

# HISTORY AS A WAY OF CONSTRUCTING THE NOTION OF NATION: A CASE STUDY OF HISTORICAL NOVELS PUBLISHED IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

## LA HISTORIA COMO FORMA DE CONSTRUIR LA NOCIÓN DE NACIÓN: UN ESTUDIO DE CASO DE NOVELAS HISTÓRICAS PUBLICADAS EN EL SUR DE VIETNAM A PRINCIPIOS DEL SIGLO XX

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**Revista de Investigaciones Universidad del Quindío**

Universidad del Quindío, Colombia

ISSN: 1794-631X

ISSN-e: 2500-5782

Periodicity: Anual

vol. 34, no. 2, 2022

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Received: 04 July 2022

Accepted: 30 August 2022

URL: <http://portal.amelica.org/ameli/journal/517/5173391037/>

**Abstract:** The French colonization of Vietnam had a significant impact on Vietnamese history, social structure and spiritual life. This study is based on the fact that the presence of the colonizers changed and ruptured Vietnamese cultural tradition. As a result, generations of Vietnamese people attempted to rebuild their identity through various means with the aim to adapt to new conditions, and one of which was composing historical novels. The research provides a brief overview of the settings of the colonial Vietnam in the early twentieth century. It is obvious that because of its complicatedness, the article only indicates its general traits, considering them important premises upon which our study of Vietnamese literature of the time is based. I then present how Southern Vietnamese writers made use of their historical novels to evoke the public sense of nationalism and constructing the notion of unified origin. Southern Vietnamese literature is chosen to be studied since this is a special territory where different cultural and political issues concerning the making of the modern Vietnam came up.

**Keywords:** Southern Vietnamese literature, popular literature, historical novels, national identity, the modernization of nation.

**Resumen:** La colonización francesa de Vietnam tuvo un impacto significativo en la historia, la estructura social y la vida espiritual de Vietnam. Este estudio se basa en el hecho de que la presencia de los colonizadores cambió y rompió la tradición cultural vietnamita. Como resultado, generaciones de vietnamitas intentaron reconstruir su identidad a través de varios medios con el objetivo de adaptarse a las nuevas condiciones, y uno de ellos fue la composición de novelas históricas. La investigación proporciona una breve descripción de la configuración del Vietnam colonial a principios del siglo XX. Es obvio que por

su complejidad, el artículo sólo indica sus rasgos generales, considerándolos premisas importantes en las que se basa nuestro estudio de la literatura vietnamita de la época. Luego presento cómo los escritores de Vietnam del Sur hicieron uso de sus novelas históricas para evocar el sentido público de nacionalismo y construir la noción de origen unificado. Se elige la literatura del sur de Vietnam para ser estudiada ya que este es un territorio especial donde surgieron diferentes temas culturales y políticos relacionados con la creación del Vietnam moderno.

**Palabras clave:** literatura del sur de Vietnam, literatura popular, novelas historicas, identidad nacional, la modernización de la nación.

## INTRODUCTION

The French conquest of Indochina marked the beginning of Vietnamese early modern history. The year 1858 is a significant date in both Vietnamese and Chinese history, and it has been extensively researched by historians. For nearly a century, the French invaded and exploited colonial Vietnam. This period of time was long enough for Western colonizers to have a significant impact on Vietnamese culture. This is a significant issue that has always piqued the interest of a number of Vietnamese scholars. It is worth noting that the majority of them agree that prior to French colonization, the Vietnamese people had a long-lasting culture. While dealing with the Vietnamese, the colonizers might acknowledge that the locals were not spongelike, and that Vietnamese culture was not really a homogeneous, stable and simple entity. “The fact that the French came and invaded Vietnam only contributed to the confusion of languages and cultures which had always been the essential feature of Vietnam for centuries since its formation. Vietnamese people have never spoken a single language, and have never had an exclusive culture” (Phạm, 2017, p.130). Throughout history, the Vietnamese ethnicity has affirmed its position as a nation with distinct identity. More importantly, Vietnam’s political and cultural geography, as well as its flexibility in international relations, may have aided this nation in defeating others’ ambitious attempts to invade and assimilate it. However, when confronted with a formidable and, to some degree, “strange” foe like the French colonizers, Vietnamese people at the time understood clearly that the loss of sovereignty might result in the fact that the national identity was also at risk. The more they were exposed to the colonial power, the more concerned they became about national memory and identity loss. However, this hegemonic and exotic influence compelled the Vietnamese to band together even more tightly in order to preserve and enhance their cultural identity. To put it another way, Vietnamese culture was challenged during this period not only by the demand for modernization and Westernization, but also by the need to protect and maintain their national identity. The West in general, and particularly French culture, was both charming, unavoidable, and exotic, as well as risky, with a variety of uncertain eventualities. Several Western scholars, one of the most well-known of whom is David G. Marr, conducted early research on this topic. (Marr, 1971; 1981).

## METHODOLOGY

In this paper, surely our description of the colonial situation of Cochinchina cannot be as adequate and comprehensive as it truly was. Yet the issues we primarily focus are what and how Vietnamese writers contributed to the construction of the notion of nation through their historical novels, which can be considered one of the most essential sources of the early twentieth-century flourishing of Vietnamese nationalism. The terminology “national identity” used in this paper differs from Anderson’s concept of “imagined community”, which is to some extent more related to spatial elements (Anderson, 1991). By contrast, the term as used herein is construed as a nation’s characteristics, the core values that have formed a communal culture and lifestyle, and the community’s shared political, linguistic and psychological institutions. Identity is formed throughout the history of a nation, and based on which an individual can identify where he belongs to. The awareness of national identity contributes to the formation of a community's internal force, transforming it into a unified entity that is diametrically opposed to other identities. The historical novel is a distinct subgenre in which the spirit of modernity and democracy, as well as associations with national history and identity, are intertwined. In this paper, we investigate the role of historical novels published in Southern Vietnam prior to 1945 in establishing the notion of Vietnamese as a nation.

## DISCUSSION

### *Constructing the Notion of Nation from Understanding the Roles of History*

The essential role of leading intellectuals of the time should be considered firstly, since in fact, almost all nationalist movements are ushered by the intelligentsia, particularly in countries colonized by the West. Vietnam experienced an intellectual crisis in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Novel Western-like intellectuals were not fully formed at the time, and it was not until after 1925 that they began to achieve a superior position in Vietnamese history and culture. Trịnh Văn Thảo divides Vietnamese colonial intellectuals between the last decades of the nineteenth century and 1945 into three generations: the 1862 generation or the “classical intellectuals”, the 1907 generation or the intellectuals of two different worlds, and the 1925 generation or Westernized intellectuals (Trịnh, 2000, p.25-29). During the colonial era, the aforementioned 1907 generation of intellectuals who were both deeply rooted in Confucianism and newly exposed to Western civilization lost their positions. They were inextricably linked to feudalism's demise and the imperial examination system. Meanwhile, the colonial government's dominance grew gradually, and a number of French-Vietnamese schools were established during this time. As a result, they were gradually stripped of their power in both knowledge generation and the governmental system. However, this situation simultaneously made them take part in public protests, which were an important part of the nationalist movement in Vietnam at the time. These Confucian intellectuals were even regarded as leaders or bigwigs of these protest movements. One of their

contributions was to reform national consciousness by adopting cultural and social models from various modern countries at the time. This movement was known as Duy Tân (literally Renovation), and it advocated for the replacement of the old with the new, beginning with cultural and educational reform. A large number of intellectuals of the 1907 generation were appealed to this movement, and it quickly became a focal point of attention. What they aimed to was a dual purpose: self-strengthening and retaining liberation from the French. However, as a matter of fact, this movement was more likely to conduct the reformation of national culture and view this effort as an effective way to liberate the country, instead of launching armed conflicts against the colonial government. The central point of this movement was to reappraise what was impeding Vietnamese culture from developing and reforming, and thus to learn from the West, specifically France, and at the same time to oppose against it. While searching for cultural and social models to learn from, these intellectuals acknowledged that the Japanese reformation model was what they should aspire and imitate. Their first step toward realizing that dream was to launch Đông Du (literally Journey to the East) movement. Both Duy Tân and Đông Du movements were led by Phan Bội Châu (1867-1940) and Phan Châu Trinh (1872-1926). The movement's motto was "open people's awareness – enhance people's consciousness – better people's lives" (khai dân trí, chấn dân khí, hậu dân sinh). As a result of the movement's robust influence, the literary works which were written by Confucian Duy Tân intellectuals to propagandize the thought of identity enhancement and self-improvement also had great impact on the public. In these works, they primarily conveyed their pride in the Vietnamese race and ethnic origin, but also indicated their nation's flaws that needed to be addressed immediately. On the other hand, the literary works written by novel intellectuals educated in the Western educational system was brewing and gradually influencing the mental lives of Vietnamese bourgeoisie at the time, particularly in Saigon and Hanoi. Various literary genres were adopted from the West, including novel. Besides social novels, these new intellectuals wrote historical novels, which also contributed to the reformation of the nation, albeit later than the effort made Duy Tân Confucianists. The emergence of historical novels during this period anticipated an uprising of nationalism far deep from contemporary Vietnamese intelligentsia's awareness, which would then result in the public protests against the French colonial government, and eventually the August Revolution in 1945 and the full independence of Vietnam. That historical novels reminded the mass public of the heroic and glorious national past, which to some extent has aided in the construction Vietnamese nationalism, made this literary genre more appealing and become strongly appreciated in such a colonial context. The flourishing of this literary genre in not only Cochinchina but also Tonkin reveals the common mental structure of Vietnamese society at the time: reminiscing about typical historical events and figures, then evoking the conception of nationalism, reforming the country, and indicating the aspiration of an independent, united and self-improving Vietnam.

A bibliography and texts of historical novels published in Cochinchina nearly a century ago can be found in high quality libraries, where documents are housed in good preservation condition, such as the National Library of France, National Library of Vietnam in Hanoi, and private collections of several Vietnamese book

collectors. Throughout decades of turmoil and warfare, these literary texts are very difficult to be found in the book marketplace at present, except for the aforementioned places. And in these library, we can discover a variety of historical novels printed with simple illustrations and printing techniques, that are *Giọt máu chung tình* [A Drop of Faithful Blood] (1926), *Gia Long tẩu quốc* [Emperor Gia Long on His Overseas Journey] (1930), *Hoàng tử Cảnh như Tây* [Prince Cảnh and His Journey to the West] (1930), *Gia Long phục quốc* [Emperor Gia Long Retaking His Country] (1932) by Tân Dân Tử (1875-1955); *Việt Nam anh kiệt* [Vietnamese Luminaries] (1927), *Việt Nam Lý trung hưng* [The Reflourishing of the Vietnamese Lý Dynasty] (1929), *Lê triều Lý thị* [Lê Dynasty, Lý Clan] (1931), *Tiền Lê vận mệnh* [The Short Fate of Tiền Lê Dynasty] (1932), *Trần Hưng Đạo* [General Trần Hưng Đạo] (1933) by Phạm Minh Kiên (?-?); *Nam cực tinh huy* [The Glory of the South] (1924), *Nặng gánh cang thường* [Burden of Virtues and Obediences] (1926) by Hồ Biểu Chánh (1885-1958); *Việt Nam Lê Thái Tổ* [Vietnamese Emperor Lê Thái Tổ] (1929) by Nguyễn Chánh Sắt; *Tiểu anh hùng Võ Kiệt* [The Little Hero Võ Kiệt] (1926) by Phú Đức (1901-1970). It is also worth noting that in the colonial era, Vietnam was divided into three separate parts, and that in Tonkin at the time existed a variety of historical novels as well, such as *Tiếng sấm đêm đông* [The Thunder in a Winter Night] (1928), *Vua bà Triệu Ẩu* [The Woman Emperor Triệu] (1929), *Đinh Tiên Hoàng* [Emperor Đinh Tiên Hoàng] (1929), *Hai bà đánh giặc* [The Two Women's Fight against the Invaders] (1929), *Việt Thanh chiến sử* [History of the Vietnam-Qing War] (1929), *Trần Nguyên chiến kỷ* [The Era of Mongol-Vietnam War] (1932) by Nguyễn Tử Siêu (1887-1965); *Hùng Vương diễn nghĩa* [Romance of Hùng Kings] (1929) by Trúc Khê (1901-1947); *Ngọn cờ lau* [The Reed Flag] (1931), *Ngọn cờ vàng* [The Golden Flag] (1934) by Đinh Gia Thuyết (1893-1953); *Vua Hàm Nghi* [Emperor Hàm Nghi] (1935), *Vua Quang Trung* [Emperor Quang Trung] (1940) by Phan Trần Chúc (1907-1946). It is interesting to study issues of Vietnamese colonial culture and literature through these historical novels.

As just mentioned before, constructing the notion of Vietnamese nation is one of the most prominent purposes of Southern Vietnamese historical novels in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. First, this idea was usually presented in the foreword or the preface of these historical novels. They served as not only a reading guide for the contemporary readers, but also these writers' manifesto on the importance of identifying and preserving Vietnamese identity based on its over-a-thousand-year history of formation, development and protest against various invaders and enemies. Several historical novelists expressed concern about the general public's historical awareness at the time, that is, they paid no attention to Vietnamese history, but only Chinese historical figures. In the preface to the novel *Giọt máu chung tình*, Tân Dân Tử puts forward that:

"When asked about Zhang Liang, Han Xin, Xiang Yu, Xiao He, people may know really well. Meanwhile, they are mostly unaware of their country's heroes and luminaries. In other words, our people only pay tribute to heroes and heroines of other nations while burying our own, only extol the glory of others while obscuring ours" (Tân, 1926, p.2)

Nguyễn Chánh Sắt, in his preface to his novel *Việt Nam Lê Thái Tổ*, indicates:



“Our Vietnam, throughout its history from its formation to feudal dynasties, respectively Đinh, Lê, Lý, Trần, Lê, and to the present day, has existed for four thousand years, in which there have been numerous heroes and luminaries. In comparison to other East Asian countries, Vietnam is not less glorious.” (Nguyễn, 1929, p.1)

In the colonial era, almost every cultural activities, including publishing, was scrutinized and censored. The use of historical novels to construct the notion of nation in such a context thus emphasizes the strong protesting spirit of Vietnamese people during the period. It is because their narration of national history in novels also meant that they were constructing and enhancing the notion of nation, or the pride in their ethnic origin and the process of national formation and development. The discrimination between us and the others, particularly China, was presented very clearly. It is a fact that throughout history, Vietnamese people have always constructed and strengthened their cultural identity while both constantly protesting and adopting influences from China. The aforementioned excerpt from Tân Dân Tử’s preface to his novel manifests that the Southern Vietnamese writer aspired to evoke the sense of nationalism, which is in fact a product of modernity. In his another novel, *Gia Long tẩu quốc*, the appearance of three forewords (two written in prose, and one poem) and one preface in the opening of the novel reveals that influential intellectuals in Southern Vietnam at the time were aware of the need to unite and speak up their common thought, with the aim to reform social consciousness. Nguyễn Tư Thức, the former editor-in-chief of periodicals *Đông Pháp* and *Canh nông*, indicates in his foreword to the novel *Gia Long tẩu quốc*:

“Our country does have a very glorious history, yet most of national citizens (except for learned people, who to some extent pay attention to the national history) are venerating Zhang Daoling in their front yard, and Guan Yu inside their house; they are always talking about Chinese history, while they rarely mention Vietnamese emperors Đinh Tiên Hoàng, Lê Thái Tổ, general Trần Hưng Đạo, heroines Trưng Trắc, Trưng Nhị, etc. – the luminaries who sacrificed themselves for the liberation and glory of the nation. This is in fact a weakness of ours” (Tân, 1930, p.5)

Tân Dân Tử, in his preface to this novel, also claims that:

“The majority of national citizens are unconcerned about their national history as if they are foreigners. They also do not pay any homage or honour to their predecessors. Meanwhile, they devote the most of their attention to Chinese history and culture, and thus forget their national ancestors [...] What has led to that reality? Why are the people unconcerned about their national history as though they are not Vietnamese? This is a serious problem that we, the intellectuals, should be aware of and try to find efficient solutions to it.” (Tân, 1930, p.10)

In the preface to his novel *Việt Nam Lý Trung hưng*, Phạm Minh Kiên pointed out the reason why Vietnamese people had little focus on their national history. From his perspective, this reality stemmed from the fact that during this period of time, the number of Chinese literary works translated into Vietnamese and published far outweighed that of books about Vietnamese history. As a result, the majority of Vietnamese readers at the time preferred Chinese historical novels, and also paid much respect and honour to historical figures depicted

in these fictions. Phạm Minh Kiên also stated that he and other Vietnamese contemporary writers should be responsible for that, as he puts it:

“The public’s forgetfulness of our predecessors is a result of the fact that traditional writers have been translating too many foreign literary works, especially Chinese fictions, huddling together and praising them. As a result, the majority of Vietnamese people are now very familiar with Chinese heroes, while they know very little about national great men. It’s a shame.” (Phạm, 1929, p.3)

Southern Vietnamese writers believed that to fix the problem effectively, they needed to novelize national history, making it more easily to be received by the mass public. To put it another way, historical novels were considered as a means of instilling the nationalist spirit into Vietnamese people’s minds, and constructing a more specific notion of their nation within them. Those writers retained the belief that the narration of a national heroic past would aid in the unification of social classes, and thus the more efficient protest against foreign influences, specifically Chinese culture, overseas Chinese who were living in Indochina at the time, and particularly the French colonizers.

The xenophobia movement conducted by Vietnamese intellectuals at the time was very vibrant. It should be noted that they boycotted foreign powers in not only cultural aspects, but also economic activities. Several periodicals in Saigon got involved in the reformation movements, on the one hand encouraging Vietnamese people to compete in trading with foreigners, on the other hand evoking people’s nationalism by appealing them to buy and consume products made or owned by Vietnamese. In fact, the essentials market was still dominated by Hoa people. Banks, currency, and export and import industries were all controlled by Indian and French traders. Newspaper advertisements for services and products during this period can provide us with an interesting perspective on the aforementioned issue. In terms of the socioeconomic status of overseas Chinese in Vietnam at the time, there is a book by the contemporary well-known journalist Đào Trinh Nhất (1900-1951), entitled *The Influence of Foreigners and the Issue of Immigration into Cochinchina*. The book provides a cultural-economic sociological analysis of Hoa people’s monopolization of the Cochinchinese marketplace. The author also proposed that Vietnamese people from Annam (Central Vietnam) and Tonkin (Northern Vietnam) be relocated to Cochinchina to help develop the national economy (Đào, 1924). This idea had such a great influence on Vietnamese public that when it was just published, Hoa people bought up every copies of this book and burned them down. It is also worth noticing that the anti-Chinese and anti-Indian sentiments were motivated by a more profound goal: opposing the French. The two famous newspapers in Saigon during this period, *Nông cổ mín đàm* and *Lục tỉnh tân văn*, both took part in this xenophobia movement, as shown and analyzed thoroughly in a well-known book by Peycam (Peycam, 2012). This xenophobia, on the one hand, demonstrates how Vietnamese people would react when being controlled and dominated in terms of trading and economy, yet on the other hand, indicates very clearly their urgent desire to reaffirm their national identity. Observing the public’s reaction towards contemporary socioeconomic issues, Southern Vietnamese writers acknowledged that they had opportunities to achieve their goal of constructing and enhancing the concept of nation.

However, it should be asked in what context and on what premises the need to affirm national subjectivity arose. Whether these premises aided in the birth of numerous historical novels in Southern Vietnam at the time? A brief description of the situation of translation and social movements may help. It is because the fact that the formation of a large community of general readers, the development of translation, the emergence of discourses on national history, and various sociopolitical movements were what led to the popularization of historical awareness and the need to construct the notion of nation in Southern Vietnam in the early twentieth century.

There are obvious reasons for the rapid development of translation in Southern Vietnam at the time. According to Itamar Evan-Zohar, a premodern literature will necessitate the development of translation if it begins to recognize its own flaws and experiences a literary crisis (Evan-Zohar, 1990, p.45-51). This analysis could be applied to Southern Vietnamese literature from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Southern Vietnam was a new territory at the time, and its literature was still in its early stages. When the French invaded Vietnam, the Vietnamese Romanized script was chosen to facilitate daily and academic communication. Furthermore, because the Vietnamese printing industry primarily used this Romanized script, it became more powerful in generating knowledge and information, including the concept of nation. This topic was once thoroughly discussed in an interesting essay by McHale Shawn. (McHale, 2004). The formation and development of press and publication enhanced the strength and influence of information and knowledge. In addition, French-Vietnamese educational system, in which students were primarily taught French and Romanized script, was soon constructed. As a result, a totally new generation of writers and readers emerged. However, these conditions were not adequate to completely change the literature. The Western-like literature in Vietnam was in the middle of its formation. Moreover, the number of new writers was meager, and most of them did not have much experience in composing literary works following Western styles. These were the weaknesses of Southern Vietnamese literature in the early twentieth century. Translation was thus an important tool to improve these flaws. As a result, the translation of Chinese fictions, especially Chinese historical novels, flourished during this period.

A fairly complete statistics of translations of Chinese classical novels in Vietnam can be found in Yan Bao's research essay in the book edited by Claudine Salmon (Claudine Salmon, 2004, p.163-195), or in a book written by Vietnamese authors entitled A Chronography of Ho Chi Minh City (Trần & Trần, 1998, p.348-352). Apart from translations which can be listed as classics, there were also low quality works which popularized superstitious beliefs. The dominance of Chinese historical novels in the publishing market had a significant impact on the general public's historical awareness. It was a fact that Vietnamese people were more familiar with Chinese history than with Vietnamese history. This reality reminded Southern Vietnamese writers of the importance of finding solutions to problems. Tân Dân Tử, Phạm Minh Kiên, Hồ Biểu Chánh, Nguyễn Chánh Sắt thus started to pay more attention to Vietnamese history as a theme of their literary works, with a purpose of familiarizing the general public



with the national history. More importantly, this choice implied these writers' attempt to evoke Vietnamese spirit of nationalism.

Hồ Biểu Chánh, in his preface to his work *Nặng gánh cang thường*, ponders:

"Chinese people have both history and historical fictions. We, Vietnamese people also have history, so why we do not have historical novels? Moreover, if a Vietnamese historical novel can not entertain readers, it can also recite a portion of our history. And of course it is absolutely not meaningless" (Hồ, 1926, p.1)

Phạm Minh Kiên claims with pride in his preface to the novel *Việt Nam Lý trung hưng*:

"Lý Thường Kiệt was a famous general of our Lý dynasty, who once quelled Champa, traversed from south to north to defend the country and pacify the borderlands. Lý Thường Kiệt's accomplishments were comparable to those of Chinese heroes, such as Di Qing of the Song dynasty, Xue Rengui of the Tang dynasty, Guan Yu of the Han dynasty" (Phạm, 1929, p.4)

In fact, the massive translation of Chinese historical novels stemmed from not only the reading demand of the Southern Vietnamese mass public, but also the interference of Hoa people in Saigon. It is because they soon realized that the greater the Chinese cultural influence on Vietnamese people, the easier it would be to improve their economic situation. For instance, they advocated printing various advertisements of their products in the back pages of these historical novels, and then giving those copies away free of charge to their customers. The Hoa people's effort to popularize their culture can be compared to the boom of advertising on films and other modern media. It is thus widely considered that Southern Vietnamese writers composed a variety of historical novels in order to both protest against that attempt and reaffirm Vietnamese cultural identity.

In fact, prior to the movement of translating Chinese fictions, Southern Vietnamese writers had been conducting various translation projects since the latter half of the nineteenth century, particularly since the time when Trương Vĩnh Ký started to manage the newspaper *Gia Định báo* (1865), Southern Vietnamese writers had been conducting various translation projects, which can be considered the first step on the road to the construction of modern national identity in the colonial context. These writers were mostly new intellectuals who were educated in Western countries, such as Trương Vĩnh Ký (1837-1898), Huỳnh Tịnh Của (1834-1907), Trương Minh Ký (1855-1900), Nguyễn Trọng Quản (1865-1911). Their contributions to the reformation of Vietnamese culture were primarily based on their bilinguality. They were Christian intellectuals, and thus markedly different from the Confucian intelligentsia, especially in terms of academic background and belief. One of their most significant accomplishments was to introduce the West to Vietnamese people, particularly through their translation of Western literary works and classical books into Vietnamese. Additionally, they also concentrated on collecting and annotating Vietnamese folk songs, folk narratives, and classical works written in Sino-Nôm by medieval Vietnamese authors. In fact, Vietnamese folk culture clearly manifests both internal values and boundaries of Vietnamese identity. As a result, the transmission of cultural knowledge to burghers via printing technology, particularly Vietnamese folk culture and classical literary works, can be viewed as an attempt to familiarize the community with Vietnamese traditional culture. This was also a foundation for constructing

the notion of nation in such a socioeconomic context. In other words, translating national literature (from Sino-Nôm into Romanized script) was thus a method of preserving and transmitting Vietnamese cultural identity from the past to the present, and to some degree, a form of protest against the colonial power. It should be also noted that these translation activities created a contact zone between Vietnamese culture and Western modernity, as well as new cultural representations and modes of existence. They aided in preventing Vietnamese people during the colonial era from the risk of cultural rupture and identity loss. These activities appear to have been the strategies employed by Vietnamese people in their fight against colonizers. However, the French realized that these activities were unavoidable, and the only thing they could do was try their hardest to keep them under control.

Moreover, the emergence of essays on history and Vietnamese traditional culture (published as books or in public periodicals, such as *Đồng Dương tạp chí* (1913-1918), *Nam Phong tạp chí* (1917-1934), *Tri tân* (1941-1945), *Đại Việt tạp chí* (1942-1944)) and collections of folk literature during this period also contributed to the contemporary awareness of national history. Meanwhile, the French began archaeological and cultural studies about Southern Vietnam, focusing on the existence of Óc Eo culture in Ba Thê (An Giang at present). However, there were colonial intrigues lying behind these findings. First, it tried to prove that prior to the arrival of Vietnamese in Southern Vietnam, another ethnicity defined their territory over this land. More profoundly, the colonizers wanted to separate the Southern territory from Vietnam in order to establish a colony there more easily. As a result, Southern Vietnam was a battleground for not only military forces, but also cultural wars at the time. Uprisings and revolutions against the French conducted by Trương Công Định (1820-1864), Võ Duy Dương (1827-1866), Nguyễn Trung Trực (1838-1868) were to some extent the tests used to assess people's allegiance to Nguyễn dynasty. In such a context, the attempt to construct national historical awareness in order to confront with Western historical interpretations reveals that Vietnamese at the time had a profound consciousness of what national identity was. Their composition of historical novels also aimed to not only entertain readers, but also to address issues of nation and ethnicity. However, because they were more interesting than scientific essays on national history, they were naturally more appealing to the mass public.

In short, the emergence of historical novels in Southern Vietnam in the early twentieth century stemmed from the dissent with the mass publication of Chinese historical novels, the recognition of the need to reaffirm Vietnamese cultural identity, and historical discourses published in periodicals. Furthermore, the *Đồng Du* and *Duy Tân* movements also had a significant impact on this phenomenon. This movement began in 1907 and ended in 1925, when Phan Bội Châu was arrested in China and sentenced to penal servitude in Huế. A year later, Phan Châu Trinh passed away in Saigon. The funeral of Phan Châu Trinh was attended by thousands of people and can be considered a manifestation for the nationalist spirit of Vietnamese people. Their understanding of nation thus became more specific and apparent. It is also added that Việt Nam Quốc dân Đảng [Nationalist Party of Vietnam] and Communists contributed to the rise of Vietnamese nationalism. Last but not least, there might be a coincidence

when the first Southern Vietnamese historical novel – *Giọt máu chung tình* by Tân Dân Tử - was written in 1925, which was also the time point when Duy Tân movement was launched. Then, a great number of historical novels were published in Southern Vietnam, which formed an important tendency in Vietnamese literature in the early twentieth century.

*From a Literary Perspective: Historical Figures and Constructing the Notion of Nation*

To familiarize the concept of nation to the public more easily, Vietnamese writers during the colonial era exploited Vietnamese historical figures and events to compose figurative novels. In these literary works, a variety of Vietnamese luminaries were depicted lively and attractively. Several of them are emperors who founded Vietnamese feudal dynasties, such as Lý Công Uẩn (974-1028), Lê Lợi (1385-1433), Nguyễn Huệ (1753-1792), Nguyễn Ánh (1762-1820). Besides, the main characters of these historical novels are also Vietnamese heroes who contributed to the defense and liberation of the nation, such as Lý Thường Kiệt (1019-1105), Trần Hưng Đạo (1231-1300), Nguyễn Trãi (1380-1442), Võ Tánh (1768-1801), Ngô Tùng Châu (1752-1801). The stories of these historical figures were narrated from new perspectives in historical novels written by Phạm Minh Kiên, Tân Dân Tử, Nguyễn Chánh Sắt and Hồ Biểu Chánh.

In his two novels *Lê triều Lý thị* and *Tiền Lê vận mệnh*, Phạm Minh Kiên focused on the central character Lý Công Uẩn. According to the official history, Lý Công Uẩn was the first emperor of Lý dynasty (1009-1225), which marked the beginning of Vietnam's monarchical period. Lý Công Uẩn is portrayed in Phạm Minh Kiên's novels as a commander who successfully pacified the territorial fragmentations led by chiefs of Chăm Sơn, Hà Man and the invasion of Champa, then became the first emperor of the Lý dynasty. In *Việt Nam Lý trung hưng*, Phạm Minh Kiên depicts the well-known historical figure Lý Thường Kiệt who conducted the protests against troops of Champa and the Song dynasty (China). Phạm Minh Kiên is also the author of the novel *Trần Hưng Đạo*, which is about a famous hero of the Trần dynasty (1225-1400). Trần Hưng Đạo commanded Vietnamese troops to fight against Mongol invasions. All of the characters depicted in novels by Phạm Minh Kiên were born in Northern Vietnam, and their political and military careers were mostly associated with this territory rather than Southern Vietnam. By portraying these characters, Phạm Minh Kiên perhaps thus aimed to reinforce the notion of South-North unity and the view of Vietnam as a united nation with a common origin, which was in fact an opposition against the French division of Vietnam into three kỳ (parts) governed by different political regimes. This was a remarkable attempt, since it was a fact that in writings by Southern Vietnamese Confucian intellectuals, such as Võ Trường Toản (1709-1792), Phan Thanh Giản (1796-1867), Trịnh Hoài Đức (1765-1825), Ngô Nhơn Tĩnh (1761-1813), Lê Quang Định (1759-1813), Nguyễn Đình Chiểu (1822-1888), Nguyễn Thông (1827-1884), the notion of national unification was presented very strongly, while they rarely paid attention to the common origin of the nation: "From the perspective of these Confucianists, their patriotism was identical with their allegiance to the dynasty. Moreover, because of geographical distances, their literary works hardly ever

mentioned the historical periods prior to the Nguyễn dynasty” (Đoàn, 2010, p.688).

Tân Dân Tử focused more on Southern Vietnamese historical figures. He poured his heart into composing novels about emperor Gia Long of the Nguyễn dynasty, including *Gia Long tẩu quốc*, *Hoàng tử Cảnh như Tây* and *Gia Long phục quốc*. No one has written about emperor Gia Long as much as and as completely as Tân Dân Tử did. These three novels narrate the story of Gia Long from his escape from the pursuit of Tây Sơn army until his restoration of the Nguyễn dynasty (1802-1945). These three novels are about the conflicts between the Tây Sơn dynasty (led by the three brothers Nguyễn Huệ, Nguyễn Nhạc, Nguyễn Lữ) and Nguyễn Ánh's force, which occurred during a long period of time and over a wide space, with a wide world of characters. There are some characters who are real historical figures, such as Võ Tánh, Châu Văn Tiếp, Ngô Tùng Châu. However, some characters appearing in these novels are fictional. The novels' narrating space ranges from Thăng Long (in Northern Vietnam) to Phú Quốc island (in Southern Vietnam), as well as Cambodia and Thailand. The conflicts narrated last for nearly one third of a century. In the colonial context, Southern Vietnamese masses viewed emperor Gia Long as a poignant symbol of the aspiration to build up nation. The adaptation of these novels into works of cải lương also reveals that the general public in Southern Vietnam really paid attention to their national history. Tân Dân Tử himself adapted his novel *Gia Long tẩu quốc* into cải lương with five acts a year after the publication of the novel (Tân Dân Tử, 1931). Another historical novel of Tân Dân Tử - *Giọt máu chung tình* was also adapted into cải lương by Trương Quang Tiền without the title change (Trương, 1931). In the 1960s, based on the novel *Giọt máu chung tình*, Viễn Châu again composed a work of cải lương entitled *Võ Đông Sơ-Bạch Thu Hà* [Love Story of Võ Đông Sơ and Bạch Thu Hà], which focuses more on the romantic love story of the two major characters. Southern Vietnamese cải lương is a beautiful combination of Western drama and Vietnamese traditional music, which has always piqued Southern Vietnamese public's interest. Thereby, historical novelists could remind the public of their national historical figures more easily and effectively.

What piqued Southern Vietnamese readers' interest in historical novels? It may be because authors of these novels entertained their readers with romantic love stories and the personal lives of famous historical figures. In addition, the mass public's patriotism was growing during this time, and they could sympathize with the falling nation's tragedy and the thirst for liberation presented in historical novels by Southern Vietnamese writers. Readers might not feel disconnected from the characters Lý Thường Kiệt depicted in *Việt Nam Lý trung hưng* or *Lý Công Uẩn* in *Lê triều Lý thị* and *Tiền Lê vận mệnh*. Lý Thường Kiệt is described in the novel by Phạm Minh Kiên as a young man who is famous for his “wide knowledge, great talent, and strong sense of humanity and responsibility”. He is also the valiant commander of the resistance to the invaders. In the novel, however, he is portrayed as a very ordinary person who is also bereaved by the loss of a family member. On a bloody battlefield, Lý Thường Kiệt and Hoàng Anh acknowledge each other as father and son, which is a touching and humanistic detail. Lý Thường Kiệt also spares Chế Đát Du Na's life, not because his child was raised up by Chế, but because Chế Đát Du Na is also a

“human”, who must fulfill his duty as a citizen of his nation when the war breaks out. Lý Công Uẩn is portrayed in *Lê triều Lý thị* and *Tiền Lê vận mạt* as not only a monarch, but also a devoted and romantic “ronin”. He also feels nervous and worried when first catching sight of charming and graceful girls Xuân Kiều and Bạch Lan. More importantly, images of these women never fade in Lý Công Uẩn’s mind, and when he is officially crowned the first emperor of the Lý dynasty, he returns to welcome his women into the royal palace. In *Nặng gánh cang thường* by Hồ Biểu Chánh, the personal life of the main character Thanh Tông (a fictional character) is described more specifically and detailed. Perhaps because Hồ Biểu Chánh was an extremely experienced novelist, he succeeded in narrating the beautiful yet tragic love story of Thanh Tông and Lê Bích. The two main characters’ fathers are both government officials, but they are envious of each other. One day, Thanh Tông murders Lê Bích’s father. Lê Bích is distraught over her father’s death and tries to avoid him. When the Champa attacks the border land, Thanh Tông is assigned to command the army and pacify the invasion in order to atone for his sin as a murderer. A short period of time after he defeats the enemy and comes back, Lê Bích and Thanh Tông get married. The novel’s plot is not very complicated, yet what makes this work attractive and interesting are various scenes in which the two main characters’ confusion about how to choose between love and filial piety are described in an appealing manner. In this novel, personal fates and historical changes are interwoven, which makes *Nặng gánh cang thường* more modern easily received by burghers due to its romanticist spirit, the combination between personalism and historical inspiration.

Speaking of narrative techniques of Southern Vietnamese historical novels, there was an interference between Eastern traditional techniques and Western ones in Vietnamese literature in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. All of the aforementioned historical novels are basically traditional chapter novels, yet they were written in a more modern spirit. The plots of *Lê triều Lý thị*, *Tiền Lê vận mạt*, *Trần Hưng Đạo*, *Việt Nam Lê Thái Tổ*, *Gia Long tái quốc*, *Gia Long phục quốc* were arranged in different ways to clearly depict the characteristics of the main characters while also glorify Vietnamese people’s effort to liberate the nation. In general, these novels’ plots are not complex since its events are narrated chronologically, and this is to some extent appropriate for describing long-lasting wars. The unique trait of this narrative strategy is that authors create the plot’s climax through which character’s characteristics and author’s thoughts can be clearly represented. In *Việt Nam Lý trung hưng*, there are two opposing character groups both having influence on the royal court: the first includes Lý Thường Kiệt, Lý Đạo Thành, Hồ Quý, Trịnh Hoài Bảo, and the other includes Trương Hầu Mô, Trương Bất Nhã, Trịnh Thiết Hùng. And the majority of the plot revolves around the conflict between these two groups, in which the group led by Trương Hầu Mô tries to defenestrate Lý Thường Kiệt but fails eventually.

The script used to compose these historical novels is also worth noting. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Trương Vĩnh Ký advocated “writing in a pure Vietnamese script”, which clearly reveals his strong sense of nationalism. That spirit was supported and continued by Southern Vietnamese historical novelists, such as Phạm Minh Kiên, Tân Dân Tử, Hồ Biểu Chánh, Nguyễn Chánh Sắt. Despite writing novels about Northern Vietnamese heroes and



luminaries, they also portrayed their characters as typical Southern Vietnamese people. That is how Southern Vietnamese writers constructed and reinforce the nationalist spirit.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we provide a brief description of the sociopolitical and cultural conditions under which various nationalist movements arose in Southern Vietnam, while also indicating that generations of Vietnamese people always attempted to find ways to liberate their nation from the French colonizers. During this period, Vietnam might not immediately defeat the French, yet the awareness of national unity and the notion of Vietnam as an independent nation were built and strengthened significantly. Composing historical novels was an efficient and unique method to reinforce that spirit. They exploited historical events and figures to reaffirm Vietnamese identity and its national history. It is more remarkable that the emergence of these historical novels inspired their audiences to learn more about their national history. In these literary works, a variety of longlasting issues were mentioned and analyzed, including national consciousness, pride in national history, meaningful lessons on human love and morality. Historical novels published in Southern Vietnam in the early twentieth century were thus an important milestone of Vietnamese modern literature.

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