “I oppose every war”.<sup>302</sup> This peace-loving hero is also soulful and optimistic. While the battle was fierce in Từ Đàm, he still gathered youngsters to sing and play music in the temple of Phan Bội Châu”.<sup>303</sup> However, Ca also bitterly realizes that all efforts of this hero go to nowhere or even ironical.

Old Minh still sounded optimistic: “We should call for peace and attract the world’s attention. Tomorrow I am going to write more letters. I am going on hunger-strike to oppose the Americans and the Vietcong as well. Anyone joins me?” Everyone looked at each other, half wanted to join, half wanted to burst out laughing because it was so ironic now. For me, I only wanted to be alive. Either communism or the existing order would be meaningless if I was no longer alive.<sup>304</sup>

At the end of the book, as if to emphasize his helpless and solitary nature, it is not even clear whether or not Old Minh is still alive.

Similar to these *kí* of southern writers, northern propaganda *kí* in particular and literature in general, supported the point that ordinary people are victims of the war. However, while southern *kí* during 1945–1975 hardly demonstrated ordinary people as heroic, or, showed the helplessness of lonely heroes in wartime, northern propagandic *kí* tended to offer a collective heroism of ordinary people.<sup>305</sup>

By presenting the Vietcong as either bloodthirsty or machine-like, Phan Nghi’s reportage *Crossing Trường Sơn Mountains* and some parts of Phan Nhật Nam’s and Nhã Ca memoirs resemble northern propaganda *kí* in some ways. However, the memoirs of Thái Lãng, Phan Nhật Nam and

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid. Original text in Vietnamese: “Tao chống hết, chiến tranh là tao chống”.

<sup>303</sup> See Ibid.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid. Original text in Vietnamese: “Giọng ông Minh vẫn tin tưởng: “Mình cứ kêu gọi hòa bình, cứ kêu gọi thế giới. Ngày mai tao viết thư gửi nữa. Tao tổ chức tuyệt thực phản đối Mỹ, phản đối Việt cộng, đứa nào dám theo không?” Mọi người nhìn nhau, nửa muốn hưởng ứng vì thấy giọng ông đầy hăng hái, nửa muốn phì cười vì tính chất mỉa mai khôi hài. Còn tôi, lúc đó chỉ muốn được yên thân, quốc gia hay cộng sản lúc này chả có tý nghĩa lý gì hết nếu tôi không sống được”.

<sup>305</sup> See Chapter 2.

Nhã Ca also manage to develop multiple voices in the way they represent the Vietcong, the American and other ally forces, as well as the South Vietnamese soldiers and people. The horrors and losses of the war, as well as the corruption of South Vietnamese society under the presence of the American army, and the unstable political system do not in themselves explain the existence of multiple perspectives in South Vietnamese *kí*. South Vietnamese writers were offered freedom of expression in some ways. The works of Lãng, Nam and Ca question the essence of the war and the order that they had been put into, and bravely present the reality from their own experience and from different angles. It is obvious that Võ Phiến's claim of the extreme objectivity in South Vietnamese *kí*, which was mentioned earlier in this chapter, is excessive. However, is it possible to assert that Thái Lãng, Phan Nhật Nam and Nhã Ca remained free from the influence of the Saigon government?

Firstly, that southern *kí* presents both northern and southern soldiers (as well as American soldiers and ordinary Vietnamese) as war victims is not completely free from propaganda. Northern criticism saw it as “văn học tình thương, tâm lý chiến” (“psychological warfare literature”).<sup>306</sup> The Vietnam War, in the Saigon government's view, was an unjust war between brothers, which was fuelled by the North. Therefore, the compassion for the situation of the country and northern people was a popular slogan in the Saigon government's propaganda. In the introductory speech of the National Congress of Artists (7 – 15 January 1957), Trần Khánh Thành stated that he wanted northern artists and writers to demonstrate justice and love of their compatriots as southern ones do.<sup>307</sup> Although Phan Nhật Nam's memoir *Traces of War* and *Along Road No. 1* provides a rough representation of the life of South Vietnamese soldiers and a bitter demonstration of the cold and aloof American ally, his works were only officially published after the Americans had begun to withdraw from South Vietnam after the Tet Offensive in 1968. Thái

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<sup>306</sup> See Trà Linh and others,.

<sup>307</sup> *Kỷ Yếu Đại Hội Văn Hóa Toàn Quốc (Proceeding of the National Congress of Culture)*, 24. Original text in Vietnamese: “Chúng ta mong các văn nghệ sĩ ở Bắc phần khỏi phải bó buộc ca ngợi lòng căm thù, sự chia rẽ giai cấp, sự phá hoại tôn giáo và gia đình, mà được đem tài năng của mình làm sáng tỏ công lý và tình thương đồng chủng”.

Lăng's *Diary of A Witness* strongly criticizes the failed alliance between the Americans and South Vietnamese was written in 1967 but not published until 1969. This suggests that the Saigon government also attempted to control the collective memory through publication.

The fact that Nhã Ca's *Mourning Headband for Huế* was immediately awarded the first prize for literature by Saigon government and was continuously reprinted from 1970 to 1973 also has something to do with the Saigon government's attempts to claim that the Vietcong conducted a massacre at Huế. Nhã Ca has assured that her book contains facts only, no fictional element:

Having survived the Battle of Huế, I wrote *Mourning Headband for Huế*. It is neither a novel nor any other kind of fiction which is devoted to an artistic purpose. It contains just facts, the facts of an escape from the battle. I simply record my own experience and other survivors' stories which I was told. They are just the fragmentary stories of a falling city in the chaos of fire and deaths.

Traditionally, there is only one narrator in a memoir. However, there are three memoirs by different narrators in *Mourning Headband*: the main narrator is Nhã Ca, telling her own experience of fleeing from the falling city; besides, she adds two stories which are told by survivors of Huế. In addition, there is a chapter told in the third-person, an unconventional mode in the memoir.<sup>308</sup> It is noticeable that Ca neither encountered the Vietcong nor witnessed the massacre while the story by Khâm, the dying young man from An Cựu, and the story by an injured young man from Từ Đàm, as well as the chapter told in the third-person, provide a detailed demonstration of the Vietcong as well as some evidence of the massacre by the Vietcong, which is absent in the story by the narrator Ca. Besides, the way Khâm and the young man from Từ Đàm tell their stories are identical to the narrator Nhã Ca's one. Two details are repeated many times in Ca's writings: firstly, the vitality of nature regardless the destruction of war which encourages

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<sup>308</sup> In *Mourning Headband*, hapter 3, "*Những mảnh vụn góp nhặt*" ("*Collected stories*"), is told in third-person. Chapter 5 is the story told by the injured young man from Từ Đàm. And chapter 7 is the story told by Khâm, the dying young man from An Cựu.

people to live; secondly, the people's love and respect towards their birthplace in their dying moments. For example, after hours of fear fleeing from the battle and witnessing the chaotic situation of Huế civilians in the church–turn–shelter, the narrator Ca suddenly realizes how beautiful and precious nature is:

It was drizzling, which made me fasten my coat to prevent the wind and the raindrops. Last night in the church, my fear and worry made me feel hot sometimes. Now standing by the well, I suddenly felt like looking at the rain and the green desperately as if I would never be able to see them again.<sup>309</sup>

Similarly, the anonymous young man who fled from Từ Đàm also mentions the ochna flowers:

But I suddenly stopped at the water storage tank which was already dry: near the tank, an ochna tree<sup>310</sup> of which all the branches had been ruined, maybe by a piece of artillery, still showed its yellow flowers. They looked like small lights of hope which brought back my vitality and yearning for surviving.<sup>311</sup>

This detail also appears in the same way in the story by Khâm, the dying young man from An Cựu:

Hường, a few days later, told me that a liberation soldier died in that vacant hole, head on the edge and face to my house. I guessed that before he died, he was able to see the

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<sup>309</sup> Nhã Ca. Original text in Vietnamese: “Trời lất phất mưa, tôi phải kéo hai vạt áo mắng tở lại để che gió. Cả đêm trong nhà thờ, phần sợ hãi, phần lo lắng tôi không cảm thấy lạnh mà nhiều lúc còn thấy nóng bừng là khác. Bây giờ đứng bên giếng nước, nhìn mưa bay, nhìn cây cổ, tôi bỗng nhìn cảnh vật một cách hết sức ham hố, như sợ không bao giờ còn nhìn thấy được nữa”.

<sup>310</sup> The ochna tree resembles the cherry or apricot. Because it blossoms with yellow flowers in spring, it is often used for decoration in southern households during the Lunar New Year Festival. Therefore, it represents traditional family gathering and happiness.

<sup>311</sup> Nhã Ca. Original text in Vietnamese: “Nhưng tôi đứng sững lại, nơi chiếc bể cạn, cây mai đã gãy hết nhánh, chắc một quả đại bác đã rơi gần đầu đó, nhưng những cánh hoa mai vàng vẫn tiếp tục, bên cạnh những cành gãy, những gạch ngói, những bông mai vàng như những đốm hy vọng gây cho lòng tôi bao tình cảm thiết tha, ham sống”.

yellow flowers of the ochna tree in the yard and a part of the roof which had been ruined by bullets or B40 rockets in the first night of the battle.<sup>312</sup>

For South Vietnamese people, the yellow ochna flowers do not only represent nature but also Tet, the Lunar New Year Festival when every family gathers and enjoys time together. This kind of detail, which uses nature as a metaphor for domestic tranquillity also appears in other books by Ca.

Another trademark detail of Ca is the attachment between people and their birthplace, which is shown in the fact that the head of a corpse is laid out so that it points to their homeland when they are buried. When Khâm flees from the city he notices the position of the dead American: he lies prone, face to the road, his hand tightly holding a family photograph. Before he dies, Khâm also asks Ca and her cousin to lay him by the door to be able to look at the rain, the grass and his homeland in his last moments: “I’d love to see the rain and the green. Bullets haven’t touched that tree yet and the rain has washed it clean. I’d love to see it”.<sup>313</sup> The narrator Ca also records a sentimental scene in which a South Vietnamese soldier thoughtfully buries a Vietcong:

In the garden which was just few houses away from my house, there were a vacant house and a vacant shelter from which an injured liberation soldier emerged when it was filled with gas [by southern soldiers]. He was left behind by his comrades. He died at the moment he came out and saw the light. In the shelter, despite his injury, he still wrote his diary and a letter to his mother and sister. Especially, he also wrote an anti-war letter:

“When I die, I would love to have my head layed to the north and legs to the south. I

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<sup>312</sup> Ibid. Original text in Vietnamese: “Chiếc hố bỏ trống đó, mấy ngày sau, Hường kể cho tôi nghe, có một người lính giải phóng chết gục trong đó, đầu kê lên miệng hố và mặt quay vào phía nhà tôi. Tôi đoán chắc trước khi chết, anh còn kịp nhìn thấy những bông mai vàng trong sân và một phần mái nhà bị sập đổ vì mảnh đạn hay những phát B40 của đêm đầu tiên khai hỏa”.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid. Original text in Vietnamese: “Thôi anh chị để mặc tôi, chạy đi, không họ tràn tới bây giờ. Xin dừng tôi nơi cánh cửa, không, nơi cái cột kia cũng được. Tôi còn nhìn thấy mưa, thấy cỏ cây. Bụi cây trước mặt chưa có một vết đạn nào tới phá, mưa gội sạch hết để tôi nhìn”.

contributed to this bloodbath; therefore, I deserve to die here, along with the innocent Huế civilians and my people". After reading the letter, the southern soldier quickly put it in his pocket, and quietly carried the body to the garden. He made a small hole to bury him. He carefully checked directions in order to properly place the unfortunate man's head to the north.<sup>314</sup>

These trademark details also reappear a great deal in Ca's other works, for example, her autobiographical fiction *Tình ca cho Huế đổ nát* (*A Love Song for Huế the Ruined City*, 1969).

It is noteworthy that both the young man from Từ Đàm and Khâm, the man from An Cựu, when talking to Ca and her cousin, are either seriously injured and either in flight from Huế or dying. Therefore, it is unusual that they still manage to include these sentimental details in their talk to the narrator Ca. By sharing the same trademark details with the story by the main narrator Nhã Ca, the stories by the young man from Từ Đàm and Khâm, the man from An Cựu, are no longer simply records of events: they have been assimilated by Ca's rhetorical strategy; in other words, they have been fictionalized to support the author's intention.

Despite using multiple narrators, which is unusual in *kí*, and applying a similar rhetorical strategy for different narrators, *Mourning Headband* is more like an autobiographical or testimonial fiction than *kí*. However, Ca still insists that there is no fictional detail in her book and calls it "bút kí".<sup>315</sup> Moreover, both southern and northern readers and authorities, either in praise

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid. Original text in Vietnamese: "Ngay sau khu vườn cách nhà tôi vài căn, có một ngôi nhà bỏ không, một chiếc hầm bỏ không, người ta cũng bơm hơi cay, xông ra một giải phóng quân bị thương, bị đồng đội bỏ lại. Và khi lên nhìn thấy ánh sáng thì hắn cũng vừa thở hắt ra mà chết. Ở trong hầm, dù đau đớn, hắn cũng viết nhật kí, viết thư gửi cho mẹ và em. Điều đặc biệt là hắn có một lá thư nguệch ngoạc viết phản đối chiến tranh nữa: Khi tôi chết, tôi muốn gối đầu lên đất Bắc, dù chân tôi ở miền Nam. Tôi đã gây cảnh đổ máu ở thành phố này, tôi phải để máu của tôi lại để hòa cùng với dòng máu oan ức của dân Huế, của dân tộc tôi. Người lính Biệt động đọc xong mấy dòng trên, anh vội nhét lá thư vào túi, rồi lặng lẽ bế xác tên Việt cộng, xác một người Việt Nam, ra vườn. Anh đào một cái hố nhỏ và chôn xác người miền Bắc chết cùng với dân Nam. Anh nhìn quanh quất, tính lui tính tới để tìm ra phương Bắc làm chỗ gối đầu cho kẻ bạc mệnh".

<sup>315</sup> A kind of reportage which tends to describe an event, a place, a journey rather than investigate something. Writers can add a lot of comments or personal feelings into *bút kí*. Vũ Ngọc Phan, as stated earlier in this chapter, use the term "bút kí" to refer to literary essays, which is a different genre from *kí*.

or criticism of the work, have considered it as Ca's memoir. While northern critics accused the work of providing distorted information about the Battle of Huế, the Saigon government praised it for accurately recording the massacre committed by the Vietcong and portraying the horrors of war, for which the book was granted with the National Prize for Literature in 1970. There was no testimony of any survivors from what was called "the Vietcong massacre"; therefore, the book, which only records what survivors from the Battle of Huế heard from others about the crime, was considered an accurate account and used in the government's propaganda campaign against northern communism.<sup>316</sup>

In short, While Nghi, in his *Crossing Trường Sơn Mountains*, heavily reflects the Saigon government's propaganda by depicting the Vietcong as bloodthirsty and greedy beasts as well as praising the alliance with the American, Phan Nhật Nam, Nhã Ca and Thái Lãng manage to develop multi-sided viewpoints which undermined the myth of the great war against communism by the great South Vietnamese army and the great American ally. However, they were not totally free from the orthodox ideology of Saigon government. While Lãng avoids mentioning the Vietcong in *Diary of a Witness*, Nam and Ca show their disagreement with communism in their works. Besides, their criticism of the Americans and of corrupt South Vietnamese officials as well as the criticism of South Vietnamese soldiers only appeared after the Americans started to abandon South Vietnam, showing the role of the Saigon government in the manipulation of public memory despite its claim to support freedom of expression. It is also noticeable that while there was secret sympathy for the Vietcong in South Vietnamese poetry, the perception of *kí* as a discourse of truth restricted its writers from positive representations of the Vietcong. There was no *kí* which

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<sup>316</sup> Gareth Porter has revealed that the Saigon government manipulated documents on the Tet Offensive. Firstly, there are contradictions in the reports of casualties in the Battle of Huế. Secondly, the Saigon government did not permit journalists to approach the sites of excavations of mass graves in Huế after the Tet Offensive. Porter challenges Douglas Pike's assertion about the causes of civilian deaths in Huế, stating that there was no systematized massacre by the Vietcong. See D. Gareth Porter, "The 1968 "Hue Massacre,"" *Indochina Chronicle*, 33 (1974), 2–13 <<https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~furrp/porterhue1.html>>. For opposite idea to Porter's one, see Douglas Pike, *The Viet Cong Strategy of Terror* (Saigon: US Mission, 1970).

openly supported communism in South Vietnamese literature during 1945–1975. Interestingly, in late 1970, Trần Đố Dũng, a writer of the anti-war journal *Trình bày*, commented on the relationship between memoirs, history and politics as follows:

The appearance of historical and political memoirs at the end of every year these days is also noticeable. It represents an effort to rewrite or reassess history. It wants to erase or remake something; simultaneously, it states that the past offers precious lessons for the present. Such kinds of memoir are likely to be published more in the upcoming years because of political reasons rather than history and literature's sake.<sup>317</sup>

Trần Đố Dũng's remark demonstrates that the objectivity of South Vietnamese *kí* had already been questioned even at the time. It is interesting that, as previously mentioned in this chapter, Mai Thảo, the founder of few journals which received funds from the government and the American, also once claimed that: "A writer can never play the role of an objective witness. [...] A writer does not write history, he makes history and risks his life for it".<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> Trần Đố Dũng, 51–52. Original text in Vietnamese: "Sự xuất hiện vào những ngày cuối năm của loại văn hồi kí lịch sử và chính trị cũng đáng quan tâm. Nó biểu hiện cho nỗ lực 'viết lại, xét lại' lịch sử, nỗ lực bôi xóa một cái gì, làm lại một cái gì, đồng thời cho biết quá khứ là một bài học đắt giá cho hiện tại. Những tập hồi kí vốn không mới lạ gì đối với nước ngoài, như vậy, chắc sẽ còn được tung ra nhiều hơn trong năm tới vì những mục đích chính trị hơn là văn học và sử học".

<sup>318</sup> Mai Thảo.

## Chapter 4

### Vietnamese *Kí* since the Renovation

#### 4.1. Overview: Changes in theories and criticism of socialist realism and *ký* since 1986

Nguyễn Minh Châu's essay "Viết về chiến tranh" ("Writing about War") in *Văn nghệ Quân đội* volume 11 (1978) is considered as the first voice which acknowledged the need to reconsider socialist realism in Vietnamese literature. By saying "It seems that our generals and captains' war memoirs have not thoroughly described the complicated and twisted road in their minds to a decision in battles",<sup>319</sup> Châu reveals the way war experience was represented in Vietnamese literature since 1945 is simple-minded and formulaic. It seems to be not a coincidence that after Trần Dần, the main figure of Nhân văn Giai phẩm (NVGP), Châu, another soldier writer, also attacked socialist realism in its most traditional and familiar incarnation: the wartime literature of soldier writers. He shows that "readers want access to the truths of reality in their rough, original forms, without any make-up"<sup>320</sup>. In this first attack, he did not directly point out that socialist realism as propaganda is the reason for the failure of war literature, but he argued that that kind of war writings do not match the criteria of authentic realism, and shows that writers, in order to get close to it, sometimes need to fight against the long-lasting taste of readers and their own

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<sup>319</sup> See Nguyễn Minh Châu, "Viết về chiến tranh" ("Writing about War"), *Văn nghệ Quân đội*, Vol. 11, 1978, 114 – 119. Original text in Vietnamese: "Hình như hồi ký chiến tranh của các vị chỉ huy của chúng ta chưa mô tả kĩ những chặng đường khúc khuỷu để đi đến hạ quyết tâm". And: "Trên con đường đi đến chủ nghĩa hiện thực, đôi khi chúng ta phải khai chiến với cả những quan điểm tốt đẹp và lâu dài của mình".

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., 116. Original text in Vietnamese: "tiếp cận tối đa với những sự thật cuộc đời ở dạng nguyên khởi, chất phác, mộc mạc, không trau chuốt, trang trí, tô điểm".

habits of writing.<sup>321</sup> In fact, Châu quietly started his struggle to renew Vietnamese literature after 1975 with the novel *Miền cháy* (*The Burned Land*, 1977) which examines the aftermath of the war, and collections of short stories like *Người đàn bà trên chuyến tàu tốc hành* (*The Woman on the Express Train*, 1983) and *Bến quê* (*The River Dock of My Hometown*, 1985), in which the war, people's lives and the narrator's inner self are revealed from many angles.

Hoàng Ngọc Hiến was the first writer to directly criticize socialist realism as the main reason for the poor performance of Vietnamese literature. In his article “Về một đặc điểm của văn học và nghệ thuật ở ta trong giai đoạn vừa qua” (“On a Characteristic of Our Literature and Arts during the Last Period”) in *Văn nghệ* (1979), he wrote: “In general, in our literature nowadays, writers tend to describe *what-should-exist* more than *what-exists*”. He continued that: “In several works, it is clear that writers seem to care more about conforming [to propaganda] than to truthfulness. This kind of work can be called “conformist realism”.<sup>322</sup> Though he did not even hint that “conformist realism” (or doctrinal realism) is in fact another name for socialist realism, readers might easily have guessed what he meant. The article was like a bomb thrown into collectivized literature, raising a fierce debate among literary circle and politically influencing the critic's life. Though considered as one of the most influential intellectuals in art and cultural area in Vietnam in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, his criticisms of socialist realism lead to professional ostracization.

It was not until the meeting of Nguyễn Văn Linh, the general secretary of the Vietnam Communist Party (CPV), with artists and writers on the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> October 1987, that the end of socialist realism as the orthodox method for literature and arts became widely known. Before

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<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, “Về một đặc điểm của văn học và nghệ thuật ở ta trong giai đoạn vừa qua” (On a Characteristic of Our Literature and Arts during the Last Period), Nguồn: Văn nghệ số 23, ra ngày 9/6/1979. [Accessed <http://phebinhvanhoc.com.vn/?p=303> September 2013]. Original text in Vietnamese: “Nhìn chung, trong sáng tác hiện nay, sự miêu tả cái phải tồn tại lấn át sự miêu tả cái đang tồn tại”. And “Đọc một số tác phẩm chúng tôi thấy tác giả dường như quan tâm đến sự phải đạo nhiều hơn tính chân thật. Có thể gọi loại tác phẩm này là “chủ nghĩa hiện thực phải đạo”.

that, in order to solve the political and economical crisis in Vietnamese society, the economic Renovation (“Đổi mới”) which ended the collectivized economy and accepted the market economy and private ownership was introduced by the 6th National Congress of the CPV in Hanoi between 15 and 18 December 1986. In this congress, Linh was elected to succeed Chinh as Party General Secretary. Therefore, the meeting between Linh and artists can be considered as a significant change in cultural policy, conforming to the economic renovation. The meeting gathered nearly one hundred writers, artists and cultural activists and focused on a discussion of the need to release literature and the arts from the control of propaganda. Typically, the writer Nguyễn Ngọc pointed out that the circumstances of war led to a politically conformist literature and arts which slowed their development for a long time.<sup>323</sup> Answering to the artists and writers in the meeting, Linh admitted that during the last period, the achievement of literature and arts was still poor. The CPV had underestimated the role of literature and arts, and arbitrarily controlled them. It had also implemented several unfair policies in cultural management. However, he still tried to save socialist realism at some level:

We should maintain socialist realism. There are some who claim to belong to socialist realism but do not dare to write truth, do not dare to criticize the Bad in order to construct the new Man of the new era. As the genuine artists, you comrades should preserve your honest way of writing and a pure and bright mind.

You are soul engineers, therefore, you have to contribute to the emergence of the New Man by describing the Old Man who is full of mistakes and bad habits. You should not follow idealism to describe people as saints.

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<sup>323</sup> Nguyễn Ngọc’s report in the meeting was printed later in *Văn nghệ*, see “Cần phát huy đầy đủ chức năng của văn học nghệ thuật” (“To Fully Promote the Functions of Literature and Arts”), *Văn nghệ*, Vol. 44 (31–10–1987). Can be seen at: [http://www.viet-studies.info/NhaVanDoiMoi/NguyenNgoc\\_CanPhatHuyDayDu.htm](http://www.viet-studies.info/NhaVanDoiMoi/NguyenNgoc_CanPhatHuyDayDu.htm) [ Accessed 2 September 2013].

It is not socialist realism if your writings do not make people look forward to the bright future and strongly believe in it in order to overcome current difficulties. Audiences and readers do not only need to see the darkness but also the light in order to come through it.<sup>324</sup>

Inspired by the meeting, two months later, Châu marked his fight against socialist realism in his article “Hãy đọc lời ai điếu cho một giai đoạn văn nghệ minh họa” (“Let’s Say Farewell to a Period of Illustrative Literature and Arts”) on *Văn nghệ* (5 December 1987). In this article, he criticized the efforts of politics to control literature and the arts which had resulted in diminishing the creativity and honesty of artists. He does not wish to reject the whole of Vietnamese literature during the postwar period but sadly points out its aesthetic failure:

I do not think that in the last few decades, the revolutionary literature which was nourished by the wisdom, sweat and blood of many generations of writers, did not provide any great and truthful work. But, on the other hand, we need to be honest to each other: during the last few decades, there was only freedom for illustrative writing. We got used to decorating the conventional forms and models and assumed it as the whole wide reality.<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> See Nguyễn Văn Linh, “Đồng chí Nguyễn Văn Linh nói chuyện với văn nghệ sĩ” (“Nguyễn Văn Linh Talks to Artists”), *Văn nghệ*, Vol. 42 (17–10–1987). Can be seen at: [http://www.viet-studies.info/NhaVanDoiMoi/NguyenVanLinh\\_NoiChuyenVanNgheSi.htm](http://www.viet-studies.info/NhaVanDoiMoi/NguyenVanLinh_NoiChuyenVanNgheSi.htm) [Accessed 2 September 2013]. Original text in Vietnamese: “Phải đứng vững trong trường phái tả chân xã hội chủ nghĩa. Cũng có những người tự xưng là ở trường phái tả chân xã hội chủ nghĩa nhưng họ không dám viết sự thật, không dám phê phán lên án cái xấu để xây dựng con người mới. Là những văn nghệ sĩ chân chính, các đồng chí phải giữ gìn sự trung thực của ngòi bút, giữ gìn tư duy trong sáng của mình. Các đồng chí là những kỹ sư tâm hồn, phải góp phần xây dựng con người mới từ những con người cũ còn mang nhiều thiếu sót, thậm chí còn mang nhiều cái xấu. Đừng rơi vào khuynh hướng duy tâm, duy ý chí mô tả con người mới luôn luôn toàn vẹn như ông thánh. Phải thấy rõ cả nhược điểm mới xây dựng được con người mới. Tả chân xã hội chủ nghĩa nếu không làm cho con người hướng về tương lai tốt đẹp với một niềm tin lớn để vượt qua những khó khăn trong hiện tại thì không đúng với lòng mong muốn của chúng ta. Công chúng khi thưởng thức tác phẩm của chúng ta không thể chỉ thấy tối tăm mà phải thấy được ánh sáng để nhảy qua bóng tối”.

<sup>325</sup> See Nguyễn Minh Châu, “Hãy đọc lời ai điếu cho một giai đoạn văn nghệ minh họa” (Let’s Farewell a Period of Illustrative Literature and Arts), *Văn nghệ*, Vol. 49 & 50 (5–12–1987). Reprinted in *Nguyễn Minh Châu: Tác phẩm chọn lọc* (Selected Writings of Nguyễn Minh Châu), ed. Tôn Phương Lan (Hanoi: Giáo dục Publishers, 2009) 462–66, 456. Original text in Vietnamese: “Tôi không hề nghĩ rằng mấy chục năm qua nền

Lê Ngọc Trà, a critic who was educated in Soviet Russia, can be considered as another prominent critic of socialist realism. After his article “Văn nghệ và Chính trị” (“Arts and Politics”) on *Văn nghệ* (*Literature and Arts*) volume 51 & 52 (1987) which also criticizes the influence of politics on literature and the arts, he continued to reveal how writers and artists wrongly applied the notion of truth and reflection in literature and arts, seeing this as one of the reasons for the poor performance of revolutionary and socialist literature in “Về vấn đề văn học phản ánh hiện thực” (“On Literature’s Reflecting Reality”) in *Văn nghệ* (1988). In his opinion, many artists and writers rigidly assumed that photographic realism is socialist realism, therefore, restrained their creativeness. There were other writers and artists who acknowledged that realism seeks not the appearance but the essence of reality, however, they were forced to use rigid and simple formulations of propaganda literature. He also identified the principal influences behind the collective attempt to reflect reality as follows: the Yenan thoughts on literature and arts (by Mao Tze Dong) and vulgar reception of literature and art in Soviet aesthetics and criticism as well as the misleading interpretation of Lenin’s Theory of Reflection.

According to Lenin’s Theory of Reflection, consciousness is the reflection of the material world, and social consciousness is the reflection of social being. Reflecting reality is not a mission but a characteristic of literature. Besides, saying true and saying truth is not the same thing. [...] The truthfulness of literature, therefore, is not only the truthfulness of reflecting reality, but also the truthfulness of the writer’s attitude, evaluation and honesty. Saying true and saying truth always come under a condition: the right to say true and say truth. For many years, our literature has not been given that right.<sup>326</sup>

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văn học cách mạng – nền văn học ngày nay có được là nhờ bao nhiêu trí tuệ, mồ hôi và cả máu của bao nhiêu nhà văn – không có những cái hay, không để lại được những tác phẩm chân thực. Nhưng về một phía khác, cũng phải nói thật với nhau rằng: mấy chục năm qua, tự do sáng tác chỉ có đối với lối viết minh họa, văn học minh họa, với những cây bút chỉ quen với công việc cài hoa, kết lá, vờn mây cho những khuôn khổ đã có sẵn mà chúng ta quy cho đấy đã là tất cả hiện thực đời sống đa dạng và rộng lớn”.

<sup>326</sup> See Lê Ngọc Trà, ‘Về Vấn đề Văn Học Phản ánh Hiện Thực (On Literature’s Reflecting Reality)’, *Văn Nghệ*, 20 (1988), 3 <[http://www.viet-studies.info/NhaVanDoiMoi/LeNgocTra\\_PhanAnhHienThuc.htm](http://www.viet-studies.info/NhaVanDoiMoi/LeNgocTra_PhanAnhHienThuc.htm)> [Accessed

However, Trà did not directly point out that rectification criticism was one of main reasons which led many writers assume photographic realism as socialist realism. The influence of rectification criticism will be demonstrated later in Tô Hoài's *Cát bụi chân ai* (*The Dust Beneath Whose Feet*, 1992), which is investigated in the following part in this chapter.

Until now, there has been no administrative voice which officially claimed the death of socialist realism as the orthodox method in Vietnamese literature and art. But in a discussion between famous writers and critics on the relationship between literature and politics and the freedom of writing in the office of the *Văn nghệ* newspaper on 28 January 1988, Hoàng Ngọc Hiến affirmed that socialist realism is “a fake concept”:

Socialist Realism is a fake concept that has caused troubles for writers and artists, critics and authorities for a long time. At the beginning, it was just a banner, but then it was turned into an academic concept, and then was decorated and demonstrated as a method of writing, and became so powerful.<sup>327</sup>

Later, in the book *Nhìn lại nửa thế kỷ lý luận hiện thực xã hội chủ nghĩa ở Việt Nam, 1936–1986* (*A Half Century of Socialist Realism in Vietnamese Criticism, 1936–1986*), which was published in 1999, Phương Lưu marks the period 1975–1986 as the last period in which a theory of socialist realism in Vietnamese literature was maintained. In Lê Duy Bắc's *Đường lối văn nghệ sau 1986* (*Policies on Arts and Literature after 1986*, 2001), socialist realism is not mentioned as the

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12 August 2013]. Original text in Vietnamese: “Theo phản ánh luận Lenin, ý thức là phản ánh của vật chất, ý thức xã hội phản ánh tồn tại xã hội... Ở đây phản ánh hiện thực là thuộc tính chứ không phải là nhiệm vụ của văn học. Mặt khác phải thấy rằng nói thật và nói sự thật không phải bao giờ cũng là một. [...] Tính chân thực trong văn học, do đó, cũng không phải chỉ là tính chân thực của sự phản ánh, mà còn là tính chân thực lịch sử của thái độ, cách đánh giá và sự trung thực của nhà văn. Nói thật và nói sự thật bao giờ cũng phải kèm theo một điều kiện: quyền được nói thật và nói sự thật. Nhiều năm qua văn học ta chưa hoàn toàn có quyền ấy”.

<sup>327</sup> Văn Trang, ‘Thảo Luận Bàn Tròn Tại Tuần Báo Văn Nghệ, 28–1–1988 (Discussion at Văn Nghệ on 28 January 1988)’, *Văn Nghệ*, 10 (1988), 2. Original text in Vietnamese: “Vấn đề hiện thực xã hội chủ nghĩa cũng cần được xem lại. Đây là một khái niệm giả đã gây đau khổ kéo dài cho cả nghệ sĩ, cả nhà nghiên cứu lẫn lãnh đạo. Nó lúc đầu được nêu lên như một ngọn cờ, và đã có sức tập hợp, vẫy gọi. Nhưng tai hại là ở chỗ từ một ngọn cờ, người ta lại định biến nó thành khái niệm học thuật, để làm sang cho nó, chứng minh nó là phương pháp sáng tác, biến nó thành vạn năng”.

orthodox method for literature and arts anymore. In fact, most Vietnamese writers and artists turned their back on socialist realism after 1987. Among critical works which looked back and explained the existence of socialist realism in Vietnamese literature, the prominent ones are Trần Đình Sử's "Văn học và hiện thực trong tầm nhìn hiện đại" ("Literature and Reality Under Current View") in the conference *Văn học phản ánh hiện thực đất nước hôm nay* (*Literature on Reflecting Current National Reality*, July 2010), and Lã Nguyên "Văn học hiện thực xã hội chủ nghĩa như một hệ hình giao tiếp nghệ thuật" ("Socialist Realism as an Artistic Communication Mode") in *Nghiên cứu văn học* (2012). These critics exemplify a recent trend of approaching literature using Foucault's theory of discourse. They examined socialist realism from its relationship with politics and Soviet aesthetics.

Along with the fight against socialist realism in the theoretical realm, there was an enduring fight conducted by many writers who were of the new generation as well as ones who grew along with socialist realism during the war. Their writings were called "Văn học Đổi mới" ("Renovation Literature"). In poetry, Chế Lan Viên's poetry collection *Di cảo thơ* (*Posthumous Manuscript*, 1992–95) is a typical one. In theatre, Lưu Quang Vũ's plays in 1980s such as *Hồn Trương Ba, Da hàng thịt* (*The Butcher's Skin*), *Tôi và Chúng ta* (*I and We*), *Ông vua hóa hổ* (*The King Turns Tiger*), *Chiếc ô công lý* (*The Umbrella of Justice*) stirred theatres in Hanoi with questions of the relationship between individuals and power, the soul and the material world, and explored how people are institutionalized by ideological systems and their own desires. In fiction, some prominent works of this post-socialist realist writing include Phạm Thị Hoài's first novel *Thiên sứ* (*Angel*, 1988); Dương Thu Hương's novels *Bên kia bờ ảo vọng* (*Beyond Illusions*, 1987) and *Những thiên đường mù* (*Blind Paradises*, 1988); Bảo Ninh's *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* (*The Sorrow of War*, 1987); Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's *Tướng về hưu* (*The Retired General*, 1989); Dương Hương's *Bến không*

chồng (*The Dock of Husbandless Woman*, 1991).<sup>328</sup> After the rise of Renovation Literature, Vietnamese literature recently has turned towards world literature in its efforts to represent the problems of current society as well as individuals. This post-Renovation Literature can be summed up by Nguyễn Bình Phương's statement:

There is a young literature which is contrary to Renovation Literature in the way that it does not express its disagreement or anger at anything. In my opinion, that this young writer generation is against nothing provides them with a great freedom for writing. There are social messages in this kind of literature, but they contain no political motivation. They care less for politics than for individuals in the current society.<sup>329</sup>

In fact, it is not easy to distinguish the boundaries between Renovation Literature and post-Renovation Literature because the war, the collectivised system and its aftermath as well as literary heritage of socialist realism are still reflected in Vietnamese life and literature in various ways, which will be demonstrated in the following parts in this chapter.

Recently, the influential critic Lã Nguyên has split Vietnamese literature after 1975 into three periods: 1975–1985 sees the beginnings of the literary renovation; 1986–1991 is the most active period of renovation literature; and from 1992 up to now, the renovation seems to have been completed and Vietnamese literature has entered a new phase.<sup>330</sup> He stated that the literary

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<sup>328</sup> For more information about Vietnamese Renovation literature, see: Dana Healey, 'Literature in Transition: An Overview of Vietnamese Writing of the Renovation Period', in *The Canon in Southeast Asian Literatures*, ed. by David Smyth (Curzon Press, 2000), pp. 41–50.

<sup>329</sup> This is from an interview with Nguyễn Bình Phương by Dominique Bari, "1975–2005, Việt Nam ba mươi năm sau: Nhìn về văn học hôm nay" ("1975–2005: Thirty Years of Vietnamese Literature"), *L'Humanité* (April 2005). The Vietnamese translation of the article by Phan Bình can be seen at:

<<http://www.tienve.org/home/literature/viewLiterature.do?action=viewArtwork&artworkId=3542>> [12 August 2013]. Original text in Vietnamese: "Có một nền văn học trẻ, đối nghịch với văn học Đổi Mới, không bày tỏ sự bất bình, dù trước bất cứ cái gì. Họ không chống cái gì cả, theo tôi điều đó mang lại cho họ một tự do rất lớn để sáng tác. Ngay cả khi người ta tìm thấy trong đó những thông điệp có tính chất xã hội, nó không mang tính chất chính trị. Người ta không quan tâm đến chính trị nữa, mà quan tâm đến cá nhân trong xã hội đương thời".

<sup>330</sup> See Lã Nguyên, "Nhìn lại các bước đi, lắng nghe những tiếng nói" ("Looking Back: Vietnamese Literature After 1975"), *Văn học Việt Nam sau 1975: Những vấn đề nghiên cứu và giảng dạy (Vietnamese Literature After 1975: Some Issues in Study and Teaching)* (Hanoi: Giáo dục, 2006), 55–69.

renovation started with *kí* (especially investigative reportage) but its best achievements are among short stories and novels.

My argument is that though during the most recent period defined by Lã Nguyên, most readers and critics seem to have considered stories and novels as more typical for the literature of renovation, in fact, it is *kí* which more clearly shows how Vietnamese literature turns away from socialist realism and comes closer to postmodernism. The resurrection of investigative journalism, a genre which was absent in socialist realism *kí* during 1945–1986, and the emergence of renovation memoirs, as well as autobiographical metafiction, sparkle a postmodern skepticism on the sincerity and truthfulness of canonized socialist *kí* and a playful attitude toward the transparency of the genre.

#### **4.2. *Such a Night* and the resurrection of investigative journalism**

The text which inaugurated the most active period of the literary renovation was Phùng Gia Lộc's investigative journalism "Cái đêm hôm ấy đêm gì" (*Such a Night*) on *Văn nghệ* 1987. This piece tells the real story which happened to the writer's family and other farmers in Thanh Hóa Province on 26 November 1983. It shows how farmers suffered from the rigid and unfair policies of collective farming and the new kind of "village bully" by local authorities. At the end of 1987, when Lộc confronted dangers because of his honesty and braveness against the provincial authorities, his friends arranged to help him to flee to Hanoi. He was hidden and taken care of by writer friends in the *Văn nghệ* newspaper office and the piece was written there. Nguyên Ngọc, the chief editor of *Văn nghệ*, who helped to hide Lộc during that time, later recalled that Lộc's work created an intense controversy, which awoke investigative journalism as a genre, fuelled hundreds of courageous pieces which honestly reflected wrongdoings and the aftermath of war

throughout the whole country, contributing to significant changes in the cultural and economic policies of the Vietnamese government.<sup>331</sup>

*Such a Night* depicts a chaotic and tragic night when Lộc's family and his village neighbour confronted police and village authorities who came to every household to seize property for their not being able to pay the collective farming tax. Because of high taxation, famine and a lost harvest due to floods, most households were not only unable to pay the tax in full but also suffered from hunger and despair. A terrorist and undemocratic atmosphere prevailed in the villages. Thanh Hóa Province can be considered as one of the hottest spots in this conflict between the masses and the authorities. *Such a Night* starts with the hunger and despair of the narrator (the author himself) when he sees that his family, friends and neighbours are starving and desperately worried about their tax debts. It ends with the desperation of the entire family after the police and village authorities, having pushed Lộc's ailing mother to the floor, take away a supply of rice seeds hidden in a coffin, which have been saved by the family for the future funeral of his mother only.

There is nothing particularly noteworthy about *Such a Night's* technique and style, compared to investigative journalism of the period 1932–1945 which is considered as the golden age of this genre in Vietnamese literary history. What made the piece so powerful an example of Vietnamese journalism is not the form but the content. More specifically, it bravely approaches another area of truth – the wrongdoings and failed policies of the contemporary political system, which had been avoided by journalism and literature for a long time. *Such a Night* marked the resurgence of investigative journalism as a genre after a long period of disappearance (1945–1986). The piece was very well-received and led to a fierce debate. After *Such a Night* was published, Lộc received great support from many readers and writers. An investigation in Thanh

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<sup>331</sup> See Nguyễn Ngọc, 'Độc "Đêm Trước" Nhớ Phùng Gia Lộc' (To Remember Phùng Gia Lộc)', *Tuổi Trẻ Online*, 11 May (2005) <<http://tuoitre.vn/Van-hoa-Giai-tri/114335/Doc-%E2%80%9CDem-truoc%E2%80%9D-nho-Phung-Gia-Loc.html>> [Accessed 4 July 2013]

Hóa Province's conflict was conducted, which led to the head of the province being removed from his position and introduced changes in the provincial policies and administrative system.

Many readers share the feeling that *Such a Night* is reminiscent of a scene in Ngô Tất Tố's famous novel *Tắt đèn* (*Lights Off*, 1937), which is rich in reportage quality. The scene in this work is similar to *Such a Night*'s situation in many ways: in *Lights Off*, unable to pay for the high and unfair poll tax for himself and his already dead brother, Dậu's ailing and starving husband is in danger of being imprisoned. Finally, Dậu has to fight against the village police and authorities in order to prevent them taking her husband away. Despite her efforts, he is dragged off, leaving his starving and despairing wife and children behind. Let's compare two paragraphs from the two works:

There came the sounds of drums and trumpets all over the village. Dogs started barking in every hamlet.

Dậu yawned while stretching his arms sluggishly. He leaned his arms against the bed and tried to sit up while moaning. When he picked up the bowl with his shivering fingers, trying to sip some porridge, the village police and the men of the head of village appeared with whips and ropes. Striking the whip on the floor, the village police fiercely shouted at Dậu in the voice of a drug addict:

"Hey bastard, I thought you died yesterday night, but you are still alive, aren't you? Quickly pay the money! Now!"

Frightened, Dậu dropped the bowl and fainted.<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> Ngô Tất Tố, *Tắt đèn* (*Lights Off*) (first printed on *Việt Báo Newspaper*, 1937), reprinted in Ngô Tất Tố, *Ngô Tất Tố và Tác Phẩm* (*Ngô Tất Tố and His Works*) (Hanoi: Văn học, 1971), 78. Ngô Tất Tố was one of the most prominent Vietnamese writers and journalists in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most of his fictions are rich in reportage quality, which is a consequence of his main job as a journalist. Original text in Vietnamese: "Tiếng trống và tiếng tù và đã thùng thảng đưa nhau từ phía đầu làng đến đình."

And here is the similar scene in *Such a Night*:

Suddenly the sounds of gongs roared all over the district. From a loudspeaker turned up to maximum volume, came the news of provincial plans and policies of farming and tax collecting. Hoàng Văn Nhân, leader of farming group No. 12, read out the list of households who had not paid. Torches were blazing along every path. The dogs were all barking like hell.

[...] Just before 1 a.m, the police and the village militiamen crowded in tumultuously to the households which had not managed to pay enough farming tax. Dogs were barking, and pigs were crying as if being slaughtered, which frightened my smallest son so much that he bursted into crying and held on to my wife tightly. Thức, my second child, crouched into my chest in the bed, not daring to make a sound. I heard the police and militiamen were searching for rice seeds in my next door neighbour's house. I could clearly hear them shouting and my neighbours begging for mercy.<sup>333</sup>

It is uncertain that Lộc intentionally makes the situation and the style in his reportage similar to the scene in *Lights Off*. The work is in fact the real story of himself, his family and his hometown.

It was bravely published to reveal the problems of farming policies and the overcontrol of new

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Tiếng chó sủa vang các xóm.

Anh Dậu uốn vai ngáp dài một tiếng. Uể oải, chống tay xuống phản, anh vừa rên vừa ngó đầu lên. Run rẩy cất bát cháo, anh mới kê vào đến miệng. Cai lệ và người nhà lý trưởng đã sầm sập tiến vào với những roi song, tay thước và dây thừng.

Gõ đầu roi xuống đất, Cai lệ thét bằng giọng khàn khàn của người hút nhiều sái cũ;

– Thằng kia, ông tưởng mày chết đêm qua, còn sống đấy à? Nộp nốt tiền sưu! Mau!

Hoảng quá anh Dậu vội để bát cháo xuống phản, lăn đùng ra đó, không nói được một câu gì”.

<sup>333</sup> Phùng Gia Lộc, “Cái đêm hôm ấy đêm gì” (“Such a Night”), *Văn nghệ* (1987). Can be seen at:

<<http://tuoitre.vn/Chinh-tri-Xa-hoi/Phong-su-Ky-su/114622/Phung-Gia-Loc-Cai-dem-hom-ay-dem-gi.html>> [Accessed 8 July 2013]. Original text in Vietnamese:

“Bỗng tiếng keng gõ giũa liên hồi. Keng khắp xã: từ đội 1 đến đội 15, như một sự bùng nổ dây chuyền. Tiếng loa phóng thanh mở hết cỡ đọc bản tin, kế hoạch huy động lương thực của tỉnh và chỉ thị của tỉnh ủy về công tác lương thực. Hoàng Văn Nhân, đội trưởng đội 12, đọc trên loa danh sách những nhà thiếu thóc chưa giao nộp cho hợp tác xã. Đèn đóm soi rưng rục ở các ngã đường. Chó sủa ới là chó sủa.

... Gần một giờ sáng, công an, dân quân đã ập đến các nhà nợ thóc. Tiếng chó sủa vang, tiếng lợn kêu ềnh ệch như bị chọc tiết ở các nhà gần quanh, làm thằng Út Văn khóc thét lên, ôm riết lấy mẹ. Thằng Thức cũng im thin thít, nằm co trong lòng tôi không dám cựa. Bên nhà ông Ái, láng giềng cách vườn nhà tôi một hàng rào, công an và dân quân đang lùng sục. Tiếng ông bà Ái kêu xin và tiếng quát lác, tôi nghe rõ mồn một”.

“village bully” by local authorities. What makes this reportage reminiscent of *Lights Off* and other great pieces of investigative reportage in its golden age (1932–1945) lies not only in the similar details superficially but in its vehement criticism of the contemporary political system. After *Such a Night* was published, hundreds of pieces of investigative reportage appeared in newspapers all over the country, revealing many hidden social problems. For example, Trần Huy Quang’s *Chuyện của một ông vua lốp* (*Story of A King of Rubber Tyres*, 1987) and *Lời khai của bị can* (*Declaration of the Accused*, 1987), both first published in *Văn nghệ*, are two reportages about a businessman who successfully created and ran an independent tyre factory but faced many obstacles and was even imprisoned by the authorities because before 1986, private ownership was out-lawed. *Văn nghệ* became the first newspaper which showed its commitment to renovation by publishing several influential pieces of reportage towards the end of 1987. Trần Khắc’s *Người đàn bà quỳ* (*The Kneeling Woman*, 1987) depicts the miserable life of a woman at the hands of corrupt rural authorities; Hoàng Minh Tường’s *Làng giáo có gì vui* (*The Joy of Teaching*, 1987) reveals the impoverishment of teachers; Võ Văn Trực’s *Tiếng kêu cứu của một vùng văn hóa* (*The Cry for Help from A Cultural Area*, 1987) shows how careless and ignorant management of culture by local authorities damages the cultural legacy of Vietnam. It is noticeable that Nguyễn Ngọc, the chief editor of *Văn nghệ* during that time, received a lot of criticism from above authorities. He retained his position for almost two years but was forced to resign at the end of 1988. Moreover, despite their influence and well-acknowledged place in the literary renovation, these works have not been reprinted or put into university manual of journalism as well as any collection of journalism to this day.<sup>334</sup>

After the period 1986–1991, investigative reportage quickly developed in terms of numbers of journalists and published works. But there has not been any new “earthquake” created by investigative reportage since 1986. The resurrection of investigative reportage after

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<sup>334</sup> For example, in Đức Dũng, *Phóng Sự Báo Chí Hiện đại (Modern Investigative Journalism)* (Hanoi: Thông tấn, 2004), there is none of the controversial pieces mentioned above.

1987 originated from the need to know the truth and to tell that truth to readers and writers. Its blooming is the consequence of the fact that many socio-economical and political problems were hidden or distorted in presentation for a long time due to the cultural management policies and the application of socialist realism before the Renovation. After the social problems before the Renovation were revealed and to some extent solved, other problems of the new period appeared and many of them have been reflected in journalism. But there are still some taboo areas for investigative reportage including, for example, corruption on the part of high-ranking officials and rebellions against the existing state. Under the state's censorship policy<sup>335</sup>, it is not easy for investigative reportage to have a multi-angled approach that area. At this point, I share Laughlin's explanation for the decreased performance of Chinese reportage after 1989:

There was of course genuine interest among readers and writers, primarily because contemporary reportage in the 1980s provided a rare window to information and ideas that had been taboo throughout the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). That is, its values derived from its supply of information that had previously been lacking, but once it had served its purpose of confirming the disillusionment of the Chinese reading public reportage became expendable: it declined sharply in quality and popularity after 1989. From another point of view, though, the value to readers and writers of reportage in the 1980s was that it provided a means of social critique that was able to circumvent the official news media and also provide a deeper analysis of the social and cultural roots of certain problems facing Chinese society. The decline of reportage after 1989 cannot be interpreted as a sign that this function has become irrelevant, only that reportage is no longer a reliable medium for the performance of this function.<sup>336</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> Censorship is still effective in Vietnam, though it is less strict. There are more reportages which uncover social evils or wrongdoings. However, politics is still a forbidden area for investigative reportages.

<sup>336</sup> Charles A Laughlin, *Chinese Reportage : The Aesthetics of Historical Experience* (London: Duke University Press, 2002) 21.

There are strong parallels between the rise of investigative journalism in Vietnam and China. Both the two countries have been underlying a similar political process: the economy and culture has been liberated to a degree while the central political authority has been maintained.

When investigative reportage as a genre cannot match the expectation of journalists and readers any more, automatically, attention turns to other literary forms: the novel and the short story became the renovative centre of Vietnamese literature. In other subgenres of *kí*, for example, memoir and autobiography, we see an increasing tendency to combine or blur the boundaries between *kí* and fiction, or to seek renewal by means of postmodern literary strategies, as I will explain in the next part of this dissertation. In other words, the essence of reality is now expressed in another way: through a notion of imaginary or fictional truth. Another explanation for investigative reportage's fall into disfavour is that postmodernism has gradually made writers and readers realize the incredibility of texts, especially ones which are long well-known for its credibility like history and journalism. Postmodern theory leads to a more sceptical attitude to truth: the text does not simply reflect material or social being. It rejects rigid genre boundaries and promotes parody, irony, and playfulness.

#### **4.3. Memoirs of literary circles: decanonizing socialist writers**

It is a fact that there are strong connections between autobiography<sup>337</sup> and the representation of gender, trauma and postcolonialism.<sup>338</sup> Linda Anderson has considered autobiography as “the text of the oppressed”: “Autobiography becomes both a way of testifying to oppression and empowering the subject through their cultural inscription and recognition”.<sup>339</sup> If the resurrection

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<sup>337</sup> In broad sense, autobiography refers to memoir, diary, autobiography, testimony. In narrow sense, it refers to an account of a person's life written by that person, focusing on his private life rather than offering a broader view of history and the society.

<sup>338</sup> These connections have been examined in several researchs, for example, see: Victoria Stewart, *Women's Autobiography: War and Trauma* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Owen Evans, *Mapping the Contours of Oppression: Subjectivity, Truth and Fiction in Recent German Autobiographical Treatments of Totalitarianism* (Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2006); David Huddart, *Postcolonial Theory and Autobiography* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>339</sup> Anderson, 104.

of investigative reportage informs the resistance of individual memory against collective one as well as an improvement of democratic conditions, the publishment of the memoirs after 1986, which portray hidden sides of North Vietnamese literary circle, reflects the need to return autobiography to be a democratic genre. Through undermining the myth of socialist writers, these memoirs undermine propaganda memoirs as well as a collective memory of socialist writers as the speaker of absolute truth.

#### 4.3.1. Myth of socialist writers

Let's look at a typical selected collection of criticism during the period 1945 –1985: *Tập nghị luận và phê bình văn học chọn lọc* (*A Collection of Selected Literary Criticism*), Volume 3. The book was published in 1976 by Giáo Dục, a publisher which was established in 1957 and has been Vietnam's leading educational publisher ever since. There are two main parts to the book: the first includes four essays on the principles and objectives of socialist literature by key cultural leaders; the second part contains seventeen critical essays on socialist writers, poetry and prose, in which there are four on Hồ Chí Minh's literary works and three on the poetry of Tố Hữu, the leading cultural figure of the Party at that time.

1	To Learn President Ho's revolutionary thoughts on culture, literature and arts
2	Reading Hồ Chí Minh's <i>Prison Diary</i>
3	Reading Uncle Hồ's poetry
4	Hồ Chí Minh's political commentary works
5	Introduction to Tố Hữu's <i>Từ ấy</i>
6	On Tố Hữu's <i>Việt Bắc</i>
7	Some thoughts on Tố Hữu's <i>Gió lộng</i>
8	Poetry and the great war against the American for national independence
9	Poetry from the South: the national songs

10	<i>Vùng mỏ</i> : a novel about workers by a worker writer
11	The national hero in <i>Đất nước đứng lên</i>
12	Typical characters in <i>Cái sân gạch</i>
13	Truthfulness and fighting spirit in <i>Tầm nhìn xa</i>
14	Cồn Cỏ Island's soldiers in Nguyễn Khải's writing
15	<i>Bất khuất (Undauntedness)</i> : a great lesson of being a revolutionist
16	<i>A Mother Who Fights</i> : a heroic mother
17	<i>Hòn Đất</i> : a truthful depiction of the great war by our heroic people in the South

The list shows that all these selected critical works are instances of socialist literary criticism: “truth” and heroism are the criteria. Not only were cultural leaders’ works made models of socialist literature but themselves as writers also became heroes. During the period 1945–1975, the stories of how different people went through hardship and ignorance to acknowledge Marxism and become socialist writers were popular. It was also common to read accounts of how a socialist literary work was created in a difficult situation such as under the enemy’s threatening or wartime hardship. Such tales were often told in writing camps and conferences and were also published. Hồ Chí Minh and Tố Hữu are the most popular examples made by this propagandic criticism. Similar to the manipulation of revolutionary prison diaries which was investigated in Peter Zinoman’s “Reading Revolutionary Prison Memoirs”<sup>340</sup>, the appearance of these “becoming a writer” stories confirmed the national myth of revolution.<sup>341</sup>

<sup>340</sup> See Zinoman, ‘Reading Revolutionary Prison Memoirs.’ In this article, he gives a thorough analysis of how Vietnamese revolutionary prison diaries reflect the national myth of revolution.

<sup>341</sup> In *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (University of California Press, 2001), Hue Tam Ho Tai applied William C. Spengemann and L.R. Lundquist’s idea of the relationship between autobiography and American Myth in “Autobiography and the American Myth” (1965), *American Quarterly* 17 (fall 1965): 501–2; and Benedict Anderson’s idea of “the biography of nations” *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 204. He stated: “Making history serve wartime purposes was achieved by writing the past (history in the lower case) as a narrative of heroic and ultimately triumphant struggle against foreign domination and inscribing the future as a vision of communist utopia achieved through the inexorable working of History with a capital H,

During the period 1945–1986, the principle of “Party Spirit” became the lodestone for both literary writing and criticism. In a letter to the 3<sup>rd</sup> National Congress of Artists in December 1962, the Central Committee of the CPV stated: “Our criticism of arts and literature has improved to strengthen and verify the Party’s policies on arts and literature as well as to study and apply Marxist–Leninist thoughts on arts and literature”.<sup>342</sup> Similarly, in the 4<sup>th</sup> Congress of Artists in 1968, Trường Chinh stressed that “Criticism does not only have to guide readers and audiences to properly receive artistic works, and improve their knowledge, Party spirit and aesthetic ability, but also to ensure that writings and performances adhere to Party doctrine”.<sup>343</sup> This policy led to two kinds of criticism during this period: investigative criticism by “lính gác tư tưởng”<sup>344</sup> (“ideology police”) which identified the political flaws in a given; and illustrative criticism which praised particular works in order to create a new myth of socialist writers. When political content was the most important criteria for any work, writers who adopted literary forms and language unfamiliar to socialist realism were said to be “lost” in bourgeois, counter–revolutionary thought (NVGP<sup>345</sup> is a clear example).

After 1975, many memoirs were published, serving the need to remembering one of the most special periods in Vietnamese history, which combines the revolution, the Vietnam War and socialist transformation. A great deal of them were written by military and political leaders, for example, Hoàng Văn Thái’s *Những năm tháng quyết định* (*The Most Crucial Years*, 1985), Đặng Vũ Hiệp’s *Kí ức Tây Nguyên* (*Memories of Tây Nguyên*, 2001) Phùng Thế Tài’s *Bác Hồ, Những kỉ niệm*

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Marxist style”. (p. 4). Tai went on to suggest that the state shaped “not only written history but popular memory as well” (p. 7).

<sup>342</sup> Central Committee of the Labour Party of Vietnam, ‘Thư Của Ban Chấp Hành Trung ương Đảng Lao động Việt Nam Gửi Đại Hội Văn Nghệ Toàn Quốc Lần Thứ III (Letter from Central Committee of the Labour Party of Vietnam to the 3rd National Congress of Literature and Arts 1968)’, in *Về Văn Hóa Văn Nghệ (On Culture and Art)*, 4th edn (Văn hóa, 1976), pp. 19–31, 19. Original text in Vietnamese: “Công tác lí luận và phê bình cũng đã có nhiều cố gắng mới để giữ vững và làm sáng tỏ đường lối văn nghệ của Đảng và tìm hiểu thêm những nguyên lí của chủ nghĩa Mác – Lênin về văn nghệ, nhằm đẩy mạnh việc sáng tạo và thưởng thức văn nghệ”.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid, 38. Original text in Vietnamese: “Công tác phê bình không những phải giúp quần chúng thưởng thức tác phẩm một cách đúng đắn, nâng cao tư tưởng, nhận thức và trình độ thẩm mỹ của nhân dân, mà còn phải giữ vững vai trò hướng dẫn cho sáng tác và biểu diễn nghệ thuật đi đúng đường lối của Đảng”.

<sup>344</sup> See Trần Đình, *Đền Cù* (Người Việt, 2014).

<sup>345</sup> Nhân văn Giai phẩm Movement (NVGP). Refer back to Chapter 2 for more details.

*không quên* (Uncle Ho: Unforgettable Memories, 2002), Nguyễn Thị Bình's *Gia đình, Bạn bè và Đất nước* (Family, Friends and Nation, 2012). Besides, there were several memoirs written by writers, critics or cultural figures, for example, Anh Thơ's *Từ bến sông Thương* (From Thương River Dock, 1986), and Tố Hữu's *Nhớ lại một thời* (A Time to Remember, 2000), Nguyễn Hiến Lê's *Hồi kí* (Nguyễn Hiến Lê's Memoir, 1992). However, none of these works became literary phenomena on the scale of Tô Hoài's *Cát bụi chân ai* (The Dust Beneath Whose Feet, 1992) and *Chiều chiều* (Every Afternoon, 1999), Nguyễn Khải's *Thượng đế thì cười* (And God Is Smiling, 2006), or Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh's *Hồi kí* (Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh's Memoir, 2008). While being well received and discussed by readers, these works were not appreciated by the authorities. In particular, *Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh's Memoir*, which was leaked on the internet before publication, was prohibited by the authorities and also received severe criticism from orthodox critics. What lay behind these literary phenomena? These memoirs did not focus on the writers' life but covered the experiences of Vietnamese literary and artistic circles between 1945 and 1986. In particular, these memoirs addressed two highly sensitive periods: the removal of NVGP and land reform.

#### **4.3.2. Tô Hoài's *The Dust beneath Whose Feet* and *Every Afternoon*: untold stories about socialist writers**

Tô Hoài is generally considered to be one of the most prominent prose writers of Vietnamese literature. After joining the socialist revolution in 1943, Tô Hoài became one of the top writers of socialist literature in North Vietnam. He was also one of the first writers granted the highest award given by the government of Vietnam in recognition of cultural and/or scientific achievement: the Hồ Chí Minh Prize. He joined the CPV early and worked as a socialist writer during the Indochina War and the Vietnam War. He spent much of his time in the literary circles of Hanoi and later recorded his experiences. *Cát bụi chân ai* (The Dust beneath Whose Feet, 1992) is mostly about Nguyễn Tuân, Xuân Diệu and Nguyễn Hồng,<sup>346</sup> his three close writer friends during

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<sup>346</sup> All the main writer figures in *The Dust Beneath Whose Feet*, including Nguyễn Tuân, Xuân Diệu, Nguyễn Hồng and Tô Hoài himself are granted Hồ Chí Minh Prize in 1996. Nguyễn Khải, the author of *And God Is*

the incident of NVGP. *Chiều chiều* (*Every Afternoon*, 1999) tells the stories of writers who were forced to work in the countryside as part of land reform legislation.<sup>347</sup> These two works shocked reader with stories which did not share the myth of socialist writers created by orthodox criticism between 1945 and 1975.

*The Dust beneath Whose Feet* suggested that the freedom of the writer was an illusion and subjected censorship policies to criticism. The political police who monitored the publishing industry was mockingly depicted as follows:

At the time the ones who secretly guarded every publication served in the be ideological police.. Of course, those polices could not live in idleness, they had to find faults at any cost. But in fact, their assessments were simply mechanical imitations of someone else's. [...] When higher authorities found faults in a specific text, then suddenly those polices also found it faulty too and started to investigate its every line. Of course they found more faults in the end!"<sup>348</sup>

Irony is the dominant tone of this memoir. For example, Tô Hoài uses pastiche while narrating the event in the typical style of public-reflection: Many writers and artist who joined or supported NVGP had to make a formal and written confession of their errors in an act of reflection. "I was blind and lowered my guard. Many departments of the Writer's Union were monopolized. The

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*Smiling* also received this award in 2000. The Hồ Chí Minh Prize (Vietnamese: Giải thưởng Hồ Chí Minh) is an honorary award given by the government of Vietnam in recognition of cultural and/or scientific achievement. The prize was established by decree in 1981 and has been awarded in 1996, 2000, 2005 and 2012 often posthumously. The prize is named for Ho Chi Minh, and is considered one of the highest honors bestowed by Vietnam.

<sup>347</sup> Land reform in Vietnam was a program of land reform in North Vietnam from 1953 to 1956. It followed the program of land reform in China from 1946 to 1953. The aim of the land reform program was to break the power of the traditional village elite, to form a new class of leaders, and redistribute the wealth (mostly land) to create a new class that has no ownership. Urban intellectuals were sent to countryside to investigate ownership and redistribute. Many writers and artists who supported NVGP had to join this program as way of self-reflection.

<sup>348</sup> Tô Hoài, *Cát Bụi Chân Ai* (*The Dust beneath Whose Feet*) (Hồ Chí Minh City: Hội Nhà văn, 1992), 67. Original text in Vietnamese: "Có một thời, những người theo dõi báo chí, xuất bản và phát hành sách báo được phong làm lính gác. Lính gác thì phải có việc của lính gác, chẳng lẽ ăn lương để đứng không. Nhưng thật ra người ta chỉ đọc a dua rồi đánh đòn hội chợ. Cấp trên hô người ấy, bài ấy có vấn đề. Tự nhiên cảm thấy hình như có vấn đề thật và người ta dò tìm từng câu từng chữ. Thế nào chả ra vấn đề!"

Nhân Văn Journal and Minh Đức Publishers were suspended, but NVGP thoughts have still been existting and distracting us”<sup>349</sup>. The meetings to re-educate NVGP people are also ironically summarized:

Unfortunately, some [NVGP people] enthusiastically admitted their faults and even exaggerated them but still gained no trust. Moreover, they were accused of being “superficial” and avoiding proper self-reflection. When it was his turn to confess, Nguyễn Hồng put a pile of Văn’s volumes in front of everyone, then tearfully opened them and told the story of each. No one could tell whether he was admitting his faults or explaining his good motives and efforts. Also, there were some unable to sleep for a whole month because of worry. In the Cứu quốc Newspaper, there was a young lad went to the woods and hanged himself.<sup>350</sup>

Not only ironically uncovering the truth about the suppression of NVGP, Hoài also revealed untold stories about Nguyễn Tuân, Xuân Diệu and himself, all of whom were considered and depicted as prominent socialist writers. Tuân was worshipped by everyone because of his writing talent, aestheticism, elite and unique manner. Before 1945 he was known for the inventiveness of his language and the quest for lost traditional beauty but after 1945 he incorporated some of those elements in work that the authorities found acceptable. For example, he focused on presenting the beauty hidden inside normal people during the socialist transformation and battles. But in *The Dust Beneath Whose Feet*, besides those characteristics, there was another hidden side of Tuân:

Every time he got angry [with Tố Hữu], Nguyễn Tuân grumpily said:

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid, 98. Original text in Vietnamese: “Tôi bị mơ hồ mất cảnh giác mọi mặt. Các cơ quan Hội Nhà Văn và nhiều công tác bị lũng đoạn. Báo Nhân Văn, nhà xuất bản Minh Đức không còn, nhưng tư tưởng Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm vẫn tồn tại, vẫn làm lệch lạc chúng tôi”.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid, 99. “Khổ một nỗi, có người nghe phê bình, cứ tiếp thu thun thút, còn mình họa thêm lỗi mình cho to ra thêm nữa. Thế mà cũng không được tin, lại bị tố cáo là hời hợt, trốn tránh tranh. Có người bỗng thật nhận thấy mình sai, nhận ngay cũng lại bị cho là nông cạn, con vẹt, thiếu đào sâu suy nghĩ. Đến lượt Nguyễn Hồng trình bày, lại đặt chồng báo Văn ra trước mặt, giở từng số, vừa nói vừa ứa nước mắt. Chịu chẳng ai phân tích ra thế là kể công hay nhận tội. Tôi dự các cuộc chỉnh huấn đã nhiều, có người lo quá, cả tháng không chợp mắt, như ở báo Cứu Quốc, một cậu còn trẻ, đã vào rừng thắt cổ”.

– I’d rather return my party membership to Tố Hữu.

But he never did.

And every year, on the anniversary of the founding of the party or during the New Year festival, Nguyễn Tuân would visit Tố Hữu<sup>351</sup>. He carried a few yellow roses. It almost became a custom. After all, it’s only words ...<sup>352</sup>

The legendary writer finally turns out to have some human, pathetic side like everyone. Gift of flowers signifies respect and more broadly that he is prepared to observe social norms and to play the political game in his own interests. He is not claiming to be above the game or to be in some separate imaginative realm. After all, he turns out not a pure aesthete. Tô Hoài’s attitude towards Tuân is not humiliation but sympathy, because he also ridicules himself like that: “My rectification “knife” also fierily executed a lot of NVGP people”<sup>353</sup>. He quoted friends’ comments on his personality: Như Phong used to call him as “a cunning suburban bastard with artificially polished writings”, and Tuân directly told him that he did not “appreciate him as either a person or a writer”<sup>354</sup>. And finally, the revelation of his previously concealed homosexual relationship with the gay writer Xuân Diệu was a shock to Vietnamese conservative society and completed Tô Hoài’s demythologization of socialist writers.

Irony is also the spirit of *Every Afternoon*, which tells the stories of how intellectuals, especially writers (and Nguyễn Tuân was one of them) were assigned jobs as land reform officials.

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<sup>351</sup> During the pre-unification period (before 1975), Tố Hữu (1920–2002) was one of the most influential figures in setting cultural policy in North Vietnam. He was also Vietnam’s most famous revolutionary poet.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid, 176. During 1945 – 1986, poet Tố Hữu was the second important cultural leader after Trường Chinh. Original text in Vietnamese: “Mỗi lần cúi kính, Nguyễn Tuân vùng vằng nói: –Thế này thì tao đem trả thẻ Đảng lại cho Tố Hữu.

Nhưng chưa bao giờ Nguyễn Tuân làm thế.

Mà chỉ thấy mỗi năm, dịp kỷ niệm ngày vào Đảng, hay tết nhất Nguyễn Tuân đều đến chơi Tố Hữu. Thế nào cũng cầm lên mấy bông hồng vàng lòng trứng gà. Trước sau tề chỉnh hầu như đã thành nếp. Cũng là miêng xà thôi...”.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid, 99. Original text in Vietnamese: “Dao kéo chỉnh huấn của tôi cũng đã hăng hái mổ xẻ nhiều người lắm”.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid, 116, 170. Original text in Vietnamese: “Như Phong vẫn bảo tôi là thằng ngoại ô láu cá, văn chương dẻo gọt”. Nguyễn Tuân: “Tô Hoài. Mình thường ít khen ông – về cả con người, cả nhà văn”.

Before I had never known what rice plants look like. But now I waded across rice fields with my trouser legs rolled up like every one, and carried a leather satchel like a proper official. Being the all-important land reform official of the village, I managed to avoid going to the fields by pretending to be working on the papers. If I was hungry, I just needed to order Đăng, the village leader's daughter, to go to the market and fetch something to eat. Stealing time to eat, or even stealing someone to sleep, and covering those guilts, none of them above, I, a land reform official, was not daring enough to do.<sup>355</sup>

*Every Afternoon* also describes the two years that Hoài spent in Nguyễn Ái Quốc School (the Party's political ideology training institute) in order to improve his understanding of Marxism and socialist aesthetics. He admitted that he could not understand what he was taught: "it was all Greek to me", he wrote. "I tried but all I gained was patches of knowledge. Maybe I would never get there. Finally, I remained me. That's all".<sup>356</sup> And in *Every Afternoon* it is shown clearly that Tô Hoài is not the only one.

Explaining his motives for writing these memoirs and revealing previously suppressed details about NVGP and land reform, Hoài said that he wanted to write about the period in which he lived like an honest secretary:

I always have to fight against my self when I am writing autobiography. People often write memoirs to say something: either to praise themselves, or to express their love or hatred,

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<sup>355</sup> Tô Hoài, *Chiều Chiều (Every Afternoon)* (Hồ Chí Minh City: Hội Nhà văn, 1999)., 9. Original text in Vietnamese: "Trước đây tôi chưa biết mặt cây lúa. Rồi tôi cũng xắn quần khỏi đầu gối ra đồng lội ruộng, vai vắn đeo cái túi xách cốt da, về cán bộ. Anh đội chúa chỏm một xóm, ngại ra đồng thì mở túi lấy sổ vở nghiên cứu, đối thì bảo cô Đăng con ông rể trưởng xóm ra chợ mua bánh ngô kẹo bột về ăn, có người đến thì đứng dậy cầm cái chổi đưa mấy nhát quét nhà, ăn vụng, kể cả ăn vụng người, và làm che mắt thế gian, anh đội tôi nào biết có ai trên đầu".

<sup>356</sup> Ibid, 182. Original text in Vietnamese: "Khó lắm, tưởng là đến nghe giảng về kinh tế cụ thể rồi về nhà máy liên hệ, kiểm tra sẽ vỡ ra, nhưng càng ù ù cạc cạc như vịt nghe sấm". And "Thế thì những cái được của tôi cũng vẫn lại chỉ là chấp vá, khâu rúm, khâu đục. Tôi chịu khó cóp nhặt nhưng biết đến bao giờ mới được cỗ máy. Vừa học vừa nhớ lằng nhằng, làm thế nào cho có trí thức. Có lẽ chẳng bao giờ. Tôi vẫn chỉ là tôi vậy, vậy thôi".

or to seek something. But for me, either when writing short stories, novels or memoirs, I always try my best to approach the truth. Of course the notion of truth here is flexible.<sup>357</sup>

This statement is an indirect criticism of the notion of truth in socialist realism. By claiming a flexible notion of truth, Hoài contrasted his own provisional truth with the propaganda's more absolute but false truth. In this way, he meets the war writer Tim O'Brien, who claimed to pursue an imaginative truth to hard facts, even in his autobiographical writings.<sup>358</sup>

#### **4.3.3. Nguyễn Khải's *And God Is Smiling and Finding My Lost Self*: Sincerity and truthfulness are different stories**

Unlike Tô Hoài's memoirs, Nguyễn Khải's *Thượng đế thì cười* (*And God Is Smiling*, 2003) focuses more on his own life as a writer. Through the memoir, readers also learn about literary circles between 1945 and 2003, especially during NVGP event and the literary renovation. However, the memoir mainly deals with Hoài's journey from being a miserable child to becoming a writer in the turbulence of the revolution and the war. In the memoir, the author speaks of himself in the third person as "him". Although Khải uses the memoir to defend himself against the accusation that he was a "coward" who used "cunning" in order to survive, it still revealed a hidden side of him as a writer, painting a self-portrait which did not fit the myth of the "socialist writer":

And what about him? If it happened that his mission as a writer clashed with his responsibility as a Party member, what would he do? Normally, the writer in him stepped back or avoided conflict for one very simple reason: he had to conform to the Party's regulations as long as he remained a party member. Therefore, the characters in his

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<sup>357</sup> Lan Ngọc, 'Phỏng Vấn Nhà Văn Tô Hoài: Đừng Nên Kỳ Vọng Gì Vào Lớp Già (Interview of Tô Hoài: You Should Not Put High Expectations of the Old Writer Generation)', *Thể Thao Và Văn Hóa*, January (2007) <<http://tuoitre.vn/Van-hoa-Giai-tri/181658/nha-van-to-hoi-dung-nen-ky-vong-gi-vao-lop-gia.html>> [7 July 2013 ] Original text in Vietnamese: "Với tôi, khi đặt bút viết hồi ký là làm một cuộc đấu tranh tư tưởng. Người ta thường viết hồi ký để trình bày một vấn đề gì đấy, để ca ngợi chính mình, để yêu ai hoặc ghét ai, nhưng cũng có khi chỉ để tìm ra một điều gì đấy. Nhưng với tôi, dù viết truyện ngắn, tiểu thuyết hay hồi ký thì tôi vẫn cố gắng viết gần nhất với sự thật, tiến tới sự thật. Tất nhiên, cái 'góc độ' sự thật nó cũng linh động lắm. Nhưng từ góc độ của tôi và do tôi lựa chọn thì tôi đảm bảo thế là đúng nhất, gần nhất".

<sup>358</sup> See Lomperis.

works cannot go to the extreme of their personalities, instead, they stop somewhere in the middle, they step back, they make up with each other<sup>359</sup>. Finally, they become identical. Their lives are too flat to remain interesting to the reader. Finally, he became a pathetic writer, a second or third-class one. He could only accept it because without the revolution and the Party, he had no chance to live a normal life let alone to become a writer.<sup>360</sup>

What is the reason for a famous writer to feel the need to re-assess his life and works after gaining fame, respect and well-being? Khải had no intention of writing off his whole career as a writer, and nor did he need to: he is generally considered a sharp writer and was brave enough to broach sensitive and difficult topics such as religious and ideological conflicts in the North after 1945. But in *And God Is Smiling* there is evidence of guilt and dissatisfaction about himself as a writer. This can be explained by investigating Khải's last controversial publication: a political essay named *Đi tìm cái tôi đã mất (Finding My Lost Self)*, which was published online in 2006, two years before his death.

The 1950s and the 1960s were joyful years for me. But for millions of ordinary people, they were years of worry and despair. My joy was real, my writings during that time were sincere. But other people's tears were real, too. I knew and I saw them. I should have

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<sup>359</sup> Many writers of socialist realism like Tô Hoài, believe that they cannot create characters "development basing totally in their own imagination but follow their dialectical development in real life.

<sup>360</sup> Nguyễn Khải, *Thượng Đế Thì Cười (And God Is Smiling)* (Hội Nhà văn Publishers, 2003), 189. Original text in Vietnamese: "Còn hấn, nếu xảy ra sự va chạm giữa chức năng của một nhà văn và trách nhiệm của một đảng viên thì hấn tính toán cách sao? Thông thường là hấn nhân nhượng và né tránh vì một cái lý rất đơn giản: nếu hấn còn là đảng viên thì phải chấp hành những nghị quyết của Đảng. Thành thử các nhân vật của hấn không đi đến tận cùng tính cách của họ, họ thường dừng ở khoảng giữa, rồi làm lạnh, rồi nhân nhượng, trở nên giống nhau ở những số phận mờ nhạt, thiếu tính quyết liệt, tính bi kịch để trở thành những gương mặt lớn có sức ám ảnh lâu dài trong lòng bạn đọc. Hấn chỉ có thể là nhà văn tầm thường, một nhà văn loại 2, loại 3 gì đó, biết vậy nhưng hấn vẫn chấp nhận, không có cách mạng thì đến làm người tầm thường cũng khó nói gì làm một nhà văn".

known which side to turn to. After growing old, I suddenly realized that a writer should only follow his heart, his inner goodness.<sup>361</sup>

It took Khải a lifetime to realize that writer's personal sincerity and truthfulness of his work are different things. A writer can be sincere about what he writes, but the selected reality presented in his writings may not be representative for the essence of reality. Moreover, it is difficult for a piece of writing to achieve truthfulness when its author has abandoned his own judgements and beliefs in order to identify himself with the orthodox ideology, ignoring his own discovery of history, culture and human life while in fact "all prophecies are just hysterical and delirious"<sup>362</sup>. Khải bitterly admits that "after spending all our youth believing those prophecies, finally when grow old, we end up find out that all our achievements are just a pile of rubbish".<sup>363</sup> He criticized the ambition of socialist realism to use fixed formulations to achieve "truthfulness", which would be impossible when reflecting human soul. Khải writes that: "Human beings remain a wide and deep secret from the very beginning. Communists must be so proud to use re-education game to control the soul of human beings because it is as flexible as the wind".<sup>364</sup> He points out that:

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<sup>361</sup> Nguyễn Khải, 'Đi Tìm Cái Tôi đã Mất (Finding the Lost Self)', 2006. Can be seen at <[http://www.viet-studies.info/NguyenKhai\\_DiTimCaiToiDaMat.htm](http://www.viet-studies.info/NguyenKhai_DiTimCaiToiDaMat.htm)> [Accessed 3 March 2013]. Original text in Vietnamese: "Những năm 50, 60 của thế kỷ 20, với tôi là những năm tràn đầy niềm vui. Nhìn vào đầu tôi cũng thấy tôi được, dân tộc tôi được. Nhưng cũng những năm ấy với hàng triệu người dân thường lại là những năm đầy lo lắng, hãi sợ và tuyệt vọng. Tôi vui là chuyện có thật, những trang viết của tôi vào những năm ấy là rất thành thật. Nhưng nước mắt của người khác cũng là chuyện có thật, tôi có biết, có được chứng kiến. Tôi nên nghiêng ngòi bút của tôi về phía nào. Về già tôi mới nhận ra nhà văn phải nghe theo tiếng gọi của tình cảm, của trái tim, của cái phần thiện lương trong con người mình".

<sup>362</sup> Nguyễn Khải uses the word "prophecies" here to refer to political theories, including socialism.

<sup>363</sup> Nguyễn Khải, 'Đi Tìm Cái Tôi đã Mất (Finding the Lost Self).' See original text in Vietnamese: "Phải bỏ hẳn những tư tưởng triết học và thế giới quan phù hợp với cách nghĩ, cách nhìn, cách đánh giá của riêng mình, đã được chứng minh qua những trải nghiệm của bản thân để nhập vào dòng tư tưởng chính thống, cái triết học chính thống, cách nhìn nhận và đánh giá chính thống, xét cho cùng chả liên quan bao nhiêu tới cái tâm sự đang ấp ủ, tới những điều cần phải viết, và trên hết, máu thịt hơn hết là những phát hiện độc đáo của riêng mình trong lịch sử, trong văn hoá, trong nhân sinh". And: "Mọi lời tiên tri đều có tính mê sảng, đồng cốt. Dành cả một thời thanh xuân để tin vào những lời tiên tri ấy, về già nhìn lại cái tài sản tinh thần thu góp một đời chỉ là một cái kho chứa đủ tạp nham chẳng có một chút giá trị gì".

<sup>364</sup> Ibid. Original text in Vietnamese: "Con người vẫn nguyên vẹn là một bí mật mênh mông, sâu thẳm như từ thừa nguyên sơ vậy. Người cộng sản phải kiêu ngạo lắm mới dám bày cái trò chỉnh huấn phê bình để lãnh đạo một cách chuẩn xác cái phần khó nắm bắt nhất trong con người. Vì nó biến hoá, nó phù du như mây như gió vậy".

There are many political and cultural figures” memoirs which neglect the hidden part of their selves, the animal part which encourages us to commit sins and creates our ridiculous facial expressions. The part which they want to forget and would even become dangerous for someone who acknowledges it.<sup>365</sup>

By noting that the memoirs of “political and cultural figures” who have been well-trusted by the masses are incredible, Khải implies that the possibility of sincerity is also questionable because writers either do not fully know themselves or consciously hide the ugly sides of their souls.

There is nothing new in Khải’s above ideas. As I mentioned in Chapter Two, NVGP writers, especially Trần Dần, had previously drawn attention to the gap between text and reality and historical or political truth. In his last writing, *Di cảo* (*Posthumous Writing*, 2009), which included notes of his thoughts on literature during his career as a writer until his death in 1989, Nguyễn Minh Châu pointed out how “for a long time we have mistaken the essence of reality for some superficial things which are visible: corruption, collective production, socialism” and suggested that writers should “capture not only the real but also the illusory sides of life, not only reality but its shadow as well, which is the genuine reality”.<sup>366</sup> What is noticeable here is that these words in *Finding the Lost Self* were uttered by a leading writer of Vietnamese socialist realism, who used to carefully avoid trouble, for example, he did not attend NVGP and the literary renovation at its peak time (1986–1991). It suggests that significant changes had taken place at the very core of orthodox, mainstream literature in Vietnam. *And God Is Smiling* is also considered as a failed novel by Khải, in which he tries to examine himself from a critical and ironical

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid. Original text in Vietnamese: “Nhiều tập hồi ký của các danh nhân cả chính trị lẫn văn hoá đều thiếu cái phần còn nhày nhụa của họ, cái phần thú vật của con người nơi sản sinh ra những tội ác chưa hình thành, cái què quặt, cái buồn cười đã được kiềm chế đúng lúc, đã được giấu nhẹm, cái phần họ muốn quên đi và rất dễ trở thành lang sói với đồng loại nếu trong đồng chí, đồng nghiệp còn có người biết đến và nhớ tới”.

<sup>366</sup> Nguyễn Minh Châu, *Di Cảo (Posthumous Writing), Volume 1* (Hà Nội Publishers, 2009), 350, 361. Original text in Vietnamese: “Thực ra lâu nay ta nhầm hiện thực là cái gì bày ra bề mặt mọi người đều thấy: tham ô, hợp tác hóa, chủ nghĩa xã hội”. And: “Các nhà văn đang cố nắm bắt không những cái thực mà cả cái hư ảo của đời sống, không những nắm bắt hiện thực mà còn muốn nắm bắt cái bóng của hiện thực và cái đó mới là cái hiện thực đích thực”.

viewpoint, however, it turns out that toward the end of the work, he is lost in defending himself. This unintentionally sets off the tragedy of a typical writer of Stalinist socialist realism.

#### **4.3.4. Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh's Memoir: individual memory versus institutionalized memory**

A comparison between Tô Hoài's two memoirs, Nguyễn Khải's *And God Is Smiling*, and *Hồi ký Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh* (*Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh's Memoir*), which was leaked on the internet against the wishes of its author in 2008, would conclude that the latter text is by far the most controversial one. Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh (1930–), its author, is generally considered to be one of the most influential critics of Vietnamese contemporary literature.<sup>367</sup> He is most famous for biographical criticism, a trend which was not popular in mainstream criticism between 1945 and 1986. Fed up with literary criticism which focussed on political content and "truthfulness" criteria, Mạnh encouraged readers to approach literary works through lively literary portraits in his typical works such as *Nhà văn, tư tưởng và phong cách* (*Writer, Ideology and Style*, 1983) and *Con đường đi vào thế giới nghệ thuật nhà văn* (*Ways into the Writer's Creative World*, 1994). Biographical criticism allowed him to see that a combination of talent, ideology, personality and historical and family background created the writer as a whole and all of them are reflected in his writings. Mạnh's style of criticism may be one of the reasons which led him to pay attention to "behind the scenes" stories about literary and political circles, which are the principal elements of this memoir. Shortly after being leaked on the internet, the memoir was attacked by orthodox critics, who suggested that Mạnh gave wrong and distorted images of influential political and cultural figures, and wrote purely out of his personal hatreds.<sup>368</sup> Besides sensitive details about the operation of the

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<sup>367</sup> Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh (1930–) is one of the most influential critics of Vietnamese contemporary literature. He was granted the title Honorary National Teacher and State's Award on Literature and Arts. See Annex 2.

<sup>368</sup> See: Đặng Huy Giang, "Bệnh thường tình mà nên tránh" ("To Avoid a Popular Disease"), *Văn nghệ trẻ* (23 November 2008); Nguyễn Hữu Thắng, "Về hồi ký của Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh – Tác giả sách giáo khoa Văn" ("About *Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh's Memoir*"), *Văn nghệ trẻ* (30 November 2008); Đỗ Hoàng, "Một cuốn hồi ký lẫn nhiều sạn" ("A Memoir with Lots of Faults"), *Văn* (November 2008); Thanh Trúc, "Tâm sự đường đời hay nơi trú ẩn hận? (*Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh's Memoir*: Sharing about Life or Release of Hatred?)", *An ninh thế giới* (8 November 2008); Thượng Nguyên, "Chất độc hại trong một cuốn hồi ký" ("The Poison in A Memoir"), *Công An Nhân Dân* (12 December 2008).

Vietnamese National Assembly, the way Mạnh writes about Hồ Chí Minh is another main reason for the book to be banned. Mạnh reserves a whole chapter (Chapter Seven) for the most important figure in Vietnamese 20<sup>th</sup> century history.

Contrary to the allegations of orthodox critics, however, Mạnh does not ridicule Hồ Chí Minh in this memoir. On the contrary, his admiration for him is expressed quite clearly. For example, Mạnh addresses Hồ Chí Minh as “cụ” (great elderly), “bác” (uncle), which are the terms of respect for the elderly). However, the book pictures Hồ Chí Minh in a way which is different from the propaganda image. Besides being strong-willed, intelligent, caring and good-natured, Hồ Chí Minh in Mạnh’s understanding is also a normal person. He is scared in dangerous situations, suffers sexual restriction through devoting his life to a political career, and is clever enough to make use of propaganda in politics, and feels helpless when confronting a greater power such as the Russian or Chinese socialist authorities, or even his own comrades when they became unduly influential. The followings are typical examples of how Mạnh perceives the national hero:

I saw Hồ Chí Minh with my own eyes twice.

The first time was after the August Revolution in 1945. My father took my family from Thái Bình to Bắc Ninh Town. I continued my education by going to Hàn Thuyên secondary school.

One day, there was an announcement that Hồ Chí Minh was going to visit Bắc Ninh. Some of my school mates and I were selected to welcome him. Everyone was given a small paper flag to wave when he came. We stood in line in front of the town’s information department, where he was supposed to visit. After a while came a small cab which stopped right in front of the department. I saw two bodyguards leap out of the cab and quickly jump onto the low wall in front of the department. Guns in hands, they

carefully and nervously looked to left and right. Hồ Chí Minh emerged from the car. He wore khaki clothes and canvas shoes and held a baton. He was thin and tanned. Black-haired and black-bearded. He stood right next to us but gave us little kids no attention while we all shouted in our loudest voices: “Long live President Hồ!” He stayed there for a while, then came inside while watchfully looking around. Straight-backed, thin but strong and active, that was my impression of him.<sup>369</sup>

Mạnh describes a later encounter with Hồ Chí Minh when the former was working as a lecturer at Vinh University of Education in 1961 or 1962. President Hồ had a meeting with local people in the town’s stadium. In Mạnh’s memory, Hồ “was not at all a good speaker. His speech was slow, short, and lacked smoothness. Sometimes he blundered and had to cover it up by changing the subject”.<sup>370</sup>

Mạnh does not only record his own experience with Hồ Chí Minh but also presents what he was told by those who had the chance to meet or work with Hồ Chí Minh, for example, the writer Tô Hoài, the artist Diệp Minh Châu, war hero Nguyễn Thị Hằng. He even recounted rumours about Hồ, which circulated in some quarters. For these reasons, his memoir was criticized for discrediting and distorting the image of an important historical figure. What may have been the author’s purposes in doing this? Mạnh provides the answers at the beginning of the memoir. First,

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<sup>369</sup> Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh, *Hồi Ký Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh (Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh’s Memoir)* (The e-version of this memoir was leaked and spread on the internet out of the author’s intention. He does not want to publish it yet due to political reasons, 2008). Original text in Vietnamese: “Tôi được tận mắt thấy Hồ Chí Minh hai lần. Lần thứ nhất ngay sau Cách mạng tháng Tám. Sau cuộc khởi nghĩa tháng Tám 1945, bố tôi đưa cả gia đình từ Thái Bình về Thị xã Bắc Ninh. Tôi tiếp tục học cấp II ở trường Hàn Thuyên. Một hôm được tin Hồ Chủ tịch về Bắc Ninh. Tôi và mấy bạn học được nhà trường cử đi đón. Mỗi đứa được phát một lá cờ nhỏ bằng giấy, hễ Hồ Chủ tịch đến thì vẫy cờ và hô khẩu hiệu chào mừng. Chúng tôi đứng xếp hàng trước cửa phòng thông tin thị xã, nơi Chủ tịch Hồ Chí Minh tới. Đợi một lúc thì có một chiếc xe ô tô con đỗ ngay mép đường, trước cửa phòng thông tin. Tôi thấy có hai anh cảnh vệ vọt ra trước, cầm lăm lăm tiểu liên, nhảy lên đứng trên hai cái trụ của bức tường hoa thấp trước phòng thông tin. Hai anh lia mũi súng sang trái, sang phải, về mặt căng thẳng. Hồ Chí Minh bước ra sau. Quần áo kaki. Giày vải. Cầm batoong. Người gầy, đen. Râu tóc cũng đen. Ông đứng lại ngay sát chúng tôi, nhưng không để ý gì đến bọn trẻ con này cả, tuy chúng tôi ra sức phất cờ và hô “Hồ Chủ tịch muôn năm!”. Đứng lại một lát, liếc nhìn chung quanh một chút, mặt đầy cảnh giác, rồi ông đi rất nhanh vào phòng thông tin. Lưng rất thẳng, gầy nhưng cứng cáp, cử chỉ lạnh lẹn – ấn tượng của tôi về Hồ Chí Minh là như thế”.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid. Original text in Vietnamese: “Hồ Chí Minh không hề tỏ ra là người hùng biện. Nói chậm, ngắn, không lưu loát. Có chỗ lỡ miệng nói hớ, vội lảng sang ý khác”.

he wanted to discharge his own feelings and thoughts, to feel “the pleasure of releasing the facts of our life” because “my own life and my writing have some specific values”. Secondly, since people seem to be interested in learning significant historical and cultural information from important figures, he wants to offer an individual perspective on history in the hope that it might be of use to someone:

Besides, though I am only a politician by accident, I had the chance to witness many important historical events such as the August Revolution and land reform, and to know some private stories of figures such as Hồ Chí Minh, Tố Hữu and several key cultural figures such as Nguyễn Tuân, Xuân Diệu, Tô Hoài, Nguyên Hồng, etc. Of course, these stories have already been told from the orthodox viewpoint. Here I simply offer my own apprehension and subjective view with the hope that it might benefit someone.<sup>371</sup>

By saying that his personal perception of history had some specific value as well as noting that rumours and other’s stories are also a part of reality, Mạnh articulated the need to re–consider public memory as it had been established in history and propaganda literature. In this way, Mạnh’s memoir resembles Tô Hoài’s *The Dust Beneath Whose Feet* and *Every Afternoon* as well as Nguyễn Khải’s *And God is Smiling*, which also revise the images of much–praised socialist writers

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<sup>371</sup> Ibid. Original text in Vietnamese: “Viết hồi kí để làm gì nhỉ? Viết hồi kí thì có ích gì cho mình và cho người khác? Hình như tôi bày một sự thực của đời mình cũng là một khoáí thú riêng của con người ta. Khoáí thú được giải tỏa. Có ai đó nói rằng mọi khoáí cảm trên đời đều là sự trút ra khỏi thân mình (decharger) một cái gì đó. Với mình thì thế. Nhưng còn với người. Người ta thích đọc hồi ký của các danh nhân, của những nhà hoạt động tầm cỡ quốc gia, quốc tế hay những nhà văn hóa lớn. Biết được bí mật của cuộc đời danh nhân là biết được những thông tin có ý nghĩa quốc gia đại sự, biết được kinh nghiệm của nền văn hóa một dân tộc. Vậy tôi viết hồi ký với tư cách gì? Chỉ để cho mình được giải tỏa cũng được chứ sao? Ngoài ra liệu còn có ích cho ai nữa không? Tôi không tin lắm. Cũng có thể có tác dụng trong một phạm vi hẹp trước hết đối với những người thân, ngoài ra là những ai coi cuộc đời riêng của tôi cũng có một cái gì đáng tò mò và sự nghiệp viết lách của tôi không đến nỗi hoàn toàn vô giá trị. Nghĩa là cũng muốn tìm hiểu cũng muốn giải thích. Ngoài ra tôi tuy không phải nhân vật lịch sử nhưng sự tình cờ đã đưa đẩy tôi được chứng kiến nhiều sự kiện lịch sử quan trọng như Cách Mạng tháng Tám hay cải cách ruộng đất... và biết được một ít chuyện riêng của một số danh nhân như Hồ Chí Minh, Tố Hữu, Và nhiều nhà văn hóa lớn như Nguyễn Tuân, Xuân Diệu, Tô Hoài, Nguyên Hồng... Tất nhiên những sự kiện này và những nhân vật kia người ta đã nói nhiều, viết nhiều rồi theo cách nhìn quan phương chính thống, ở đây tôi chỉ nói những hiểu biết trực tiếp của riêng tôi với cách nhìn rất chủ quan của tôi. Nhưng chính vì thế mà, biết đâu đấy, lại có thể đem đến những thông tin riêng, những ý vị riêng”

by picturing them not as heroic soldier writers but as normal people who are also pathetic in their struggles with the political control of literature.

When these memoirs are put alongside the revolutionary prison memoir or war memoirs of military or political leaders, one can see the differences clearly. The latter creates personal stories of how to overcome the cruelty of colonialism or wartime difficulties as heroic Communist activists and soldiers<sup>372</sup> who symbolized the “biography of the nation” (Anderson, 1983), in other words, the victory of revolution and socialism. The former deconstruct the mechanism of institutionalized memory through desacralizing the idea of the socialist writer as heroic Communist soldier. Consequently, memoirs of literary life are also a way to deconstruct socialist realism. In these new memoirs, the most prominent writers of socialist realism are no longer heroic and committed but normal people who were institutionalized and swept under the wheels of history. The emergence of these memoirs of the literary life reveals the need to reimagine history from multiple points of view, especially from individual and subjective ones.

One might at this point ask two questions. First, why were such politically sensitive memoirs able to bloom? And second, how were these memoirs different to memoirs of socialist realism (before and after 1975) in terms of style and form? Đỗ Hải Ninh in her article “Ký trên hành trình đổi mới” (“The Change of *Kí* in the Vietnamese Literary Renovation”) in *Nghiên cứu văn học* (*Literary Studies*) explains the blossoming of *kí* in Vietnamese literature after 1986 as follows:

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<sup>372</sup> See Peter Zinoman, “Reading Revolutionary Prison Memoirs”, *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley, Calif. ; London: University of California Press, 2001), 22, 23, 39. Zinoman asserts: “A survey of revolutionary prison memoirs reveals little variation in terms of form, content, or thematic orientation. Virtually all works within the subgenre highlight the political education and successful resistance efforts of jailed Communist activists. They employ structurally identical episodes to illustrate colonial cruelty and Communist heroism”. He also argues that revolutionary prison memoirs were the result of “the efforts of the leaders of the new Communist state during the late 1950s and 1960s to construct and promote an official public history of their rise to power” because the party’s need “to reassert the legitimacy of its monopoly over political power required a popular literary form that cleaned up, embellished, and celebrated the history of its heroic struggles and sacrifices”. In the Introduction to the book, Hue Tam Ho Tai agrees with Zinoman: “Making history serve wartime purposes was achieved by writing the past (history in the lower case) as a narrative of heroic and ultimately triumphant struggle against foreign domination and inscribing the future as a vision of communist utopia achieved through the inexorable working of History with a capital H, Marxist style” (p. 4). He asserts that the state shapes “not only written history but popular memory as well” (p. 7).

The flowering of various kinds of *kí* in the literary renovation is a persuasive proof of the democratic spirit of literature in this period. As a dynamic and sensitive genre, *kí* is the best to satisfy the writer's need to tell truths and the reader's need to know truths, which are consequences of the democratic movement [in Vietnamese politics]. That *kí*, through individual experience, offers subjective apprehension and discussion to readers makes this genre's depth and attractiveness.<sup>373</sup>

Ninh also further explained the rise of the memoir as a subgenre of *kí* during this period:

The democratic atmosphere allowed writers to reveal their deep thoughts and secrets, and even to attack topics which had been prohibited before. Simultaneously, memoirs serve the readers' desire to re-assess the past and history. [...] The development of memoir also proved that individual experience had become more valuable [...] While the revolutionary memoirs of the previous period focus on events which greatly influence the development of society, the memoirs of the literary renovation pay more attention to historical observations and individual destiny under the wheels of history.<sup>374</sup>

Although I agree with Ninh that memoirs bloomed thanks to more democratic conditions after 1986 and did indeed re-assess orthodox presentations of the past, I would argue that her view of

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<sup>373</sup> Đỗ Hải Ninh, 'Ký Trên Hành Trình Đổi Mới' ('The Change of Reportage Literature in the Vietnamese Literary Renovation'), *Nghiên cứu văn học (Literary Studies)*, 11 (2006). Original text in Vietnamese: "Sự phát triển phong phú và đa dạng của các thể ký thời đổi mới là một minh chứng sinh động về tính dân chủ trong văn học. Với tư cách là một thể loại nhạy bén, ký có khả năng đáp ứng một cách cao nhất nhu cầu được biết, được nói sự thật— hệ quả tất yếu của trào lưu dân chủ. Khả năng đối thoại, đề xuất những kiến giải riêng trên cơ sở trải nghiệm của cá nhân đã tạo nên chiều sâu nhận thức và sức hấp dẫn của thể loại".

Can be seen online at:

<[http://vienvanhoc.vass.gov.vn/noidung/tintuc/Lists/PheBinhVanHoc/View\\_Detail.aspx?ItemID=36](http://vienvanhoc.vass.gov.vn/noidung/tintuc/Lists/PheBinhVanHoc/View_Detail.aspx?ItemID=36)>

[ Accessed 23 December 2013].

<sup>374</sup> Ibid. Original text in Vietnamese: "Không khí cởi mở và dân chủ tạo điều kiện cho nhà văn có cơ hội bộc bạch, hé lộ những nỗi niềm gan ruột, những trăn trở suy tư của cái tôi, những bí mật riêng tư, thậm chí không ngần ngại đụng chạm đến những điều trước đây bị coi là cấm kỵ. Đồng thời hồi ký cũng đáp ứng nhu cầu của thể hệ người đọc cần hiểu, chiêm nghiệm quá khứ, đánh giá lại lịch sử, "đi tìm thời gian đã mất". [...] Sự phát triển của thể loại hồi ký cũng chứng tỏ kinh nghiệm cá nhân đang trở nên có giá trị hơn [...] Nếu như những cuốn hồi ký cách mạng trước đây thường chú trọng đến sự kiện lịch sử đặc biệt có tác động lớn đến quá trình phát triển xã hội và ý thức con người thì những cuốn hồi ký văn học thời đổi mới quan tâm hơn đến sự chiêm nghiệm lịch sử và số phận cá nhân trong lịch sử".

*kí* in general and memoirs in particular is still influenced by the traditional theory of *kí*, which had become canonical between 1945 and 1975. By claiming that *kí* is best able to satisfy “the writer’s need to tell truths and the reader’s need to knowing truths”, she reveals her commitment to the notion that *kí* can and should be transparent and honest. However, such a view leaves Đỗ unable to explain the difference between revolutionary memoirs written between 1945 and 1975 and memoirs of literary circles written after 1986.

Investigating the reasons that so many autobiographies appeared in East Germany after 1990, Owen Evans argues that:

none of the texts purposefully seeks to deconstruct the autobiographical form; the desire to document the experience of totalitarianism far outweighs any theoretical concerns about the form and its reliability as a rendition of self. [...] For the eight authors here, their decision to adopt an autobiographical form to recount these experiences in a liberal climate thus represents a quite deliberate attempt to reassert, to rescue the self. In this way, they might even be seen to be reconstructing a subjectivity that had been repressed, even deconstructed, by totalitarianism.<sup>375</sup>

In comparison to Evans’s texts, the memoirs of Vietnamese writers after 1986 adopted a more complicated attitude towards “the form and its reliability as a rendition of self”. On the surface, these memoirs maintain the traditional form of autobiography. The authors seem to be satisfied with questioning the credibility of public memory by providing hidden secular side, or even pathetic side of the literary canons. It is difficult to tell whether they were bounded by the traditional expectation of the genre to be “truthful” and transparent or they intended to utilize that expectation to increase the effect of exposing readers to secrets different to the accepted versions. However, some changes in the form are made, reflecting the writer’s changing attitude

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<sup>375</sup> Owen Evans, *Mapping the Contours of Oppression: Subjectivity, Truth and Fiction in Recent German Autobiographical Treatments of Totalitarianism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006) 7.

towards the reliability of texts and the act of writing. While revolutionary prison memoirs intend to inform and convince readers of a prefixed “truth”, these controversial post–1986 memoirs communicate the facts by means of pastiche, along with the abundance of seemingly insignificant details and in a chaotic order. The epic quality associated with the sincere, objective, determined narrator in the revolutionary memoir is now replaced by irony and with a less than completely reliable narrator. Quite suddenly, socialist realism is undermined by its own favourite genre: memoir. Moreover, the blurring of the boundary between memoir and fiction in post–1986 writing reveals a treatment of genre which might in some ways be characterized as postmodern. Tô Hoài himself once called his novel *Ba người khác* (*Three Enstranged People*, 2006) a memoir: this confusion of genres may stem from an acknowledgement of Western postmodernism.

#### **4.4. Đặng Thùy Trâm’s *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*: changes and resistance in literary reception**

The resistance to a traditional conception of memoir and other subgenres of autobiography such as the diary and the travelogue can be seen in such recent works as *Nhật kí Đặng Thùy Trâm* (*Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*, 2005), the Vietnamese best seller, and also in the success of Nguyễn Văn Thạc’s *Mãi mãi tuổi hai mươi* (*Forever Twenties*, 2005), another soldier’s diary.

Đặng Thùy Trâm (1942–1970) was a North Vietnamese army doctor who fought for the North in the Vietnam War and died defending her medical aid station from the attack of an American troop in the Ba Tơ jungle in south–central Vietnam. The diary remained in the hands of a US veteran for thirty five years and returned to Dr Trâm’s family in 2005. It was published and soon became a phenomenon, “selling more than 300,000 copies, generating numerous translations and a television show and causing a wave of patriotic nostalgia among young Vietnamese”.<sup>376</sup> There are many reasons for the popularity of the book. However, most readers

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<sup>376</sup> See David McNeil, ‘Diary of a Vietcong Doctor: The Anne Frank of Vietnam’, *The Independent*, 2005 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/diary-of-a-vietcong-doctor-the-anne-frank-of-vietnam-317801.html>, accessed 3 October 2013>.

agree that the success of the book comes from its differences to works of government propaganda. Lê Minh Tiến argues in *Tuổi trẻ* that the book satisfies the hunger for idealism, tolerance and sacrifice in a changing society, as well as the young generation's need for "earthly heroes" instead of saintly ones.<sup>377</sup> In an interview with *BBC Vietnamese*, critic Vương Trí Nhàn suggests that "the diary is more interesting because Đặng Thùy Trâm sincerely wrote for herself only".<sup>378</sup> Bảo Ninh, the author of *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* (*The Sorrow of War*), also states in *Tuổi trẻ*:

The first time I saw the diary, I was deeply moved. It represents a part of my youth. It is the most beautiful time in my life. [...] The reactions of young readers to the book are totally sincere. Don't think that the Vietnamese younger generation does not care about the past: they just get bored with the empty, superficial lectures about it. [...] The young generation nowadays is not different from the one in the past. They are not really spoiled and degraded. And, when they come across honest writing, which was supposedly written only for the author herself, they were deeply touched. Honest words are always more attractive than lies.<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>377</sup> Lê Minh Tiến, 'Nghĩ về Hiện Tượng Nguyễn Văn Thạc – Đặng Thùy Trâm (About the Phenomena of War Diaries of Nguyễn Văn Thạc and Đặng Thùy Trâm)', *Tuổi Trẻ Online*, 18 September 2005 <<http://tuoitre.vn/Chinh-tri-Xa-hoi/Thoi-su-suy-nghi/98546/nghi-ve-hien-tuong-nguyen-van-thac-dang-thuy-tram.html>> [accessed 03 October 2013]. Original text in Vietnamese: "Theo tôi hai cuốn nhật ký của anh Thạc và chị Trâm có thể trở thành "sách gối đầu giường" của nhiều người vì đã xuất hiện trong lúc mà xã hội đang trong thời kỳ "khô hạn" về giá trị sống [...] sự thành công của hai cuốn nhật ký như còn muốn nói rằng hình như đã có một biến chuyển trong nhận thức nơi giới trẻ hiện nay. Quả thật qua anh Thạc và chị Trâm, chúng ta có cảm giác hình như người trẻ hôm nay đang cần những "hình mẫu lý tưởng trong đời thường" chứ không phải là những bậc thánh nhân cao vời mà người ta chỉ có thể tôn kính chứ khó noi theo được".

<sup>378</sup> Nguyễn Hùng, "Cơn Sốt Cuốn Nhật Ký "Có Lửa" (War Diary Becomes A Publishing Sensation)," *BBC Vietnamese*, 6 September 2005. Original text in Vietnamese: "sự chân thật của Đặng Thùy Trâm vì chỉ viết cho riêng mình đã khiến cho cuốn nhật ký thêm hấp dẫn". <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/vietnam/story/2005/09/050901\\_dangthuytramdiary.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/vietnam/story/2005/09/050901_dangthuytramdiary.shtml)> [accessed 03 October 2013].

<sup>379</sup> Ngọc Lan, "Nhà Văn Bảo Ninh: Cái Thật Bao Giờ Cũng Có Sức Quuyến Rũ (Bảo Ninh: Truth Is Always Attractive)," *Thể thao và Văn hóa*, August 2005, 41–43. Original text in Vietnamese: "Lần đầu tiên nhìn thấy cuốn nhật ký, tôi đã rất xúc động. Đó là một phần tuổi trẻ của tôi. Đó là những năm tháng đẹp nhất của cuộc đời tôi. [...] Phản ứng của độc giả trẻ là hoàn toàn chân thật. Đừng nghĩ thanh niên Việt Nam không thêm quan tâm đến quá khứ mà chẳng qua vì "chúng" không thích những bài giảng sáo rỗng đầy thôi! [...] Thanh niên thời nay và thanh niên hồi xưa vẫn thế. Họ không hoàn toàn hư hỏng. Và, khi bắt gặp một câu

David McNeil also summarizes Vietnamese readers' reaction to the diary as follows:

Although this is not the first Vietnam War diary published, many Vietnamese say Dr Dang's account has struck a chord with young people because it comes raw with human emotions and unvarnished by government propaganda. Much of the official Vietnamese history of the anti-US conflict celebrates the heroic sacrifices of loyal Communist cadres, immune to the fear, hate and longing for love that all soldiers feel. [...] Nguyen Duc Tinh, a radio announcer from Hanoi, says: "She writes the truth about her feelings, and despite everything she loved people. It comes straight from her heart. I think a lot of young Vietnamese are impressed at the way she was ready to sacrifice her life. I hope people around the world will read it to understand the truth about the Vietnam war".<sup>380</sup>

Most comments on the diary share this point: this book is different from propaganda literature in "tính chân thật". The concept of "tính chân thật", as mentioned in Chapter One of this dissertation, can be translated as "honesty", "sincerity" or "accuracy", in contrast with "giả dối" ("fake", "lie"). Although socialist realism valued sincerity as its highest dignity and requirement, the way contemporary readers perceive sincerity has changed: a literary text is sincere when it depicts reality from multiple angles. That is why *Last Night* has been praised: Trâm did not only mention heroism and patriotism but also loss, doubt as well as some wrongdoings in her organization:

Victory comes close already, but all Duc Pho remains heavy with sorrow; day by day blood still runs and bones still fall. The saddest part of the hardship is that I still have not found fairness or rightness. I still have not won the struggle with the bad traits which dishonour the members of the Party and break the spirit of the people who work at the clinic. Thuy! Are you a loser? While the Party members and the youth all support me, I still cannot win

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chuyện rất thật, một câu chuyện viết cho chính mình, họ đã "lên cơn sốt". Cái thật bao giờ cũng có sức quyến rũ hơn sự giả tạo!"

<sup>380</sup> McNeil.

over some of the evil persons in the clinic. All during the terrible dry season, I never felt sad, but always smiled in the face of hardship; yet now I am so hurt. The real enemy I do not fear, but I am afraid of how the enemy has poisoned my comrade's minds.<sup>381</sup>

Although the criteria of sincerity have changed, the expectation and belief in the sincerity of autobiography has been greatly influenced by traditional theories of the genre. For example, the passage I have just quoted reveals that Trâm in fact acknowledged that her diary is not only for herself, it might be read by the survivor soldiers or her family. She also assumed herself the task of recording the heroic battles of her comrades and the Souther Vietnamese:

October 10, 1969. I haven't written in this diary for a long time. Is the conflict gradually taking away the thoughts of one who knows how to think about life? No, I don't want it to be that way, but the job weighs heavily on me and everyday the sorrow of dead comrades makes me forget personal matters. This diary is not only about my life but is and must be pages of memory of a life bright with the Struggle and full of the sorrow of the courageous Southerners.<sup>382</sup>

The quoted paragraph shows that Trâm did acknowledge that she was writing not only for herself but for someone else to read, and her diary should not be only about her private life but also reflect the heroism of her comrades and southerners. The act of writing is already the act of editing. When you write for someone else to read, you have to edit even more. That detail undermines the absolute purity and sincerity of the book, which are believed by a great deal of readers. The reception of Trâm's diary, therefore, reflects that Stalinist socialist realism somewhat still remains in the way Vietnamese readers receive it. The pattern of reading revolutionary prison

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<sup>381</sup> Đặng Thùy Trâm and Andrew X. Phạm trans., *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace: The Diary of Dang Thuy Tram* (Broadway Books, 2008), 142.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid, 169. Phạm translates the phrase "phải là" ("must be") into "is" but this is not accurate. See the original text in Vietnamese: "nhưng quyển nhật ký này đâu phải chỉ là cuộc sống của riêng mình mà nó **phải là** những trang ghi lại những mảnh đời rục rủa chiến đấu và chồng chất đau thương của những con người gang thép trên mảnh đất miền Nam này". In Đặng Thùy Trâm, *Nhật Ký Đặng Thùy Trâm* (Hanoi: Hội Nhà văn, 2005), p. 213.

memoirs and *truyện kí* about real heroes (1945–1975) still lingers in contemporary readers, especially, the ones who directly experienced the war.

#### 4.5. Challenges to *kí*: emergence of autobiographical meta/fiction

As demonstrated in Chapter Two, *kí* occupied the main channel of Vietnamese literature because the accuracy of events and characters in *kí* was identified with the truth-bearing quality of socialist realism.<sup>383</sup> The former was been taken as the guarantee for the latter. After the Vietnam War ended in 1975, and especially after the renovation in 1986, the need to reassess historical truth and to represent a multi-dimensional reality has become more increasingly evident. The resurrection of investigative reportage and the emergence of confessional memoirs about the literary life demonstrated that the genre has answered the call for literary renovation. However, *kí* has faced new challenges. Firstly, although Vietnamese society has seen an expansion of democratic culture after the Renovation (Đổi Mới) in 1986, the existence of censorship has lessened the performance of *kí* to some extent. Secondly, nowadays both writers and readers have gradually come to “a changing, postmodern understanding of the nature of history, the historical process and the (in)validity of any individual account’s claims to accuracy or, ultimately, objective truth”.<sup>384</sup> I have previously suggested that postmodernism in the sense of multiple perspectives and a rejection of the idea of some single truth has been a good thing for Vietnamese literature, it also represents a challenge (perhaps in the sense that radical pomo theory might deny historicity). *Kí* after 1986 has been at risk. And autobiography, one of its important subgenres, has been at risk as well. Despite that memoirs of communist military officers and political figures, which follow the tradition of revolutionary prison memoirs, were abundant the end of the Vietnam War, the number of confessional memoirs and diaries after 1986 remains modest, due to either the Party’s censorship or the skeptical view of account

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<sup>383</sup> As stated in Chapter 2, “truth” in socialist realism originally referred to the essence of reality, but the vulgar reception of socialist realism subsequently took realist appearance as in photographic realism as truth..

<sup>384</sup> Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, eds., *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women’s Writing* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3.

literature which origins from postmodernism. *Kí* is no longer the centre of Vietnamese literature: after 1975, writers and readers have paid more attention to novels and short stories. Among them, historical fiction and autobiographical metafiction has emerged as one of the most attractive and controversial subgenres. Historical and autobiographical elements which are crucial in *kí* now have been absorbed into fiction in a new attitude towards reality. In the following paragraphs, I will examine Bảo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* as the first autobiographical metafiction which questions war trauma representation and asks for critical reading.

It is no coincidence that most autobiographical metafictions after 1986 have attracted both readers' attention and that of the censorship authorities. Dương Thu Hương's *Bên kia bờ ảo vọng* (*Beyond Illusions*, 1987) and Bùi Ngọc Tấn's *Chuyện kể năm 2000* (*A Tale for 2000*, which was started in 1991 and published in 2000) were banned in Vietnam. Bảo Ninh's *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* (*The Sorrow of War*), which was first published in 1987 under the title *Thân phận tình yêu* (*The Destiny of Love*), was not allowed to be reprinted between 1991 and 2005. The autobiographical elements in these novels are the main reason for all their troubles with censorship. I will examine the case of *The Sorrow of War* to clarify it.

The structure of *The Sorrow of War* is a novel within a novel. The novel inside *The Sorrow of War* is written by Kiên and he is also its main character. He writes about his own traumatic experience with the war and his life after the war as well as about writing this novel. Although most of Kiên's novel is told in the third person, some parts are narrated from a first-person point of view (Kiên's) as well. Though Kiên repeatedly informs us that he is writing a novel, it turns out that he cannot write anything except his own life. His writing follows not his plan but the flow of his chaotic memory: "He had intended to write one thing but his pen took another direction, displaying a mind of its own".<sup>385</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> Bảo Ninh, Frank Palmos and Phan Thanh Hảo, *The Sorrow of War* (London: Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd, 1993), 181.

The novel seemed to have its own logic, its own flow. It seemed from then on to structure itself, to take its own time, to make its own detours. As for Kien, he was just the writer; the novel seemed to be in charge and he meekly accepted that, mixing his own fate with that of his heroes, passively letting the stream of his novel flow as it would, following the course of some mystical logic set by his memory or imagination. [...] From that winter's night when he began to write, the flames of memory led Kien deeply into a labyrinth, through circuitous paths and back out again into primitive jungles of the past. Again, seeing the Sa Thay River, Ascension Pass, the Screaming Souls Jungle, Crocodile Lake, like dim names from hell. Then the novel drifted towards the MIA team, gathering the remains, making a long trail linking the soldiers' graves scattered all over the mountains of the North and Central Highlands; this process of recalling his work in gathering remains had breathed new energy into each page of his novel.<sup>386</sup>

Đoàn Cẩm Thi is reasonable in thinking that Bảo Ninh's original intention was to write *The Sorrow of War* in the form of autobiography. She argues that Ninh had to choose the novel form instead because "conventionally, every autobiographer has to "tell the truth only". Ninh both desired this and was scared of it. [...] the censorship authorities quietly shadow his writing".<sup>387</sup> Thi also quotes Nguyễn Minh Châu's bitter acknowledgement of the situation of Vietnamese writers before 1986:

It seems that each writer has been keeping two pens in his hand while writing: one pen is for ordinary readers, one is for writing propaganda to be read by the cultural authorities.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid, p. 81.

<sup>387</sup> Đoàn Cẩm Thi, "*Nỗi Buồn Chiến Tranh: Tự Truyện Bất Thành (The Sorrow of War Supposed to Be An Autobiography)*," *Tiền vệ*, 2004. <<http://www.tienve.org/home/literature/viewLiterature.do;jsessionid=7D95A8E8DCC85E03B11E66ED79C1A42C?action=viewArtwork&artworkId=4572>> [accessed 2 September 2013]. Original text in Vietnamese: "Vậy không viết tự truyện là một lựa chọn của Bảo Ninh. Nhưng vì sao? Vì hành động giao ước «chỉ kể sự thật» mà bất cứ tác giả tự truyện nào cũng phải đảm nhận trước độc giả của mình. Hành động đó, cũng như việc trực diện trước công chúng, tác giả của *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* vừa muốn vừa sợ hãi. [...] cái bóng của kiểm duyệt lấp ló sau những trang viết của Bảo Ninh". The original article was written in French. See Doan Cam Thi, "Du sujet dans Le Chagrin de la guerre, roman vietnamien de 1990 – Genèse d'un contre-discours", *Cahier du centre Marcel Granet, n. 2: Sujet-Moi-Personne*, sous la direction de François Jullien, Institut de la Pensée Contemporaine – PUF, 2004.

Sadly, the second pen, which was created for self-protection, after staying in their hands for a long time, became more skillful.<sup>388</sup>

Thi also claims that Ninh wrote *The Sorrow of War* in the form of metafiction to show readers “the pressure of censorship without mentioning it directly”.<sup>389</sup> It is a fact that *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* (*The Sorrow of War*) was the original name of the novel. However, because of its politically sensitive content, Ninh changed this title to *Thân phận của tình yêu* (*The Destiny of Love*) for its first publication. The novel, published in the democratic atmosphere created by the reform in 1986, was well-received both by readers and critics but soon be banned for more than ten years (1991–2005) by the government. These facts prove that Bảo Ninh had good reason to worry about the book’s political sensitiveness. The novel might have been still more controversial if it had presented itself in the form of memoir. That Ninh chose the form of metafiction might be a way of softening the impact which an autobiography might have in the eyes of the state.

Thi’s argument is a possible explanation for the autobiographical metafictional form of *The Sorrow of War*, but it is not the only one. There are some prominent similarities between Ninh and his protagonist Kiên: for example, Kiên is the lone survivor of the 27th Battalion while in reality Ninh was one of the ten survivors of the 27th Youth Brigade. In addition, both Ninh and Kiên went to university and writing school after war. The novel is clearly not an autobiography but can be called as an autobiographical novel because of these autobiographical elements. Why, then, were these elements consciously retained if Ninh wanted to avoid political difficulties?

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<sup>388</sup> Nguyễn Minh Châu, ‘Hãy đọc Lời Ai điếu Cho Một Giai đoạn Văn Nghệ Minh Họa (Let’s Say Farewell to A Period of Illustrative Literature)’, *Văn Nghệ*, 49 & 50 (1987). Original text in Vietnamese: “Có vẻ tuồng như mỗi nhà văn mỗi khi ngồi trước trang giấy là cùng một lúc phải cầm hai cây bút: một cây bút để viết cho người đọc bình thường, cho đời, một cây bút khác viết cho đạo, lo việc che chắn, viết cho lãnh đạo văn nghệ đọc. Mà cái ngòi bút thứ hai này, buồn thay, các nhà văn cầm lâu ngày để tự bảo vệ mình cho nên cũng lắm kinh nghiệm, mà cũng tài hoa lắm!”

<sup>389</sup> Đoàn Cẩm Thi. Original text in Vietnamese: “Bảo Ninh muốn giúp người đọc hiểu được gánh nặng của kiểm duyệt mà không muốn bàn trực tiếp đến hiện tượng này, không nhắc đến danh từ kị húy đó”.

My argument is that Ninh had a complicated attitude towards genre. On the one hand, he was influenced by the traditional theory of autobiography, which emphasized the sincerity and accuracy of this genre. This attitude is revealed in his comments on *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* as “an honest writing, which was supposedly written for the author herself only”.<sup>390</sup> From this point of view, the autobiographical elements in *The Sorrow of War* serve to increase the reader’s belief in the authenticity of the experiences presented in the book. Ordinary readers continue to be interested in autobiographical forms because of their curiosity and because they long to read accounts of real life experiences. Besides, the autobiographical elements also reveal that Ninh values individual, subjective approach of history, which is undervalued by Stalinist socialist realism:

He dares not abandon himself to emotion, yet in each chapter Kien writes of the war in a deeply personal way, as though it had been his very own war. [...] There is a force at work in him that he cannot resist, as though it opposes every orthodox attitude taught him and it is now his task to expose the realities of war and to tear aside conventional images.<sup>391</sup>

There is also another institutionalized memory that Ninh wanted to fight against: the distorted imagination of the war created by the American propagandic or cheap films and writings: “I am watching a US war movie with scenes of American soldiers yelling as they launch themselves into combat on the TV screen and once again I’m ready to jump in and mix it in the fiery scene of blood, mad killing and brutality that warps soul and personality”.<sup>392</sup>

Ninh’s attitude towards genres is complicated because although he still believed in the sincerity and accuracy of autobiography at some levels, he started to doubt the transparency of language and the act of writing. Kiên repeatedly admits that he has been trapped in his traumatic

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<sup>390</sup> See the previous part on Trâm’s diary in this chapter.

<sup>391</sup> Bảo Ninh, Palmos and Hảo, 45.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid, 44.

memory of the past: “The past years out here imprison me”.<sup>393</sup> However, the chronological order of traditional autobiography and the novel is no longer appropriate to transcend the multidimensional reality of traumatic experience. To present the reality of the war, which contains both the real and the surreal, a reality in which “justice has won, but cruelty, death and inhuman violence have also won”,<sup>394</sup> is a challenge for traditional autobiographical writing. Ninh created a metafiction in which the act of Kiên’s writing an autobiographical novel is acknowledged and judged by two characters: Kiên himself and another writer at the end of the book who finds Kiên’s manuscript and introduces it. This strategy allows the author to reveal the difficulties of telling a war story:

So bitter is his frustration that he feels his pen takes him closer at first and then more distant from what he wishes to say. [...] But the act of writing blurs his neat designs, finally washing them away altogether, or blurs them so the lines become intermixed and sequences lose their order. Upon rereading the manuscript he is astounded, then terrified, to read that his hero from a previous page has, on this page, disintegrated. Worse, that his heroes are inconsistent and contradictory, and make him uneasy.<sup>395</sup>

It is not that Kiên the writer is not skilful enough to keep up his “neat designs”, but his writing is a complex of commemoration and investigation which focusses on his own life as well as the wider history of the war. The writing process follows the logic of traumatic memory. That his heroes are “inconsistent and contradictory” is the result not only of the multidimensional reality of the war but also of the complicated process of remembrance. I do not share Kate McLoughlin’s thought that like Tolstoy in *War and Peace* (1865–9), Edith Wharton in “Writing a War Story” (1919) and Tim O’Brien in “(1990), Ninh fails to write about war, writing instead about the difficulties of its

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<sup>393</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid, 180.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid, 44.

representation because War “resists depiction”.<sup>396</sup> On the contrary, Ninh manages to do both by means of nonchronological narrative as well as metafictional form.

Ninh’s metafiction strategy also includes another writer, who only shows up at the end of the novel and plays the role of a narrator and a reader. This anonymous writer, who lives in Kiên’s neighbourhood, found his manuscript, copied and introduced it to society. Basing on this account, it would seem that from page 1 to page 212 of the book is entirely Kiên’s work, and the anonymous writer only writes from the end of page 212 to page 217 (the last page of the book). It is possible that some readers may find the anonymous writer insignificant or absurd because he contributes nothing to telling the main story and confines himself to explaining the chaotic structure of the manuscript and commenting on Kiên’s presentation of the war and post-war life. Unlike Kiên, who is confused, disorganized and frequently feels helpless, the anonymous writer, who also used to be a soldier, is articulate and analytical. In other words, he is the idealistic reader that Ninh expects. He explains the chaotic structure because he is committed to defending the spirit of Kiên’s novel: “the sorrow of war”, which is omitted or poorly represented in the literature of socialist realism. In this way, this anonymous character can be seen as Ninh’s clever defense against censorship as well as readers who have been influenced by the vulgar reception of literature. He repeatedly affirms that soldiers like Kiên and him “had shared all the vicissitudes, the defeats and victories, the happiness and suffering, the losses and gains” (p. 216) and for them the war was “the painful but glorious days”, the “caring days, when we knew what we were living and fighting for and why we needed to suffer and sacrifice” (p. 217). He also points out that Kiên’s writing is just an individual comprehension of the war and its aftermath: “Each of us carried in his heart a separate war which in many ways was totally different, despite our common cause. We had different memories of people we’d known and of the war itself, and we had different

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<sup>396</sup> Kate McLoughlin, *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (Cambridge University Press, 2011) 5.

destinies in the postwar years” (p. 217). Besides, he analyses how sorrow involves saving human souls from the brutality and destructions of war:

But we also shared a common sorrow, the immense sorrow of war. It was a sublime sorrow, more sublime than happiness, and beyond suffering. It was thanks to our sorrow that we were able to escape the war, escape the continual killing and fighting, the terrible conditions of battle and the unhappiness of men in fierce and violent theatres of war. [...] His sorrows prevented him from relaxing by continually enticing him back to his past. [...] Even so, I believe he derived some happiness from looking back down the road of his past.<sup>397</sup>

The troubles that *The Sorrow of War* had to face after its publication support this account of the anonymous character. Recently, in an interview in 2005, Ninh summarized the complicated reactions towards his book at the time it was published:

Despite being well-received by many readers, the book also faced severe criticism from readers and critics who used to put literary works into simple, contradictory categories: we – enemy, light – darkness, and so on; but in recent years, readers’ views of the war have changed, they don’t see my point of view as unfamiliar anymore.<sup>398</sup>

However, there is another explanation for the creation of the anonymous writer at the end of the book. Gradually acknowledging the incapacity of language and writing to capture reality and the writer’s idea, Ninh wants to help readers realize the distance between literary

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<sup>397</sup> Bảo Ninh, *Palmos and Hào*, 217.

<sup>398</sup> Ngọc Lan. Original text in Vietnamese: “Tất nhiên vào những năm đó thì những câu hỏi như vậy cũng gây ra những phản ứng vì những người xưa giờ họ quen đọc văn chương theo phân tuyến, quen đọc văn chương thời chiến tranh thì người ta không chấp nhận, nhiều người không thích, độc giả cũng thế, nhà phê bình lúc ấy họ cho là cuốn sách này đánh đồng, người ta dùng chữ “đánh đồng địch ta”, coi quân đội xâm lược cũng y như quân đội kháng chiến vậy. Tuy nhiên, nó vẫn có một bộ phận khác người ta lại tán thành, ủng hộ, và thậm chí cuốn sách này của tôi được giải thưởng của Hội Nhà Văn Việt Nam, nghĩa là nó có hai luồng tư tưởng khác nhau. Trong vòng 20 năm, từ đó cho đến nay khoảng 20 năm thì cái nhìn của con người, người ta nhìn về cuộc chiến tranh – tức độc giả ở Việt Nam – cũng trưởng thành lên. Người ta thấy điều tôi viết không có gì là mới”.

works and reality as well as to come up with a more flexible attitude to literature. The anonymous writer, while giving hypothesis and comments on Kiên's novel, keeps saying that he is uncertain: "many would say this", "Surely this was what the real author of this novel intended to say?", "Perhaps that was not completely true"( 214–7). These suggestions of uncertainty undermine the readerly conventions which had long been created and sustained by socialist realism.

In summary, the form of a metafiction in *The Sorrow of War*, in one hand, reflects an effort to escape and challenge vulgar reading of *kí* which is influenced by Stalinist socialist realism. This vulgar reading has also been presented in strict criticism of historical fictions in Vietnam recently. Since 1986, there are several historical fictions, for example, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's historical fictions, which were accused of distorting historical figures and events by adding fictional details which secularized the heroes or changed the accuracy of historical events. While this literary strategy reflects a subjective, individual and more humane approach to history, how these historical fictions were criticized also represents the mechanical reception of literature, which originated from Stalinist socialist realism.<sup>399</sup> On the other hand, the metafiction form shows Ninh's postmodern view in the sense that he sees language and writing as opaque and not simply referential. However, the doubt of the credibility of autobiography and other subgenres of *kí* has been not clearly shown in the book. This task has been performed by recent Vietnamese writers: for example, in *Chinatown*, Thuận uses the autobiographical elements to make a fake autobiography which does not aim at tricking readers but is intended for dynamic readers who

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<sup>399</sup> See Việt Quang, 'Sáng Tác về đề Tài Lịch Sử Không được Xuyên Tạc Lịch Sử! (Historical Fiction Should Not Distort History)', *Báo Nhân Dân*, 2014 <<http://www.nhandan.com.vn/chinhtri/binh-luan-phephan/item/22543402-sang-tac-ve-de-tai-lich-su-khong-duoc-xuyen-tac-lich-su.html>> [accessed 6 May 2014]; Đỗ Hải Ninh, 'Những Tranh Luận về Văn Xuôi Hư Cấu Lịch Sử và Sự Chuyển Biến của Tư Tưởng (Debates Over Historical Fictions and the Changes in Historical Approaches)', *Văn Học Việt Online*, 2012 <<http://www.vanhocviet.org/trao-doi-van-hoc/--hi-ninh-nhng-tranh-lun-v-vn-xui-h-cu-lch-s-v-s-chuyn-bin-ca-t-tng>> [accessed 3 April 2013]., and Peter Zinoman, 'Nguyen Huy Thiep's "Vang Lua" and the Nature of Intellectual Dissent in Contemporary Viet Nam', *Viet Nam Generation*, 4.1–2 (1992), 62–64, and Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, 'Văn Chương Không Cần Những Người Chỉ Viết Như Nô Bộc Hay Giải Khuây (Literature Does Not Need Puppet Writers)', *Văn Nghệ Thái Nguyên*, 16 (2014), 3.

may create different versions of the text.<sup>400</sup> Thuận's work reflects a new and more playful attitude towards autobiographical genre, which is typical for postmodern perspective, as stated in *Narrative and Genre*: "there was no longer a biographical self capable of reflection, or a biographical reality upon which to reflect. Hence reflection itself was merely ideology; and autobiography totally fictional".<sup>401</sup>

When Bảo Ninh's autobiographical metafiction and the Renovation memoirs by Tô Hoài, Nguyễn Khải, and Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh are put along side of the revolutionary prison memoir or war memoirs of military or political leaders, one can see the differences clearly: if the latter creates personal stories of how to overcome colonial prison's cruelty or wartime difficulties as communist heroes to symbolize the "biography of the nation", in other words, the victory of revolution and socialism; the former, intertextually deconstructs that mechanism of creating public memory through demystifying the idea of socialist writer as heroic communists. Consequently, it is also a way to deconstruct socialist realism, which was set to become a tool for creating public (institutionalized) memory as well. In these new representations of kí and autobiographical fiction, the most prominent writers of socialist realism are no longer heroic and committed ones but normal people who were institutionalized and swept away under the wheels of history. By the decanonization of the socialist literary canons, these renovation memoirs undermine the sincerity and truthfulness of kí written in the period 1945–1986 and suggest a new perception of sincerity and truthfulness which attaches to individualism and imaginative truth, and which also reveal the need to re-approach history, to re-picture the past from multiple points of view, especially from an individual or subjective one. Besides, the complicated reception of Dr. Trâm's

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<sup>400</sup> See Đỗ Hải Ninh, "Tiểu Thuyết Có Khuynh Hướng Tự Truyện Trong Văn Học Việt Nam đương đại (Autobiographical Novels in Contemporary Vietnamese Literature)", 2012.

<sup>401</sup> Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson, eds., *Narrative and Genre* (London: Routledge, 1997), 3. See also Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "The Trouble with Autobiography: Cautionary Notes for Narrative Theorists," in *A Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. by James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 368–369: "Autobiographical texts may be a minefield for the unwary reader, but they can also be a field of play and an occasion for critical reflection on changing reading practices, audiences, and ethics".

diary and historical fictions also represent both change and resistance in Vietnamese contemporary readers, many of whom remained under the influence of Stalinist socialist realism and opposed the introduction of postmodernism.

## Conclusion

The transformations of the theory and production of *kí* in North Vietnamese (1945–1986, and 1986–present) and South Vietnamese literature (1945–1975) which have been examined in this thesis show how *kí* was manipulated and absorbed into rhetorical strategies of socialist realism and Saigon government propaganda as well as how it resisted against them, which demonstrates the role of individual memory and collective memory to genre.

In the beginning, my objectives of this research were to clarify how the manipulated the concepts “sincerity” and “truthfulness” by Stalinist socialist realism changed the face of Vietnamese literature since 1945. I intended to make a comparison between North Vietnamese socialist *kí* with South Vietnamese *kí* (1945-1975) and Vietnamese Renovation *kí* in order to demonstrate that socialist *kí* in North Vietnam (1945-1986) was a unique phenomenon. However, in the end of the project, I found a lot of unexpected results.

In Chapter 1, I introduce and connect Vietnamese *kí* to its cultural, political situation. I was not expected that the application of socialist realism in North Vietnam (1945-1986) was prepared with Confucian collectivism. In their books, Jamieson (1995), Abuza (2001) and Kim Ninh (2002) connect the collectivism in Vietnamese culture from Confucian tradition with socialism, which inspires me to connect Confucian *chân* with Stalinist concept of sincerity and truthfulness to explain how conformity make these concept different from ones in western society which values individualism and skepticism.

From the perspective of cultural studies, in Chapter 2, I examine in details how the application of Stalinist propaganda literature, which is basically the rhetoric of Truth, transformed *kí*, a nonfictional genre, into literature of revolutionary romanticism. Other writers, for example,

Nguyễn Ngọc Minh (2013), have examined how investigative reportage was replaced with epic *kí sự, bút kí and tùy bút*. When looking at the dictionary of literary terms and books on literary theory which were published since 1960s up to present, I found that there are a lot of different definitions of *truyện kí*. Moreover, recent authors have tended to remove or ignore this term. It encouraged me to take further research on *truyện kí*, which in the end clarify that *truyện kí* is where socialist *kí* show its weaknesses. *Truyện kí*, a vague combination between fiction and autobiography/biography, reflected the effort to establish the myth of socialist hero and the great socialist transformation as Truth. However, as I present in chapter 2 and chapter 4, the efforts of NVGP and Trần Dần in the late 1950s, as well as the investigative journalists and autobiographers after the 1986 Renovation, undermined that rhetorical strategy. While NVGP undermined principles socialist realism, which are sincerity and truth, as well as rigid approaches to the essence of the reality, after 1986, Phùng Gia Lộc, Tô Hoài, Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh and Bảo Ninh returned *kí* to be a democratic genre by bravely revealing wrongdoings and hidden pathetic sides of socialist literary canons. This reflects that the persistence of individual approach to history and art has managed to help the genre to resist against the assimilation of Stalinist socialist realism to a certain extent.

Before conducting Chapter 3, I expected that the examination of South Vietnamese *kí* would show that it is totally different from North Vietnamese socialist *kí*. However, it surprised me that the works of Phan Nghị, Phan Nhật Nam, Nhã Ca and Thái Lãng demonstrate that South Vietnamese *kí* was also unable to avoid the influence of propaganda and censorship, which can be seen in the way some *kí* works praises the American as the great ally and the Vietcong as bloodthirsty beasts. However, the openness to many philosophical, cultural and literary influences and a freedom of expression to some extent in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War allowed these writers to depict the American ally, the South Vietnamese forces, the ordinary people as well as the Vietcong from different angles.

Through the analyses in this thesis, *kí* is shown as a historical product. As a discourse, *kí* may reflect or or have to conform to a collective memory which is manipulated by power. This view of genre is necessary to awake readers from naïve belief in the transparency, sincerity and stability of every genre. It promotes critical reception of every historical or literary works. Every text absorbs different genres as well as the representation of individual subjectivity. It may be the reflection of or resistance to collective memory, or the combination of both.

It is not that until postmodernism appear, did readers start to doubt the transparency and sincerity of *kí*. However, despite that we are skeptical of *kí*, we still retain the habit of writing and reading *kí*. *Kí* has not died in the era of postmodernism. What are the reasons for the existence of *kí* over time and places, as well as the similarities and differences in reading and using *kí* among different cultural communities? In non-communist and non-Asian countries, whether *kí* has been manipulated to conform to a master rhetorical of truth or not? Especially, what would happen to *kí* when every reader acknowledges that language and literature are not transparent and sincerity and truthfulness are only rhetorically built? These questions might be the topics for further studies which are the continuation of this research.

## **Abbreviations**

CPV: Vietnam Communist Party

DRV: Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam)

RVN: Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam)

ARVN: Army of the Republic of Vietnam

NLF: the National Liberation Front (also known as the Vietcong,, in the American's words)

NVGP: Nhân văn Giai phẩm

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