

# Popular Literature in Vietnam at Present

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**Abstract:** Since Vietnam started the *đổi mới*, or renovation, process, in 1986, the country's popular literature has developed in an extremely strong manner. Especially, in the current context of the market economy and its in-depth and expanded international integration, the Vietnamese popular literature has been incessantly broadening its influence even though the way it is received and recognised varies among readers. The development of the type of literature has, on the one hand, contributed to diversifying the country's literature, but, on the other hand, brought about many negative impacts and concerns of declining quality.

**Keywords:** Popular literature, development, Vietnam.

**Subject classification:** Literature

## 1. Introduction

At present, there are different ways to perceive popular literature, but they are basically divided into two groups. The first one consists of the perceptions viewing popular literature as the expression of the dark side of the market economy that values economic effects over social ones. The second group consists of the perceptions assuming that popular literature just focuses on trivial emotions of individuals, while avoiding mentioning important and pressing issues of the country. Talking about popular literature, many people show the stigma and view it as “semi-literature” located in the periphery of literature. This paper discusses the conceptions of popular

literature, the current realities and measures to develop this literary genre in Vietnam.

## 2. Conceptions of popular literature

The concept of popular literature is often identified with other concepts such as “*văn học thị trường*” (market literature), “*văn học bình dân*” (commoners' literature) and “*văn học giải trí*” (entertainment literature), etc... It results from some commoners' characteristics of those genres, as described below: *First*, they all are addressed to mass readers. *Second*, they give prominence to the entertaining function. In research works done before the early 20<sup>th</sup> century,

commoners' literature was also named folk literature, of which the characteristics were different from those of scholarly or elite literature. Meanwhile, market literature and popular literature were created and developed in company with the market economy. The concept of market literature is, however, often used to refer to the literature that is written on the basis of the supply and demand law appropriately to both sellers and buyers. In spite of being spiritual produce, literary works must be seen as a type of commodity. In the context of the market economy, as a producer, each writer has to make every effort to satisfy the requirements and tastes of readers, who are seen as consumers. In brief, whenever market economy exists, there will be market literature and a literary market as well. Yet, popular literature is different from market one in the fact that it is created on the basis of the modern communication and the consumer society. A majority of the contemporary research works on popular literature emphasise this feature. As popular literature is closely attached to the consumer society and communication, it can be disseminated "across boundaries"; not limited to a certain territory or a certain group of readers. Anybody can be a reader of popular literature, regardless of age, sex, qualification, ethnicity and nationality. It can be read anytime, in the form of e-books or on the cell phones.

In essence, popular literature tends to refuse the "royal" and "academic" qualifications, while being related closely to commoners' literature; it is the very produce of the post-industrialised market

economy. As a result, some people consider popular literature as "folk literature of the industrialised society". As regards the beginning of popular literature in the world, in the essay titled "*A Theory of Mass Culture*", Dwight MacDonald argues that the root of mass culture appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the democratic society broke down the monopoly of the aristocrats, who viewed themselves quintessential, and the technological progress could meet the demand of the cultural market [4]. Mass culture is completely contrary to elite culture and even developed parasitically on the latter, based on communication and trade. It is not by chance that many elite works have been rewritten concisely to be easily understood, aiming at gaining higher popularity. According to the Wikipedia, mass culture came out into society in the early 1920s and spread globally late in the 20<sup>th</sup> and early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century [6]. Like culture, mass literature can be developed rapidly in the consumer society and mainly in the urban space. For the reason, mass culture is sometimes considered, in essence, street and the culture that is of the daily (i.e. mundane) life. In "*Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*", John Storey argues that mass culture is attached to consumer culture, mass production and mass consumption, and especially very close to American culture [5]. Discussing mass culture, similar to many Western scholars, Nguyen Van Dan emphasises two important aspects, including "the effectiveness of the cultural product consumption" (associated with the commercial foundation) and "the globally

mass taste” (associated with the modern communication techniques) [7]. Thus, researchers specialised in mass literature agree that popular literature is basically the produce of the consumer society and the times of media, in spite of some remaining controversial issues among them.

Due to the people’s mentality in the consumers’ times, economic and artistic requirements are combined together, opening a bright prospect for popular literature. As explained logically by Piroshka Dossi about the various stages of literature in the period of market economy, “at the beginning of the avant-garde movement, art and economy were supposed to be separate realms with distinct value systems - one of them focusing on producing spiritual values, the other on generating monetary wealth. These previously hostile spheres seem to have merged into the hybrid structures of an economised culture and a culturalised economy.”[1].

It is necessary to add that the consumer society as well as the trend of cultural economisation and economic culturalisation are appropriate to the postmodernism. Although debates on the postmodernism are still taking place, the post-modern conditions have been described convincingly by Jean-François Lyotard in his famous work [2]. In the post-modern culture, the doubt and the burlesque become basic features; therefore, mass culture and literature always deliberately aim at blurring the boundary between “the particularly selected” and “the commoners”, showing the opposition to the dream of grand narratives.

In Vietnam, the beginning of popular literature has not been defined unanimously by literary researchers, though its signs are thought to have appeared before 1945 with some typical writers such as Ho Bieu Chanh and Le Van Truong. In reality, however, their works, though addressed to the masses, were not of popular literature as in line with present understanding<sup>2</sup>. The signs of popular literature were shown more clearly in the urban literature in South Vietnam during the 1954 - 1975 period, when “many people tried to write novels to be published in the feuilleton and the market was flooded with foreign swordsman and erotic novels” [3]. Yet, the urban literature in South Vietnam was basically understood as “market literature” or “consumer literature” instead of popular literature. By the 1990s, the market economy was really established in Vietnam; the internet was used widely and the globalisation took place incessantly. As a result, there were favourable conditions for popular literature to develop rapidly. It was the time when all the three important conditions for development of popular literature were found in Vietnam, including: (1) the consumer society and the mentality of pragmatism; (2) the compromise and concession between the particularly selected and the commoners’; and, (3) the rapid development of the communication technology and the media. Due to the vigorous development of popular literature, the space of elite literature has considerably shrunk. The number of writers who follow the trend of popular literature has been getting increasingly higher. Besides, the foreign translated

works of popular literature have been flooding the market.

In the readers' mind, popular literature is similar to fast food, which is not of high artistic quality but really convenient. The fundamental characteristic of popular literature is that it expresses daily issues of the modern urban dwellers through entertaining stories with a simple writing style, which are easily understood and retold. Thus, popular literature enables readers to get rid of social pressure and make the most of the leisure time. For an "elite" work, readers have to spend time contemplating it; whereas, they can read a work of popular literature while talking with others; and even, they can read it for the purpose of falling into sleep easily without any inconvenience.

### **3. The current status of popular literature in Vietnam**

#### *3.1. Themes and content*

Works of popular literature are often addressed to the uncomplicated themes, targeting the contemporary readers' mentality of trying to relieve stress. Most of the popular literary works often revolve around familiar themes, which are sometimes very commonplace, such as tricky love triangles or rectangles and mawkish emotions that easily make readers feel compassion about. That is why the romantic fictions have been ruling the roost in the literary market over the past years. The themes on sexual and homosexual relationships have attracted great attention from writers. Those works

help readers escape from unpleasant realities by satisfying their fantasies. The non-official historical, science-fiction and swordsman's themes also attract readers, since they take the readers' minds to the unknown. Basically, however, the main themes remain familiar such as the struggle between good and evil or between the righteous and the wicked with thrilling and sensational situations mixed with some love troubles.

The plot in popular literature is quite simple, unsophisticated and easily understandable. After reading a work of the literature, the reader can retell it to others, resulting in a resonance as a spreading effect among the reader community. The plot of psychology is given priority to and psychological analyses are sometimes quite subtle. Remarkably, writers of popular literature are very sharp-witted to grasp the psychological state of contemporary people. Many writers readily please the readers' facile tastes and even use all measures to attract more readers. As a result, repetition can be found in the popular literature in Vietnam at present. It is even a mixture of what we can find in Chinese romantic fictions, Taiwanese soap operas, and Korean love dramas with some factors of popular culture for the purpose of making readers feel weepy. For example, in the book titled "*Thương mấy cũng là người dưng*" (*Merely Strangers, No Matter How Much We Love*), Anh Khang shares his thinking with readers in a mild manner: "We are merely strangers. No matter how much we love, we cannot change the truth that people of the same blood may not live together for the whole

life, let alone strangers". The psychological sense quickly wins sympathy from young people, who assume that they should neither be too disappointed nor blame each other, after a short love is broken, because they are just strangers, eventually!

### 3.2. Genres

Considered a non-orthodox part located in the periphery of literature, popular literature has extremely diversified genres, including romantic novels, comics, neo-swordsman's novels, romantic fictions, "*thơ bụi*" (lit. poems of dirt), and "*tản văn*" (essays), etc. In addition, the genre of autobiography has been developed rather much with many works stirring up public opinion such as those of Le Van and Thuong Tin, etc. The development of the autobiographies is attached to the sense of expanded democracy in the society. Writers no longer have to avoid exposing the hidden self and even are no longer afraid of showing readers the most intimate stories of privacy. There is also opportunity for development of comics, especially after the Japanese comic titled *Doraemon* was published and then re-published many times by Kim Dong Publishing House. In 2011, Thanh Phong's comic "*Sát thủ đầu mưng mủ*" (*Assassin with a Festering Head*<sup>3</sup>) caused a fever among readers in various social strata. In 2013, its reprint was renamed "*Phê như con tê tê*" (lit. rejoicing like a Pangolin). It consisted idioms and proverbs adapted in rhyme, and used as wordplay by the youth, such

as: *Ngất ngậy con gà Tây* (thrilled like a turkey); *Thuận vợ thuận chồng, con đông một quá* (harmony between wife and husband results in many children and extreme tiredness)... The author shows his insights into daily life through comic pictures, so the book quickly attracted much attention from readers. Despite the various assessments, including both praise and criticism, the emergence of "*Sát thủ đầu mưng mủ*" in the market was considered "declaration of fighting" by popular literature against the pressure of academic culture and elite literature. The combination of genres is quite common in popular literature. The interaction between poetry and prose, texts and pictures, prose and drama, etc. is applied rather lively by many writers in popular literature. This makes readers feel unconstrained, while venturing and sharing the author's feelings that are appropriate to their own mood.

### 3.3. Language of art

Different from elite literature, popular literature is not sophisticated in its expression; severe issues are not raised; and, it is not very important to renovate the writing style. In the meanwhile, it particularly emphasises the gaming feature. Games in popular literature, however, aim at creating spillovers and are inclined to entertainment rather than intelligence. Language used in popular literature is attractive and arouses curiosity, especially for the youth, via "a strange way of speaking", such as "*chán như con gián*" (bored like a cockroach),

“*cống rãnh sóng sánh với đại dương*” (how dare sewers shake together with (compare to) the ocean), “*cố quá thành quá cố*” (dying because of trying too much) in “*sát thủ đầu mừng mủ*” by Thanh Phong; or, “*lỡ tay chạm ngực con gái*” (touch a girl’s breasts by mistake) and “*một nửa tình yêu là tình dục*” (half of love is sex), etc. Colloquial and over familiar language is used very often in popular literature. It does not require readers to spend much time thinking, unlike the language in elite literature. It is a type of language that can cause effects immediately. Instead of the “provocative” language, on the other hand, some writers attract readers by using mild language, similarly to essays or diaries, telling about the innermost feelings, deep longing or vague sadness with quite romantic titles of the books. This demonstrates that writers in popular literature are very clear-headed in satisfying somewhat facile tastes of their readers. It can be seen as “a tacit agreement” between the writers and a majority of readers in the market of popular literature at present.

### 3.4. Dissemination and techniques of promotion

Works of popular literature can be written and released in the traditional way (printing) or via the internet. However, the internet is particularly preferred by the netizens, since it provides them with freedom of creativity, while the personal information of both writers and readers can be hidden. After being released on the internet, some literary works are re-

edited and published in the traditional way. For some works, conversely, after being published in the traditional way, they are posted on the internet for the purpose of being further disseminated and getting more readers, as this helps save time and money. No matter which way is used for publication, writers always try to make eye-catching works. So as to increase the attractiveness, it is necessary for popular literature to rely on the communication technology, viewing promotion as an indispensable step. In a meeting of young writers held in Hanoi in 2016, Van Thanh Le argued that some young writers were mistaken, considering popular literature a type of “instant literature” and they therefore held “showbiz-like glossy introductions, aiming at advertising their names” [8]. An important characteristic of popular literature is again defined that it must be closely attached to the modern media. Before releasing a book, writers of popular literature usually collaborate with PR companies to hold an event to promote the book, or for readers to exchange with the author. The collaboration is so effective that young people will try to outdo one another in buying the book of the popular writers afterwards. The online newspaper “zing.vn” on 18 May 2015 reported that Anh Khang, born in 1987, was a writer who set the record in releasing “hot” publications, such as “*Ngày trôi về phía cũ*” (*Day Drifts Back to the Olden Side*) with 45,000 copies, “*Đường hai ngã người thương thành lạ*” (*Lovers Become Strangers, after Separation*) with 55,000 copies, and “*Buồn làm sao buồn*” (*How to Relieve the Sadness*) with 70,000 copies. The figures were really surprising, as the

number of copies of an elite literary work often ranges only from 1,000 to 2,000. Publications of literary research or criticism even encounter much greater difficulty regarding their consumption. Furthermore, popular literature sometimes inspires the composition of popular musical works. For example, the title “*Thương mấy cũng là người dung*” of Anh Khang’s work is also used to name a hit song performed by Noo Phuoc Thinh. The writer’s attraction still remains great, especially after he released the latest publication titled “*Trời vẫn còn xanh, em vẫn còn anh*” (*The Sky Remains Blue and You Still Have Me*) in April 2017. In addition to Anh Khang, some other writers in popular literature have also released best-sellers, such as Gao with “*Cho em gần anh thêm chút nữa*” (*Let Me be Closer to You*); Nguyen Phong Viet with “*Đi qua thương nhớ, sinh ra để cô đơn*” (*Going through Love, Born to be Lonely*); and, Hamlet Truong with “*Yêu đi rồi khóc*” (*Love and then Cry*). Admittedly, some writers, viewed outstanding in popular literature, are not facile at all in creating literary works. Instead, they do pay much attention to the language, the style and the way to express emotions. In truth, their works have not met strict requirements of elite literature, but it is necessary to recognise their efforts in conquering readers.

### 3.5. Effect among readers

In spite of some recent opinions arguing that the ideas for popular literature, especially romantic fictions, have nearly depleted, the fever for such works remains. In the current context, differentiation in

readers’ tastes is an inevitable reality, and readers have the right to choose their own “spiritual menu”. However, signs of taking the new way, ignoring the old way, in an excessive manner have appeared, including the use of non-standard language. That has made many people worry about the over-expansion of popular literature, particularly the cyber one. Due to the over-description of cursory feelings or violent and sexual activities, popular literature may result in misleading the youth’s tastes and senses of beauty. In addition, the low artistic quality of many works in popular literature is likely to make readers have prejudices towards the type of literature. It is also the very reason why popular literature has been for a long time out of the interest of the academia and disregarded by researchers in elite literature. Looking at the issue carefully, however, things are not so simple as mentioned above, especially when one considers popular literature a product of the consumer society and the mass media techniques. To advocate popular literature is not considered an optimal measure, since it will make readers turn their back on elite literature and make the spiritual life poorer with publications of low artistic quality. It is, however, impossible to forbid popular literature, as its development is logically part of the contemporary spiritual culture, after all.

## 4. Solutions to development of popular literature in Vietnam at present

So as to find out the most appropriate measures to develop popular literature in a good manner, it is necessary to conduct more comprehensive research on the

genre of literature. I would like to make some recommendations as follows:

*Firstly*, it is necessary to recognise the development of popular literature as an objective reality with specific historical, cultural and social foundations. In history, there have always been two types of literature existing in parallel, including the elite and the commoners'. Popular literature supported by postmodernism is a literary genre that aims at removing the boundary between the "particularly selected" and the "mass" literature, as well as the boundary between the elite and the commoners'. In fact, however, many writers in elite literature know how to absorb the nutrition of commoners' literature to be refined and transformed into works of elite literature, owing to which their scope of readers expands. Furthermore, it is not true that all writers in popular literature are irresponsible for their works. They make their writings to express feelings and quest for sympathy from the readers of the same interest without spending much time or making many efforts. In the pre-modern art, the literary popularisation was limited in various aspects, such as the geographical location (region, area and territory), the reader social strata (the intelligentsia and common people), and the taste (by sex and age...). In the time of modern communications, the creation and reception of popular literature can be popularised vigorously regardless of who the persons are or where they come from. We can say that popular literature is found wherever the internet is used. That is why it is impossible to forbid rigidly the development of popular literature with

coercion of any administrative measures. Instead, it is necessary to make timely alerts to give the correct orientation to readers.

*Secondly*, it is necessary to set up an appropriate strategy for the development of popular literature. Assuming that only popular literature is found in the country, it surely will be a serious imbalance. So as to minimise the expansion and the power of popular literature, it is necessary to have a dual strategy, which provides a sound aesthetic orientation for readers and, at the same time, emphasises the development of elite literature. The above-mentioned orientation does not mean that popular literature should be prohibited, but we have to make readers distinguish temporary values from permanent ones, as well as entertaining tricks from spiritual products, that help people to "double" their values with the charms of arts. Herein, literary criticism plays an extremely important role. It must not be turned into advertisement. Nor may works of medium quality be considered masterpieces and best-sellers for the sake of profit. In spite of being somewhat inferior to popular literature in terms of consumption due to the advantage of using the media and the market support, elite literature has never died. Indeed, when writers devote themselves to the elite/quintessence creation, they shall accept that they will not indulge facile or fugitive tastes of readers. Classic literary works are still published. Although the number of copies is not so high, they get the stable publication and secure a place in the hearts and minds of readers, especially



intellectuals and those who have the demand for experiencing cultural values. Thus, it is necessary to consider the appropriate the development of elite literature to be a strategy for in-depth cultural development with effective support from the State. While emphasising the economic and cultural combination, Piroshka Dossi also made precise assessment of the development of literature, that the ultimate goal of economy is to make profits, and the ultimate goal of arts is to accentuate the experiences of human being's existence [1]. Certainly, we can only expect such profound experiences from elite literature, not popular literature.

*Thirdly*, it is necessary to amalgamate elite literature and popular literature together. That does not mean that the standards of elite literature should be lowered, while the artistic quality of popular literature should be increased. If we pursue the adjustment, both of the literary genres will be annulled. Importantly, writers have to create works on the basis of their own sense of art, and they also have to grasp the contemporary mentality, aiming at providing readers with the products, through which the latter can feel and share the same opinions with them. Some works in elite literature created in the period of *đổi mới*, or renovation, are equally attractive to conquer readers like those in popular literature, such as “*Thời xa vắng*” (*The Olden Days*) by Le Luu; “*Mảnh đất lắm người nhiều ma*” (*Land with Many People and Ghosts*) by Nguyen Khac Truong; “*Nỗi buồn chiến tranh*” (*The Sorrows of War*) by Bao Ninh; “*Hồ Quý Ly*” (*Ho Quy*

*Ly*) and “*Mẫu Thượng Ngàn*” (*Mother Goddess of Mountains and Forests*) by Nguyen Xuan Khanh; stories for children and teenagers by Nguyen Nhat Anh, and a number of short stories by Nguyen Huy Thiep and Nguyen Ngoc Tu, etc. The renovation of art, if complying radically with the Western style, make literary works more difficult to reach readers and get positive responses from the public; whereas, the renovation of art acquiring the traditional narrative technique will make the works easily accepted and rapidly and widely shared.

## 5. Conclusion

One cannot and should not give advice to writers, since each of them has his/her own creative individuality. It is not advisable, either, to blame writers of popular literature, as popular literature can hardly exist if readers turn their back on it. The decisive factor is the very threshold of acceptance and the taste of readers. Based on the reality related to the acceptance of literature during the renovation period, we can see that if a writer knows how to combine harmoniously traditional and modern values, and express our life from the perspective of individual enjoyment and the spirit of humanity, his/her works will probably touch the deep core of the community consciousness. When the community consciousness is awakened, the aesthetic effect will spread and elite literature will reach the mass. It is likely to be one of the ways elite literature needs to seek and adopt.

## Notes

<sup>2</sup> During the period, the literature targeted at the mass (or the popularity of literature) was understood as a type of literature written with a simple style for the mass.

<sup>3</sup> The titles of the book, and many of the quotes later in the paper, are Vietnamese idioms or proverbs, that are modified in a funny way, using homonyms and words rhyming with one another.

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