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Expressions of the Self in Vietnam: Usage of 'I' throughout Literature in *nôm* and in *quốc ngữ*

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The modern Western world as the matrix for the individual has been a widely accepted theory among the general public as well as in the areas of social and human sciences. Recently, however, extensive work in various fields—linguistics, literature, history, philosophy and anthropology—has adopted a new approach to research in areas beyond simplistic Western ideas based on binary distinctions; for instance, individualism versus holism, or the West versus the Orient. This paper aims to contribute to this new area of research by offering an overview of the development of the Self and the linguistic manifestations of 'I' in Vietnamese literary works.

Keywords: Vietnam, Vietnamese literature, expressions of the Self, usage of 'I', autobiography, autofiction, subjectivity in literature.

"My soul who art thou? Who? I know not
My soul pursues me as if to provoke."
—Hàn Mặc Tử, 1939

The widely accepted theory is that the modern Western world has been the matrix for the individual. Recently, however, extensive work in various fields—linguistics, literature, history, philosophy or anthropology—has adopted a new approach to research areas beyond the West by laying aside simplistic ideas based on binary distinctions; for instance, individualism versus holism, the West versus the Orient.[1]

For the Far East, important work has been devoted to the subject in China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam to challenge the thesis

that the individual is non-existent in countries of predominantly Confucian culture.[2] *Sujet, moi, personne* (Subject, me, person), whose collaborative aim is to establish an inventory of the multiple ways of being oneself or belonging to oneself in China and in Vietnam, stand as a point of reference (Feuillas 2004). In his preface, Stéphane Feuillas notes that because of the continuity of governments of the Self, of family and of state, the notion of the individual as defined by Foucault as a triple articulation—individual and power; family strategies; self-awareness in the exercise of the spiritual or the philosophical—cannot be generalized, and that its application to the Far East demands adjustments (pp. x–xi). Feuillas underlines the fact that the private/public duality occupies a smaller place than other polarizations such as the engagement/withdrawal of the scholarly elite (*jin tui*), the internal/external (*nei wai*) or the common/personal (*gong si*). Besides, the Confucian conception of family, organized around transmission (less of material goods than of ethical values) rather than around legacies, as in ancient Greece, puts filial devotion (*xiao*) at the forefront, making the person the servant and the subject of father and mother. Lastly, the care of the Self, so developed in these societies, does not have "becoming oneself" as a final goal but the "training of wise and accomplished men who are, more or less, in act or in silence, unknown or sanctified, a civilising influence" (Feuillas 2004, p. xi).

Focusing on Vietnam, David G. Marr began a pioneering study in 2000 on the concepts of the individual and the Self, examining the different conceptions of the Self in order to ascertain in what measure they continue to influence attitudes and behaviours (2000, pp. 769–96). His novel work reflects on the notions of *thân* (身) and *tâm* (心), which, derived from classical Chinese, appear in Vietnamese poetry and essays dating back at least six centuries. The *thân*, which Marr suggests translating as "body-person", represents the animate and sensitive Self, often counterbalanced by the *thể* (体), meaning the physical, objective and instrumental body. As for the *tâm*, which might be expressed as "heart-mind", it covers inner consciousness, feelings, knowledge and moral judgment. Proceeding from these

compound words, he is able to explore this "vital concept" covering: *lương tâm* (conscience), *tâm sự* (confidences), *tâm hồn* (soul), *tâm tình* (sentiments, feelings) and *tâm lý học* (the discipline of psychology) (Marr 2000, p. 770). According to Marr, through its multiple and sometimes elusive facets, *tâm* can express "the inanimate, reflective, perceptive, sentient, and sympathetic dimensions of human nature", while also possessing an "important voluntarist potential", unlike *thân*, which, as strongly determinist, relies "on regular corporeal gratification and amenability to habit" (2000, p. 770). This explains why for centuries Vietnamese poets have found the use of *tâm* to be an essential asset in asserting their "inner self" and their "deep feelings and convictions" (Marr 2000, p. 770), like the fourteenth-century poet Chu Văn An, whose poem *Xuân đán* (Spring morning) explores the links between *thân* and *tâm*:

> The body [*thân*] clings to peaks: a lonely cloud.
> The heart [*tâm*] lies free of ripples: some old well.

Since the Communist Party of Vietnam's launch of *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) policies in 1986, academic research in Vietnam, which had long been subjected to Marxism, has benefited from a growing freedom to deal with questions that were previously 'taboo'. After the 1990s, Vietnam National University in Hanoi launched a huge initiative for the study of the "contemporary Vietnamese man" in relation to "traditional values" in socio-economic terms (Phan Huy Lê 1996, pp. 6–10). While this initiative has no doubt made it possible to develop different fields of reflection, it is clear that this project on the 'Vietnamese man' is often associated with the new dominant ideology of 'Hồ Chí Minh thought' created by the Communist Party of Vietnam in 1991. The rise of this ideology has no other purpose than replacing declining communism, and it includes an essentialist discourse in favour of 'Vietnamese identity'. Under the influence of *Đổi Mới*, writers such as Bảo Ninh, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Phạm Thị Hoài and Dương Thu Hương, who successfully re-examined the question of the Self, were subsequently subjected to state control.

Conscious of the primordial role that imagination plays in the representation of man, Vietnamese scholars nevertheless grant art a privileged position, especially literature and its significant repertoire. We have thus witnessed over the last few years a tremendous increase in colloquiums; works and theses that try to seize the idea of *con người cá nhân* (individual man) in literary expressions (Trần Ngọc Vương 1995; Nguyễn Hữu Sơn 2010; Trần Nho Thìn 2009). Nevertheless, these studies have not fully addressed this question in depth, as they have continued to be bound within the Marxist-Leninist straitjacket. Trần Nho Thìn, for example, in his study on Medieval Vietnamese literature, reproaches writers of the classic period for their "indifference in regard to societal problems, and in particular, to the life of the people" (2009, p. 100).

On the other hand, if literary criticism has demonstrated an interest in self-writing, a topic hitherto little studied, it has not been able to identify a real underlying issue or concern. Indeed, there has not yet been a rigorous definition of autobiography (*tự truyện*) because of its relatively late emergence and the fairly recent interest in the subject. Rather vague definitions can thus be found. For instance, "autobiography is a literary work under self-writing, in which the author recounts his own life" (Lê Bá Hán, Nguyễn Khắc Phi and Trần Đình Sử 1999, p. 329), or "autobiography is a literary work, often in prose and relevant to self-writing where the author tells his life by describing it" (Lại Nguyên Ân 2004, p. 363). It seems, then, that scholars can get lost in the ambiguity of definitions and tend to be confused between autobiographies, memoirs, first-person narratives, letters, reportage, lyric poems, diaries, essays and memories (Phạm Ngọc Lan 2006, pp. 16–26). Furthermore, self-writing is often subject to psychological readings that, while interesting, gloss over textual analyses and mask its formal characteristics. Kept from engaging with both literary and generic questions, it is ultimately reduced to a mere biographical resource, useful for those who wish to study the life and career of the author and to 'document oneself' in the period in which the work takes place. In his work on autobiographies, Lê Tú Anh

merely paraphrases the authors to reconstruct the different stages of their lives (2010, pp. 8–16).

My study aims to contribute to this new area of research by offering an overview of the development of the Self and the linguistic manifestations of 'I' in Vietnamese literary works. Indeed, rather than simply seeking for a straightforward definition of the 'Vietnamese individual' or for reasons for its absence, it seems more appropriate to observe how the 'I' describes, constructs and represents itself in literary texts. Whether they are oral or written, fictional or autobiographical, in verse or in prose, these texts constitute different perspectives of the underground journey, and they are works of subjectivity. Additionally, an examination of an extended era of works, as I have undertaken here, will also show how expressions of the 'I' have evolved over time. How are they influenced by exogenous factors such as Christianity, French culture, communism or socialist realism? What forms do they take in literature in *nôm* (vernacular script)[3] and in *quốc ngữ* (Vietnamese alphabet)?[4] How have they transformed under the double impact of globalization and the growing participation of women in the country's literary sphere?

Beginnings

Within Vietnamese culture, imbued as it is with Neo-Confucianism—where the focus, as it is generally recognized, is on duty and morality—only the social Self was conceivable. In addition, there is the importance of an economic model based on wetland rice cultivation, which inevitably entails community land management. And Buddhism, as it was practised in Vietnam, developed into a form of faith that was far from individualistic, even among monks.

However, speaking about oneself is an old phenomenon in Vietnamese literature. As we have seen, research has demonstrated that in some classical works, personal feelings were shown in a reserved manner, through metaphors. But an extensive and chronological study of the usage of 'I' (*tôi, ta, thiếp*, etc.) throughout literature, especially in texts representative of self-writing, is essential because

the development of the first-person singular pronoun is a major indicator of subjectivity.

When did the '*tôi*'—the neutral and sovereign 'I'—first appear in Vietnamese? How does self-awareness show itself in 'classical' works? Did contact with the West prompt changes in personal writings? Specialists date the appearance of the '*tôi*' to the late sixteenth or the early seventeenth century. It is the equivalent of 'I', which can refer to the person in the philosophical sense—the Self in relation to the universe—as opposed to '*thiếp*' or '*ta*', which only express the Self in relation to the interlocutor (Nguyễn Phú Phong 1995, p. 204). David G. Marr reminds the reader, in his *Dictionarium Annamiticum, Lusitanum, et Latinum* (1651), that the French missionary Alexandre de Rhodes (1591–1660) remarks that '*tôi*' is the equivalent of '*ego*' in Latin (Marr 2000, p. 775). Originally, in its nominal form, '*tôi*' meant 'subject of the king' or 'slave'. Nowadays it still means 'domestic servant' in the term '*tôi tớ*'. Today, while the first-person singular '*tôi*' dominates literature, '*ta*' and '*thiếp*' are seen as archaic forms.[5]

The mandarin and author of the famous *Quốc âm thi tập* (Collection of poems in the national language), Nguyễn Trãi (1380–1442), in his poem "Tự thán 39" (Self-compassion 39) written in *nôm*, pays close attention to the intimate Self: "Free at will, living outside of the world / I [*ta*] will wander through rivers and mountains, followed by a young servant" (Nguyễn Trãi 1969, p. 425). This poem uses '*ta*' to express the Self. For Nguyễn Trãi, attachment to nature and a withdrawal from and renouncement of the world sometimes prevailed over commitment to social obligations. The poem can be read as a self-portrait in which the author describes a worried soul disenchanted with court life and rustic pleasures—the opposite of the calm scholar-official capable of controlling his emotions he is supposed to be.

In fiction, the novel *Chinh phụ ngâm* (*The Song of a Soldier's Wife*) clearly demonstrates the process of the development of the intimate Self. The novel was written in 1741, comprising 477 verses in Han characters, and was translated into *nôm* two years later by

the woman poet Đoàn Thị Điểm. In a long monologue, the young wife of a warrior describes the despair and anxiety she feels while she awaits her husband's return, and in doing so is countering the official discourse glorifying women's fidelity. Her emotions, though, are expressed with great restraint. Đoàn Thị Điểm's heroine only uses '*thiếp*'—the first-person singular that was used by women to show their inferiority in respect to a man: "Alone, I [*thiếp*] feed the old and teach the young / [I] bear all burdens, yearning for my man" (Đoàn Thị Điểm [1743] 2002, p. 5). Another half century passed before Nguyễn Du's *Truyện Kiều* (The tale of Kiều), the eponymous novel in 3,253 verses in the style of the oral folk tradition, in *nôm*, marked the turning point in the notion of individuality in literature. Written in the 1800s and in *lục bát* (six-eight) metre, this national classic recounts the life and tribulations of Kiều, a beautiful and talented young woman who has to sacrifice herself to save her father and brother from prison. She sells herself into marriage with a middle-aged man, not knowing he is a pimp, and is forced into prostitution. Kiều endures a series of misfortunes for a number of years before being restored to her family. While still exalting filial piety and conjugal duty, the novel describes a love that is often far from appropriate according to the rules of propriety. Nguyễn Du's work allows the female character to express herself using '*tôi*' to denounce the conditions of women at the time:

> [I'm] this little woman [who] left her home
> To trek through hills and streams and founder here.
> Now in your hands you hold my life or death.
> Brought to this pass, my person's reached an end.
> What care I for myself? My fate is set.
> But your investment would you really risk?
>
> (Nguyễn Du 1983, p. 61)

At the end of the nineteenth century and during the early years of the twentieth, works where the '*tôi*' is dominant began to appear, and this is not unrelated to influences from the West. The practice of Christianity—first introduced in Vietnam in the seventeenth

century and becoming widespread in the nineteenth—which favoured questioning of the conscience, doubtlessly contributed to the development of introspection. It should be noted that the first missionaries residing in the country chose to translate 'I' and 'we' as '*tôi*' and '*chúng tôi*' in prayers to God (Phan Thi Đắc 1966, p. 143). This is how *Truyện Thầy Lazaro Phiền* (The story of Lazaro Phiền), a tale of transgression and remorse, written in *quốc ngữ* in 1887 by Nguyễn Trọng Quản (1865–1911), a Christian educated at the French Lycée in Algiers, marked the birth of the modern novel and participated in the development of self-expression. For reasons of jealousy, a Catholic man murders his best friend, poisons his wife and then becomes a monk. The intrigue is narrated in the present tense, a novelty at the time, and the omniscient narrator retires in favour of a first-person narrative; the interiority of the character is the main subject of inquiry.

The novel uses a double narrative in '*tôi*': the story is narrated in the first person '*tôi*' by an unnamed narrator, who then allows the character Lazaro Phiền to reveal his life using '*tôi*'. While his crimes are extremely serious, the narrator still expresses a particularly careful and sincere regard for the Self, clearly describing the diabolical feelings in question. Lazaro Phiền records in detail the state he was in when he was planning the murder. The story is far from those ideals of classical literature that portray a positive hero whose every acts and thoughts correspond to the 'duties' of a Confucian man towards the fatherland, society and family. Nguyễn Trọng Quản's novel is concerned only with the inner life of the character and its contradictions, showing him as tortured by jealousy to the point of losing his mind, then obsessed by his double crime to the extent of becoming a monk, but without being able to confess his terrible deeds. The character also speaks of his Self as if it were a stranger, coolly analysing his 'conscience', his 'spirit', his 'soul', to reveal the hidden being deep inside himself, along with his doubts and anxieties. *Truyện Thầy Lazaro Phiền* marks an essential turning point in the usage of '*tôi*'. From this date, the '*tôi*' prevails in literary texts over the other first-personsingular pronouns.

The Self Blossoms

Contrary to certain accepted thinking, the emergence of modern prose can be perceived just as clearly in the break with the 'classics' as in the continuity of certain traditions. The last competitive examinations, mostly written in Chinese characters, were organized in 1915 for the *thi đình* (Superior Court Examination) and in 1918 for the *thi hương* (Provincial Examination), while the Franco-indigenous free schools and higher education were only set up in 1917.[6] Prior to a new generation of writers being educated in the colonial system, several young scholars trained by traditional methods—such as Tản Đà, Phan Khôi, Ngô Tất Tố, Nguyễn Đỗ Mục and Nguyễn Trọng Thuật, whose aspirations to join the mandarin class had been curtailed by the abolition of the court examinations—acquired, not without a certain frustration, the status of modern authors. They accepted positions among French-speaking intellectuals, such as Phạm Quỳnh and Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, were mostly self-taught at the primary level, and then became graduates of the College of Interpreters in Tonkin, which was founded in 1886. They were journalists, interpreters, novelists and poets in *quốc ngữ*, and as such they contributed to the renaissance of literature.

As they watched the age-old foundations of their Sino-Vietnamese culture collapse and surveyed the horizon of a new era whose codes were as yet unfamiliar, these scholars explored modernity within the sphere of Chinese influence. At the same time as Vietnam was opening towards the West, the Vietnamese were also fascinated by neighbouring countries, especially Japan, the Far Eastern hub for the spread of new knowledge and, in the years between 1905 and 1908, the destination of more Vietnamese students than France. Indeed, having only just extricated themselves from the age-old confrontation with China—which had vacillated between adoration and rejection—most Vietnamese scholars did not wish to engage in a similar relationship with France. So, in 1906, in Japan, when the revolutionary Phan Châu Trinh (1872–1926) discovered the celebrated *Kajin no kigû* (Chance encounters with beautiful women) by the

Japanese writer Tôkai Sanshi, a popular political novel during the Meiji era evoking the rights of the people and the 'revolution', he adapted it in Vietnamese with the title "Giai Nhân Kỳ Ngộ Diễn Ca" ('Elegant females' re-encountered) (Vinh Sinh 1995, pp. 195–206). This window to the Far East should be observed in order to understand the complex cultural and political framework behind the origins of "Vietnamese republicanism" (Goscha 2016, pp. 17–35).

Was the fashion for introspective writing in China[7] and the "forceful affirmation of individual singularity" (Lozerand 2014, p. 513) in Japan during the early decades of the twentieth century linked to an increased Vietnamese interest for self-expression? Whatever the case, it should be noted that a very popular Chinese novel published in 1912, *Xuehong leishi* (The tearful story of Xuehong) by Xu Zhenya (1889–1937)—a tale of impossible love between two young people recorded in diary form, in which the hero describes his daily heartache—left a deep impression on Vietnamese literature. The 1922 novel *Tố Tâm* (Pure heart) by Hoàng Ngọc Phách (1896–1973), although inspired by the French Romantics, shares affinities with the Chinese novel, in particular in its powerful expressions of subjectivity. Constructed on a diverse prose base, including tales, poems, letters and diaries, this text positions a complex narrative using a triple 'I', an entirely new structure in the art of the novel in the 1920s: the heterodiegetic narrator (*tôi*), the homodiegetic narrator (*tôi*) and the voice of the heroine (*em*).[8] It is hardly surprising that the publication of this innovative work encouraged the development of several trends in the fiction of the 1930s, with the various styles of novel that followed all claiming for the main character an entitlement to live and love. The human being as an individual was becoming the cardinal value of literary expression.

It was also in the domain of poetry that the 'I' provoked considerable turbulence. The Thơ Mới (New Poetry), a movement founded in 1932, took up the challenge of liberating versification from the old prosodic constraints, especially those of Chinese Tang dynasty poetry, and opened the way to various new trends, including

romantic, realist, impressionist or fantasy. With French poetry as a model, the movement praised the individual, portraying a person's melancholy and unease. The New Poetry movement marked the birth of an 'I'. The following is an excerpt from the poem "Hư vô" (The void) by Xuân Diệu (1938), one of the emblematic figures of this movement. In it the '*tôi*' expresses 'spleen' in its metaphorical sense of existential anxiety and nothingness—one of Baudelaire's favourite themes:

> I am trembling like a leaf and ashen as winter
> Forehead bathed in sweat, eyes swollen with tears
> Rushed by time, here I stand
> On the icy banks of the void.
>
> (Xuân Diệu [1938] 1992, p. 39)

Young people in the cities warmly welcomed Thế Lữ, Bích Khê, Lưu Trọng Lư and many other poets, who, inspired by Baudelaire, but also influenced by Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarmé and others, were inventing new forms of poetic expression. The most innovative was Hàn Mặc Tử, who was born in 1912 and who died at the age of twenty-eight in a leper colony. His work has a tragic beauty shrouded in folly and despair, as illustrated by his poem "Hồn là ai?" (My soul, who art thou?):

> My soul who art thou? Who? I know not
> My soul pursues me as if to provoke.
> Her sweet lips I dare not enjoy
> My soul in haste feeds me mouthfuls of endless light
> Feasted, contented, I fall faint
> I laugh in madness, suffocating from all the odours of the moon.
>
> (Hàn Mặc Tử [1937] 2009, p. 74)

It should be no surprise that the generalized use of *tôi*' facilitated the production, between 1928 and 1944, of several *tự truyện* (autobiography) in the strictest sense of the word; that is, according to Lejeune's definition, which in my view represents the most precise understanding of the limits of the notion of autobiography:

> Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality. (Lejeune 1975, p. 14).

As part of a long Vietnamese literary tradition of self-description—from memoirs to self-portraits, and also including travel diaries, notebooks, correspondence and open letters, to mention a few—autobiography represents a decisive break with this tradition in that the author is making his Self the target of his quest.

Giấc mộng lớn (The grand dream) (Tản Đà 1929) was the first autobiographical work to satisfy the necessary and sufficient conditions for the genre. Born in 1889, Tản Đà grew up in a Confucian family, where study focussed on the Chinese classics, but at a time when the traditional exams no longer had any meaning. Though a talented candidate, he failed at the Court Examinations in 1909 and 1912. His exceptionally beautiful autobiography, which was written in 1928, mixing poetry with prose, and *quốc ngữ* with Chinese and French, follows his unusual path through life, from his traditional education to his status of modern author, while still claiming a heritage from Zhuangzi. Tản Đà uses '*mình*' more often than '*tôi*' to speak about himself. In fact, '*mình*' is a generic pronominal term that originates from a noun: *mình* (body). '*Mình'* can serve as a personal pronoun for either gender meaning 'I', 'you' (singular) and 'we' (inclusive) in colloquial language. His usage would show a "greater degree of intimacy" (Hoa Pham 2002, p. 295).

"Những ngày thơ ấu" (Days of childhood) (Nguyên Hồng 1938) and *Cỏ dại* (Wild grasses) (Tô Hoài 1944) are autobiographies by Nguyên Hồng (1918–82) and Tô Hoài (1920–2014) respectively, both of whom were from a much more modest background than Tản Đà but were early beneficiaries of the Franco-indigenous free schooling. It is easy to imagine that in the years between 1930 and 1940 this generation would have been reading, or would have been indirectly aware of, not only Marx but also Freud and his theories. Unlike *Giấc mộng lớn* (The grand dream), their objective was both a quest for the Self and social criticism, which explains why they

use the seemingly modern '*tôi*' and not the more intimate '*mình*' as Tản Đà had.

Tô Hoài in *Cỏ dại* (Wild grasses) saw the first signs of his interest in representing reality in his childhood fascination for photography and mass-produced imagery. At the heart of his autobiography is a portrait of his childhood, where he also describes the awareness of individuality that arises in the little boy he once was. Tô Hoài additionally introduces various scenes that show little Sen (the author's real name) trying to contemplate in front of a mirror. Both virtual and photographical portraits are complete in a true process of recognizing the Self in the 'mirror stage', to borrow a Henri Wallon term.[9]

Nguyên Hồng in "Những ngày thơ ấu" (Days of childhood) used psychoanalysis as a new way to explore his past through his hate for his father and his sensual love for his mother. He describes meeting up with her again after a long separation when he was thirteen and how they took a ride together in a rickshaw:

> I sat on the cushion with my thigh against my mother's, my head resting on her chest. I felt the warmth I had been missing in my life flow through my body. The smell of my mother's clothes and the scented breath that came from her lovely mouth as she chewed betel were unusually fragrant to me. (Nguyên Hồng [1938] 1995, p. 188)

In this scene resonant of Oedipus, the way the child regards his mother is far from innocent. She not only has a face but also a body with breasts, arms and thighs; in short, a sexual body suitable for enjoyment. It is not enough, however, for the son simply to look at her; he can also feel her flesh and is excited to inhale the odour of her breath and her clothes. The author's insistence on the sense of smell from among the five human senses is far from gratuitous in that it is the sense central to emotional communication. Hence, this love, in spite of the taboo and the awareness of its limits, is dangerously close to becoming a psychotic fusion. The adolescent Nguyên Hồng is even dreaming of returning to the maternal breast—the first object of his desires:

> Just think when you were young and in your mother's lap, how infinitely gentle a sensation it was to have your face against her milky breast, and her hand caressing your face and chin, rubbing your back. (Nguyên Hồng [1938] 1995, p. 188)

It should be remembered that "the sucking at the mother's breast becomes the term of departure for all of sexual life, the unattained ideal of later sex gratification" (Freud 1970, p. 294).

Beyond their differences, these stories of literary vocation and political mission by three writers relate similar journeys: the young man who, deprived of a father and without any points of reference in a colonial society scarred by deep divisions, launches into a career in literature in an attempt to heal the wounds of both personal and political trauma. The portrayal of a damaged Self with a background of family and historical conflict forms one of the recurrent motifs in these writings.

These works demonstrate the same audacity, residing not only in the fact that here the Self is a real person—Vietnamese tradition, as mentioned above, does include first-person writing—but more importantly in the way the authors make their lives the sole object of their books, laying themselves bare to their readers and directly confronting taboos. By revisiting their past to research and interpret the issues that may have shaped their personalities, they try to provide a new vision of the Self according to a logic that surpasses the binary concepts of body and soul, good and evil, East and West, tradition and modernity.

From this moment onwards, the development of autobiography should be considered within the historical continuum linking the writers influenced by Confucius, Zhuangzi, Rousseau, Liang Qichao, Lu Xun, Nakae Chômin and Tôkai Sanshi to a generation of readers of Gide, Dostoevsky, Freud, Husserl and Marx. Sadly, those writers born in the decade between 1916 and 1926, as some of the mass of beneficiaries of the modern school system of the 1930s, were relegated to an inferior status in comparison to French citizens. This is why they abandoned creative art for the 'revolution', in order to

actively participate in the struggle for national independence, which lasted until the French defeat at Dienbienphu in 1954.

From 1954 to 1975, while the country was divided into the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Hanoi and the Republic of South Vietnam in Saigon, literature developed in two completely different directions. In the North, under the close surveillance of the authorities, it was considered an ideological tool. With the liberation and edification of the nation being privileged to the detriment of the individual, literature was intended to reflect the life of the peasantry, the workers and the military (Tham Seong Chee 1981, pp. 322–35). In the South, sustained by a relative freedom of expression and influenced by Western culture through the enormous number of translations of European and American works, writing movements flourished until April 1975, when the trend was broken with the fall of Saigon (Võ Phiến 1986, pp. 128–35). From then onwards, socialist realism became the imposed framework for official literature in reunified Vietnam.

Socialist Realism: A Brutal Breach

There is no doubt the human being occupies centre stage in socialist realism, but only as an ideological theme linked to the struggle for national liberation and the building of socialism—two objectives of the 'Vietnamese Revolution'. Referred to as the "new man" that literature "expressed and praised" (Tham Seong Chee 1981, pp. 325–28), according to the instructions of the Communist Party from 1957 onwards, and based on the model imported from the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, these unprecedented individuals possessed a class consciousness that would allow them to build a revolution that would change the world. In practice, they had to have "a heightened sense of collectivism, a strong aspiration for science and technology, a love of literature and the arts, a patriotism along with an international proletarian spirit" (Hồng Chương 1976, p. 305). Consequently, the writer's mission was to "discover the new man and to praise his virtues and so create an artistic personage, an

example to be followed by everyone" (Hồng Chương 1976, p. 306). From the point of view of psychology, he was unified, coherent and analysable. With his positive attitude, he "expressed his happiness to live under a socialist regime" (Tham Seong Chee 1981, p. 325).

Without a doubt, socialist realism expects literature to function as an ideological weapon and promote its characters as role models for its readers. Revolutionary poetry must express the hopes and breathe the optimism of war, not of an individual, because "poets were the part of the people" (Tham Seong Chee 1981, p. 325). Of course, every piece of work, even the most commonplace, is the personal expression of an author. It is however problematic to talk about subjectivity when the opinions of the writer and his or her characters must reside behind ideology, as is the case in socialist realism. Here the 'I' must not be singular but must meld into a collective 'we'.

The novel *Hòn Đất*, written in 1966 by Anh Đức and lauded as a masterpiece in Hanoi school textbooks, is one of the works that most clearly represents this doctrine. The book follows the brave struggle of a group of Communist partisans and humble villagers who, at the beginning of the resistance against the regime set up by the Americans in the South, barricade themselves in a cave to hold out against enemy soldiers. Sứ, a young woman in the group, is arrested and faces the possibility of execution. Though in mortal danger, she never loses her self-control. Her feelings remain consistent and her conscience is clear. Her soul exalts her love of the fatherland.

Thus, socialist realism is content with using simplistic portrayals of the 'new man' with no recourse to problematizing the Self. But under what conditions was literature suddenly able, in the mid-1980s, to abandon the collective hero in favour of the individual? What effort has it made to step back from the orthodox notions of the subject to allow valid fictional creation?

The Era of 'I'

In the late 1980s, at a distance from the war with the United States and witnessing a decline in the dominant Marxist-Leninist ideology,

the country saw the belief in social emancipation and nation-building via class struggle to be waning and doubts and disappointment increasing. But even though post-war Vietnam was short on significant events or heroes, its literature was expanding in scope and giving eminent status to the anti-hero—a person with no civil status but with multiple identities.

Stimulated by the winds of change in 1986, literature began to undergo a transformation. The best indications of this trend are the efforts at re-examining the question of subject. Some authors began to explore dreams and the unconscious—an area previously considered taboo. *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* (The sorrow of war) (Bảo Ninh 1991a), published in 1989, sees a North Vietnam army veteran try to explore this problem in depth. The main character has returned home in 1975 after ten years of military action, but his civilian existence is of little interest to him. The past continually weighs on his mind as if he were under an evil spell; it obsesses and haunts him. He sets out to write a novel to free himself from the memory of a war considered legitimate but which destroyed a generation of young innocents. The reader is led through the author's searching and questioning as he constructs his magnum opus. The borders between reality and imagination then become blurred as one suddenly realises that Bảo Ninh's story is a reworked version of the novel written by the main character.

As in *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Remarque 1929), an ordinary soldier's tragically simple account of the First World War, *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* (The sorrow of war) is the first harrowing description of combat on the North Vietnam side during the American involvement in Vietnam. Bảo Ninh describes the cruel aspects of the war and expresses his doubts of its legitimacy, and he is the first author to undertake the criticism sorely needed in a society basking in its own glorification. The most original aspect of Bảo Ninh's work, however, is how it repeatedly questions the *raison d'être* of literature. Portraying an ex-combatant in the process of unearthing his past in order to write the story of his life, the novel leads the reader to the very core of the creative process. It expresses

the author's thoughts on his art and openly poses the question that is at once both aesthetic and existential: how does one write about man? And how does one narrate war?

Subtly alternating the use of 'I' (*tôi*) and 'he' (*anh*), the novel presents a picture of the Self during a process of self-awareness that describes the world without referring to the dominant ideology but only according to subjectivity. *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* (The sorrow of war) is the first Vietnamese publication to enquire deeply into a person's inner psyche in an attempt to describe the author's desires, frustrations and obsessions, with the result that Bảo Ninh pushed back the limits of expression of the Self. With a protagonist who does not achieve heroism, and a journey that depicts ideological disillusion and failed socialization, the novel marks the return of the Self in relation to the breach of 'I' under socialist realism where it had melted into the 'we'.

It must be noted that while this novel confronted political authority by breaking the taboo on the subject, Bảo Ninh was still a victim of both self and official censorship. In 1992, having awarded the Writers' Union First Prize to Bảo Ninh, the members of the jury had no option subsequently but to engage in their own self-criticism. When the second edition of *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* (The sorrow of war) was published it was given the different and seemingly romantic title of *Thân phận của tình yêu* (A destiny of love) (Bảo Ninh 1991b), the original being considered to be a lie (Đỗ Văn Khang 1991, p. 6).

Among the earliest authors to give a voice to subjectivity to express a new view of man and the world was Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. His work describes several different forms of parricide: the secret wish to exclude the father, the unequivocal demand for his death, or a killing blow with an axe. Unexpectedly, and this is what makes his discourse so interesting, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp does not disguise his fascination for this crime within the family. From "Tướng về hưu" (The general retires) to "Tội ác và trừng phạt" (Crime and punishment) and "Không có vua" (Without a king), his short stories (Nguyễn Huy Thiệp 2007)—which take the shape of

personal narrative or a diary format—often portray a narrator whose biography resembles that of the author's and places the desire and act of parricide in the context of the complex and tumultuous events between 1975 and 1985, a decade that began with the victory of the Communist Party and ended with poverty, the advent of the reign of money, and disillusionment with ideology. Indeed, it is difficult to ignore the existence of a political message in these short stories. Do their titles not allude to connivance between paternity and the one-party state? Are they not suggesting the end of an authoritarian regime? In any event, one cannot ignore the fact that this significant body of work by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, in which the murder of the father takes place, opened the door to a new generation of writers, serving as a threshold between wartime and peace. With the increase in the number of writings in the form of first-person interior monologues or private diaries, the challenge from then on was to explore the wealth of variety and action in the individual private sphere in order to convey the complexities of contemporary existence.

In her first novel, *Thiên sứ* (*The Crystal Messenger*), Phạm Thị Hoài (1988) gives her own name, Hoài, to the heroine-narrator, but without giving the character her own biographical details. It is, however, relevant that the text begins with an anti-conformist 'I' (*tôi*) who refuses all nostalgia. *Thiên sứ* relates the 'coming of age' of a sensitive person seeking answers to life's questions through the moving story of her journey to emotional and sexual maturity. Nevertheless, it is rather an anti-bildungsroman insofar as in a classical bildungsroman the goal is maturity and the protagonist achieves it gradually and with difficulty: he finally accepts societal values. In *Thiên sứ*, to the contrary, the protagonist is unable to reach maturity. She decides never to grow up and retains the stature of a child while having several love affairs in post-war Vietnam. From Phạm Thị Hoài onwards, personal expression has been explored in all its forms, especially by the authors that emerged around 1995. Their works illustrate a new trend: speaking about oneself. This movement is not without its links to the present context of Vietnamese society

where individualism is emerging as the memories of poverty and war fade away.

Unquestionably it is Nguyễn Việt Hà who led the way in the quest for a plurality of the 'I' (*tôi*). *Cơ hội của Chúa* (A chance for god) (Nguyễn Việt Hà 1999) is a novel that mixes monologue and the personal diaries of four characters to portray the experiences of young people in Hanoi in the early 1990s aspiring in vain to change. In their wild pursuit of money, illegal trading and corruption, they go from one disillusion to another. It is a major work on the youth of today who, faced with a material and moral stalemate, take refuge in exile, money, alcohol or death. *Cơ hội của Chúa* fascinates with the wealth of its subjects—religion and disillusion, love and the renunciation of happiness, friendship and vanity. Its art lies in how the diaries of the four protagonists are interweaved. The reader is thus directly acquainted with the interiority of the characters without needing the input of the narrator. Drawing on three different levels, their portraits are often subtle, and sometimes contradictory. For example, the Hoàng character is seen from the point of view of the omniscient narrator, then by other protagonists and finally by himself.

These characters and the facts of the narrative are described from different angles. The information provided by the narrator and the diaries complement, confront and sometimes contradict one other. Through this process, Nguyễn Việt Hà destroys the linearity of time—a characteristic of classical works. The subjective gazes allow him to express a heterogeneous, open world, rich in mysteries and uncertainty. Hoàng is also the character who goes the furthest in writing: he composes literary texts. This is the only area where he knows no failure, as if the failure of love was essential to artistic success. In the novel, one can read two short stories where Hoàng draws with derision and tenderness the portraits of 'wise men' like Zhuangzi and Huizi, while developing his reflections on literature and his relationship to the world.

The Self, put to the test of globalization, is the focus of inspired inquiry in Thuận's work. In *Chinatown* (Thuận 2005), a young Vietnamese woman in Paris relates her hopeless love for a Chinese

man from Hanoi. Although it is not autobiographical, this story is the novel of the Self par excellence: the main text and its accompanying extracts from the story *I'm Yellow* (in English in the original text) written by the woman in exile are both in the first-person singular '*tôi*'. The author uses the locations mentioned by the heroine to make a critical analysis of the fall of the USSR and the rise of China. Hanoi is described with its own problems and also in the context of its relationship with the wider world, particularly its complex ties with Paris—capital of the former colonial power—and with Beijing and Moscow, two 'older brothers' of the socialist block. A symbol of exile and secret love—with subtle reference to Duras—*Chinatown* draws its strength from a new political overview. More than introspection, this work swings between assertion of the Self and the writing of history.

In the novel *Ngựa thép* (Steel horse) (Phan Hồn Nhiên 2014), the question of 'I' (*tôi*) tested against globalization is quite different. The author imagines a world where all borders between countries and continents have been erased. The only barriers remaining are between individuals, who stand isolated, facing solitude and death. The characters try to create links of love and affection with their close ones. Most of the time, however, they only succeed in avoiding or destroying each other. Born into a globalized world, they traverse an array of unnamed locations, with the exception of Saigon, their point of departure, and Santa Fe, an American city pervaded by the art of Georgia O'Keeffe.

For Phan Hồn Nhiên, body consciousness gives human beings the feeling of existing. His body is shown as this attachment, this limit, this primordial element of an identity that has become uncertain. While the characters have a rather vague civil status, the author pays particular attention to their bodies as organic objects. Moreover, the characters evoke their own bodies without deviation. In defiance of the codes of modesty, they say 'my body' (*cơ thể tôi*). The word 'body' (*cơ thể*) appears 181 times in the novel. On the other hand, we note the relative absence of terms that are supposed to determine the intimate Self, such as 'soul' (*tâm hồn*), 'heart' (*trái tim*), 'mind' (*tinh thần*), 'will' (*lý trí*). Nevertheless, while the characters of *Ngựa*

thép (Steel horse) do observe the slightest changes in their bodies, they comment on them with such a distance that it seems like a foreign organism.

In counterpoint to the cascade of human bodies destroyed, Phan Hồn Nhiên draws up an immense gallery of figurative images composed of paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs, fragments of film, postcards and posters exposing animal and vegetable bodies. It goes without saying that the insertion of these works of art enriches Phan Hồn Nhiên's quest for 'I' with a new sensitivity. These images offer another reading of the body, through the aesthetic of contrast between the human and the vegetal, the animate and the inanimate, the real and the imaginary, the prosaic and the poetic.

Another important theme is that of the individual facing the internet. "We have been pushed by solitude into the cul-de-sac of despair", cries one of the "citizens of the internet" who are omnipresent in the novel by Vũ Phương Nghi, *Chuyện lan man đầu thế kỉ* (Senseless stories for the new century) (Vũ Phương Nghi 2006, p. 223). In *Blogger* (Phong Điệp 2006), the narrator is a young introvert in real life, but this is no obstacle to her gaining recognition as a popular blogger. Isolated by her provincial background, sidelined by her colleagues, rejected by her fiancé and forced to abort her baby, the heroine of *Blogger*, a young employee of a state-owned company in Hanoi, leads her life confined to her boring office and tiny room. To disguise her distress, she keeps browsing the internet by hacking into the Wi-Fi connection of the neighbouring building. She is a successful communicator when the exchange does not require physical presence, but in the end she commits suicide because she is unable to withstand the pressures of the online world. Her female body is perpetually harmed; a victim of poverty, violent sexual acts, abortion and self-destruction. Women writers uncompromisingly question their post-war zeitgeist, considering themselves and their peers to be both beneficiaries and victims of digitalization. What is the impact of digital culture on the development of the individual in terms of relationships, sexual and otherwise? And how does the individual manage the confrontation between the real and the virtual?

The first-person voice dominates twenty-first-century literature. This is particularly the case in the writings by women, who, while writing about themselves, clearly demonstrate a keen desire to blur the frontier between reality and fantasy. Their heroines, who share with them a common identity—though not to the extent of constituting a reference framework—immerse themselves in the virtual world, which sometimes leads to madness and death. Autofiction,[10] a form of fictionalized autobiography, is a style they master with virtuoso. At the end of *T mất tích* (T. has disappeared) (2012) by Thuận, in an epilogue, the narrator presents herself as the author of a novel also titled *T mất tích*, without any link being established between the character (fictional) and the author (Thuận).

Conclusion

From the intimate poems of Nguyễn Trãi in the early fifteenth century to the autofictions of Thuận, Vũ Phương Nghi and Phong Điệp in the early years of the third millennium, as well as a period including the autobiographies of Tản Đà, Nguyên Hồng and Tô Hoài, Vietnamese tales of the Self, which had previously centred on the masculine and been set in the constantly troubled and discordant history of the nation, are now tending towards postmodern subjects, and frequently feminine ones, both fractured and plural, in search of a world that has become limitless.

The development of the 'I' in Vietnamese literature through a wide range of genres and time periods, incorporating those cultural, social and political changes that are particularly representative of expressions of the Self, has established the continuity of subjectivity in literature. Its transformations over the centuries—under the impact of factors such as Christianity, French culture, communism, social realism, globalization, and the growing participation of women in the literary sphere—represent the clearest illustration of the Vietnamese capacity to conceptualize the individual.

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NOTES

1. Examples of this new approach are to be found in Lozerand (2014). These cover not only East Asia and Latin America but also India and Africa in a quest to identify different attitudes to and appreciation of individual singularity.
2. Leading among the recent in-depth studies is Jacqueline Pigeot's (2017) treatment of the portrayal of the Self and self-awareness in the writings of women during the Heian period.
3. *Nôm*, literally 'Southern characters', is a logographic writing system formerly used to write the Vietnamese language. It reduces the gap between the written and spoken language. Although formal writing in Vietnam was done in classical Chinese until the early twentieth century, *nôm* was widely used between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries by Vietnam's cultured elite.
4. *Quốc ngữ*, literally 'national language script', is the modern writing system for the Vietnamese language. It uses the Latin script with some digraphs and the addition of nine accent marks or diacritics—four to create additional sounds and another five to indicate the tone of each word.
5. My study only discusses the expression of 'I' in literature. It must also be kept in mind that in Vietnamese the choice of pronouns depends partly on formality. According to Hoa Pham, some operate "in formal contexts" and others "in colloquial contexts" (spoken language, personal letters and written dialogue) where the speaker establishes "a close or egalitarian relationship with the addressees" (2002, pp. 281–312).
6. It should be noted that the French occupation of Vietnam lasted less than a century (1858–1954). The conquest took more than twenty years, and colonial ascendancy was uneven from one territory to another. In 1867 the south became a colony under the name of Cochinchine; Tonkin in the north and Annam in the centre became protectorates in 1884.
7. A couple of examples of this new literary genre are *Sanshi zishu* (Autobiography at thirty) by Liang Qichao (1902) and *Sishi zishu* (Autobiography at forty) by Hu Shi (1933).
8. In her diary the heroine addresses the man she loves using '*anh*' (elder brother) and refers to herself as '*em*' (younger sibling). '*Anh*' and '*em*' are kinship terms. For Vietnamese, the use of kinship terms is the most popular way to refer to oneself and others. Anyone can be referred to using kinship terms, and not just people who are related.
9. The creator of the term, H. Wallon, was the first psychologist to reveal the

importance of the mirror in the psychological construction of the infant, which he develops in his book *Les Origines du caractère chez l'enfant. Les préludes du sentiment de personnalité* (The origins of character in children. The preludes of personality sentiment) ([1934] 2002).

10. Autofiction is a term first used by Serge Doubrovsky on the blurb of his novel *Fils* (Doubrovsky 1977).

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