

## NEW VOICES: SOCIO-CULTURAL TRAJECTORIES OF VIETNAMESE LITERATURE IN THE 21st CENTURY

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Many important changes have taken place in the domain of Vietnamese literature in the last two decades as the country embraced the new globalized consumer age. This article examines the ways in which contemporary Vietnamese literature responds to the new social and cultural milieu delineated by rapidly developing market economy, globalization, and rise in new technologies, mass media and the internet. It highlights the role of young generation of writers whose enthusiasm, unorthodox creativity, penchant for experiment and resentment of authority contributed to the transformation of Vietnamese literature from a 'servant of revolution' to the purveyor of entertainment, modernity and individualism. It also analyses the changes in the publishing industry and evaluates the role of the internet in Vietnam as a vital alternative space which can accommodate various forms of marginalized writing.

**Key words:** Vietnamese literature, publishing, the internet, popular literature

### Introduction

Contemporary literature in Vietnam derives its momentum from a new generation of writers. With their youthful enthusiasm, unorthodox creativity, penchant for experiment, resentment of authority and desire for freedom they are defying established Vietnamese literary tradition in terms of form, subject matter and cultural position. Their efforts have helped to reinvigorate and diversify the Vietnamese literary scene.

The first page of a collection of short stories by young Vietnamese writers born in the 1980s, *Truyện ngắn thế hệ 8X*, contains a short poem – a literary mission statement of sorts, which encapsulates their generational outlook; they describe themselves as rebellious, single, free-spirited and they stress their lack of desire

to “chew over the old”.<sup>1</sup> Such an unabashed proclamation of individualism, recalcitrance, emphasis on entertainment and refusal to employ literature for any “high”, “noble” (and certainly any political) purpose, would have been unpublishable just over a decade earlier. In a country where the concept of literature has long been that of a moral, educational and ideological tool, such ostentatious disengagement from any duty to society seems daring and self-indulgent. How did Vietnamese literature make the transition from a “servant of revolution” to the purveyor of entertainment, modernity and individualism?

In the span of the last twenty years, Vietnamese literature has witnessed some fundamental changes: the unique trajectories resulting from the complex interplay between political liberalization, economic transformation and globalization have over the years altered and boosted the country’s cultural activities. The year 1986, when the Vietnamese government adopted the *đổi mới* (renovation) policies, represents an important milestone in the modern history of the country. Even though renovation was driven predominantly by economic motives, its effect has inevitably filtered down to the cultural sphere and paved the way for its far reaching transformation. The uniform revolutionary culture of socialist realism with its collective ethos has ultimately been supplanted by a pluralized culture validating diverse individual experiences. New autonomous forms of literature have emerged and slowly superseded the rigid state-regulated literary production of the past. As a result, a vibrant literary scene has evolved in Vietnam over the last decade and altered the ways in which literature is being perceived, produced, distributed and consumed.

When renovation unleashed the process of “untying” (*cởi trói*) of art, Vietnamese writers eagerly embraced the more liberal circumstances to revisit the past and revise the black-and-white, ideologically tinted portrayal of important issues from Vietnamese history in a critical, individualistic and multifaceted way. Those renovation writers who fronted the literary scene in Vietnam in the late 1980s and 1990s and whose works were firmly rooted in the country’s dramatic past, such as Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Dương Thu Hương, Bảo Ninh, Phạm Thị Hoài, Nguyễn Duy and others, have gradually been eclipsed by younger writers (albeit only in terms of popularity and media attention, if not as regards the quality of writing). The late 1990s and especially the 2000s witnessed the rise of a new generation of authors, variously referred to according to the decade of their birth as generation 7X, 8X, 9X or generation@ (the generation of

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<sup>1</sup> Chúng tôi khóc/Chúng tôi cười/Chúng tôi điên loạn/Chúng tôi hiền lành/Và trạng thái tâm lý cuối cùng là trống rỗng. //Những đứa chúng tôi cô đơn/Những đứa chúng tôi tìm đến trang viết đôi khi /Như một sự giải tỏa xa xỉ/Khi trầm mình lại, thấy mọi đều dường vô vi. //Và rồi chúng tôi lại khóc, lại cười, lại điên loạn ... Nhưng chúng tôi không nhai lại những đoạn băng cũ rích/Vì đơn giản chúng tôi thuộc thế hệ trẻ. Thế hệ 8X đầy tự tin và kiêu ngạo. (Truyện ngắn 8X, 2006).

the internet era).<sup>2</sup> Although these writers do not consciously operate as a coherent group or movement, they share many similarities underpinned primarily by the fact that their writing embodies the transformed conditions of Vietnamese society of the post-renovation era. They represent a generation born or coming of age into a more liberal and open society where the worship of revolution has been replaced by the worship of consumerism, collective benefit by individual gratification, local distinctiveness by globalizing uniformity and tradition by modernity. In contrast to their older predecessors who often bemoaned the moral emptiness and alienation of the post-1986 period-times described, for example, by Phạm Thị Hoài as “filled with doubt, boredom, diminished appetite for achieving heroic deeds, years of half-baked entertainment and rule of money”<sup>3</sup> – the younger writers, impassioned by the possibilities of modern-day Vietnam, take little notice of the past in their determination to seize the future.

### **Globalization, consumerism and the rise of popular literature in Vietnam**

*Đổi mới* (renovation), open-door policies and the emergence of a market-oriented economy exposed the formerly closed society in Vietnam to the full-blown impact of globalization and consumerism. The complex processes of globalization which involve a whole spectrum of interactions and effects feature prominently in the rapid rise of Vietnam. As pointed out by Nguyen Phuong Binh, the term globalization was not used widely in Vietnam until mid-1990s (before that, Vietnamese officials used to rely on the communist rhetoric and employ the term “internationalization” instead).<sup>4</sup> Globalization gained new impetus in Vietnam in 2007 when Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization.

The past few decades have seen a proliferation of research on globalization, which has been theorized in terms of the binary between the global and the local, i.e. between the trend towards cultural homogenization through global cultural flow and the opposite trend towards cultural diversification in terms of local or national agendas. Looking at globalization in terms of the global/local, universal/particular or homogenizing/diversifying dichotomies inevitably results in the perception of globalization as a “clash of cultures” which privileges the unidirectional flow of influence from “globalizing centre to passive periphery”.

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<sup>2</sup> Although the heart of the young generation of authors is represented by the generation 8X (i.e. authors born in the 1980s), the boundaries between the individual decades cannot be applied too rigidly as many authors born in the final years of the 1970s spiritually belong to the 8X generation as do some of those born in the early 1990s.

<sup>3</sup> PHẠM THỊ HOÀI. *The Crystal Messenger*, p. 127.

<sup>4</sup> NGUYEN PHUONG BINH. *Globalization and Its Implications for Southeast Asian Security: a Vietnamese Perspective*, p. 3. [online]

Some scholars have proposed to look at globalization as a dynamic process of interplay between the global and the local where neither is overemphasized but “both layers, and everything in between, is held in productive conversation with each other”<sup>5</sup> and employ the term glocalization instead (Long, Robertson). Long defines glocalization as a process in which “local situations are transformed by becoming part of the wider ‘global’ arena and processes, while ‘global’ dimensions are made meaningful in relation to specific ‘local’ conditions and through the understandings and strategies of ‘local’ actors”.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Robertson describes globalization/glocalization as a dialectical process, or more exactly “as a form of institutionalization of the two-fold process involving the universalization of particularism and the particularization of universalism”.<sup>7</sup>

In Vietnam, the current state of debates on the process of globalization in the sphere of culture reflects a degree of anxiety globalization has implanted. While many positive aspects of globalization are clearly recognised and embraced, the

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<sup>5</sup> LEVITT, 2007, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> LONG, N. *Globalization and Localization: New Challenges to Rural Research*, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> ROBERTSON, R. *Globalization, Social Theory and Global Culture*, p. 102.

An interesting example of the “universalization of particularism” is offered by Theo van Leeuwen in his analysis of Vietnam News, an official government-sponsored English language daily newspaper. His study focuses on issues of cultural and ideological adaptations; by analysing a sample of translations of articles from Vietnamese into English he shows that the team of foreign translators have to engage in the process of making the local comprehensible to the global: the Vietnamese language articles written from a local perspective need to be culturally and ideologically “pulled back to that of an outsider”. As a result, “cadres” become “officials”, “the fight” becomes “a campaign”, “State control” becomes “supervision”, “being enlightened” becomes “being converted to the Communist cause” (i.e. the fact that Vietnam, market reform notwithstanding, is still a Communist country is watered down for foreign consumption while preserving enough communist terminology to reflect *couleur locale*) (VAN LEEUWEN, Theo. *Translation, Adaptation, Globalization: The Vietnam News*, p. 230). A similar shift can be seen in the “Americanization” of *chiến tranh chống Mỹ cứu nước* (*the war of national salvation against America*), i.e. the efforts of the Vietnamese to adapt the memories of the American War for the benefit of Western tourists in such a way that they would match more closely the global Hollywood-inspired version of the Vietnam war experience (hence the proliferation of “Apocalypse Now” or “Good Morning, Vietnam” bars or the market for fake artefacts such as Zippo lighters). Finally, the same process (albeit more complex as it involves several local/global flows) is reflected in the appropriation of Vietnamese fashion to fit in with the Western fad of Asian chic. As illustrated by Leshkovich and Jones, while the “appropriated” outfits were extremely popular with foreigners who perceived them as locally Vietnamese, the Vietnamese looked down on them as “too un-Vietnamese” and “too Chinese” (LESHKOWICH, Ann Marie, JONES, Carla. *What Happens when Asian Chic Becomes Chic in Asia?*, p. 289).

danger stemming from the reality that “the forces of globalization are breaching national frontiers” is also acknowledged.<sup>8</sup> The unequal flows of cultural exchange between Vietnam and the West have led the authorities to voice concerns that Vietnamese cultural identity is being eroded, that “the artistic, educative and awareness-raising aspects of culture” are undermined and that “the country runs a risk of being culturally assimilated”. For example, an article by Voice of Vietnam warned that “traditional values are traded in for profits, spiritual values are deformed or sunk into oblivion” and that “Western life-style pragmatism and pornography can spread into Vietnam, thus demolishing our cultural identity”. Indeed, early on in the renovation era the fear of the contamination of Vietnamese culture was evidenced by the government’s campaign for the eradication of social evils which, along with a push against prostitution, drug addiction and corruption, also incorporated a drive for linguistic purity, resulting, for example, in the removal of billboards advertising international companies with slogans in English rather than Vietnamese. Somewhat ironically, the anxiety about commodification of Vietnamese culture for Western consumption “has sparked a nostalgia for a bygone colonial era, which masquerades as a mandate for helping a nation preserve its cultural heritage, its cultural sites of memory”.<sup>9</sup> To counteract the perceived dangers of globalization in the cultural sphere, the Vietnamese authorities have promulgated numerous policies which focus heavily on issues of preserving cultural identity. For example, the anxiety that too much Western theory, cultural and literary trends have been imported to Vietnam in comparison with the few literary works exported from Vietnam is behind the country’s increasing efforts to promote its own culture/literature abroad. In recent years, the Vietnamese government has been increasingly vociferous about the need for Vietnamese literature to enter the world-stage and keenly encourages, at least in its official rhetoric, the translation of Vietnamese literature into foreign languages. In 2010, the second International Conference on Vietnamese Literature took place in Hanoi with the promotion of Vietnamese literature abroad at the top of its agenda. The Association of Vietnamese Writers agreed to cooperate with foreign publishing houses to bring Vietnamese literature to the global audience (agreements with various institutions in ten countries to translate Vietnamese literature into foreign languages have since been signed).

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<sup>8</sup> NGUYEN PHUONG BINH. *Globalization and Its Implications for Southeast Asian Security: a Vietnamese Perspective*, p. 8. [online]

<sup>9</sup> NORINDR, P. *Aestheticizing Urban Space: Modernity in Postcolonial Saigon and Hanoi*, p. 83.

## Commercialisation and consumer culture

The exposure to global flows of ideas, capital and products and the consequent commercialization of Vietnamese society is mirrored by a growing commercialization of cultural production. As argued by Crawford, “the most observable facet of the globalization phenomenon may be the resonance of Western consumer values and icons in societies throughout the world”.<sup>10</sup> Writing in 2004 Nguyen Bich Thuan and Thomas observed that “Vietnam is on the brink of becoming a fully-fledged media culture in which popular narratives and cultural icons are reshaping political views, constructing tastes and values, crystallising the market economy and providing the materials out of which people forge their ideas”.<sup>11</sup> The adoption of market mechanisms has also accelerated the modernization of literature. A range of reforms and deregulations lead to the loosening of state control and increased cultural exchange with Western countries. However, it is important to note that, as in China, the liberalization of mass media and publishing in Vietnam was largely motivated by economic considerations, not by a quest for political liberalization; that is to say, the changes were prompted not by a desire to free public discourse but by an attempt to reduce financial losses and embrace the financial gains that could be raised from the cultural market. Supply and demand took over from ideology as literature evolved from a state-managed endeavour to a market-driven enterprise.

If the impact of globalization has created circumstances which brought literature closer to the rule of the market economy then, in turn, the involvement of the market and commercial entrepreneurship helped to create a dynamic and varied literary scene. The most conspicuous manifestation of the dominance of the market is reflected in the boom of popular literature in Vietnam: since the 2000s, popular literature (both foreign and domestic) has largely superseded serious literature in the marketplace. The substantial rise in popular literature/culture reflects the general turning of Vietnamese culture away from didacticism towards entertainment. Furthermore, for the first time, the “value” of a book bears direct correlation to its market potential rather than its ideological impact. As pointed out by one Vietnamese critic, “in accordance with the broad and diverse laws of supply and demand” a new literary market has evolved in Vietnam to cater for readers’ diverse tastes.<sup>12</sup> This statement articulates two significant issues: it identifies literature as a commodity and acknowledges the

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<sup>10</sup> CRAWFORD, D. *Chinese Capitalism: Cultures, the Southeast Asian Region and Economic Globalisation*, p. 71.

<sup>11</sup> NGUYEN BICH THUAN, THOMAS, M. *Young Women and Emergent Postsocialist Sensibilities in Contemporary Vietnam*, p. 136.

<sup>12</sup> BUI THI QUYNH BIEN. *Nghệ thuật trần thuật trong truyện ngắn thế hệ nhà văn 198X*. [The Narrative Art in Short Stories of the 198X Generation] [online].

relevance of the target reading audience. As with China, the rise of consumerism has instigated a new phenomenon which Berg labels “a best-seller consciousness”.<sup>13</sup> In Vietnam, too, the concept of a bestseller is emerging as a significant trend. Although the best-seller was initially perceived as a foreign phenomenon and was widely discussed in Vietnam in terms of translations of foreign bestsellers into Vietnamese, the quest was certainly on for a home-grown bestseller. Vietnamese media have long been questioning the existence of a truly Vietnamese best-seller; applying the sole criteria of the sales volume of print-based copies (not taking into consideration alternative/online publishing channels), the collection of short stories *Cánh đồng bất tận* by Nguyễn Ngọc Tư, which sold over 108 000 copies and achieved 24 editions (so far), is often endorsed as the first true domestic Vietnamese bestseller.

The debates on the rise of popular culture reflect the dynamism and complexity of the on-going transformation of Vietnamese society. Thomas and Heng define popular culture as “a set of practices and activities that engage the population in their material worlds but which provide a zone in which different, cultural values and ideologies meet and intermingle, but also wrestle with each other, in their attempts to secure the spaces within which they become influential in framing and organizing popular experience and consciousness”.<sup>14</sup> Within a Vietnamese context, popular literature is generally perceived in terms of its distinction from “high”, “official” (“revolutionary”), “serious” literature and is widely understood to categorize literature that is light-hearted in its subject matter and written primarily for entertainment; appeals to a wide audience (especially to the youth); is widely distributed and has a strong commercial appeal.

Although the popular market was initially dominated by foreign translations, gradually a home-grown popular literature has emerged. The appeal of popular literature represents a natural reaction to the years of rule of socialist realism; after the regimented and culturally ascetic years of war and high socialism, the book market has started offering readers light entertainment. While some critics perceive this trend as a threat to serious literature, others put a more positive spin on it by crediting the rise of popular writing with sidelining the official politicized literature, introducing greater variety and new genres. The Chairman of *Hội Nhà văn Việt Nam* (*Association of Vietnamese Writers*), Nguyễn Hữu Tính, complained about the pressure from a public which demands “literature that is easy to read but not necessarily of outstanding literary merit”. “Average is what sells,” lamented Mr. Tính, “which makes it more difficult to reach the heights of

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<sup>13</sup> BERG, D. *Consuming Secrets: China’s New Print Culture at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, p. 325.

<sup>14</sup> THOMAS, M., HENG, R. *Stars in the Shadows: Celebrity, Media, and the State in Vietnam*, p. 291.

creativity”.<sup>15</sup> Vietnam’s new popular literature is also attracting the attention of censors who are struggling to accept the increasingly ‘unruly’ writing appearing on the market. To be creative, avant-garde and commercially successful while still complying with the state’s bureaucracy is an arduous task as “pop culture is definitely at odds with official ideas of Vietnamese culture”.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, more enlightened critics are welcoming the new diversity of literature. A quick survey of Vietnam’s literary output of the past ten to fifteen years reveals that the boom in the market has led to a proliferation of genres (many new or previously neglected) such as thrillers and horrors, crime fiction, young adult fiction, women’s fiction, romance, chick lit, biography, travel writing, action adventure and others.

### **Publishing in Vietnam**

A crucial factor contributing to the revitalization of the Vietnamese literary sphere was the transformation of the country’s publishing industry. In pre-renovation Vietnam, publishing was incorporated into the planned economy as a non-profit, state-subsidized activity in the service of state propaganda. This centralized management was inflexible and was designed to give an artificial boost to those authors and books which conformed to the needs of ideological

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<sup>15</sup> NGUYEN HUU THINH. *Committed to Vietnamese Writers Achieving Potential*. 2010. [online]

<sup>16</sup> THAYER, C. A. *Vietnam: Censorship No Joking Matter*. January 2012. [online] The complexities of this process are echoed in a recent case of censorship which concerns Vietnamese artist/author Thành Phong. His comic, *Sát thủ đầu mung mủ* [*The Murderer with a Pus-filled Head*] which replicates the street patois of Vietnam’s youth, was recently banned by Vietnamese authorities for being obscene and potentially corrupting to youth. Yet, as is often the case, the ban gave the book an enticing air of notoriety and priceless publicity. The case highlighted several other issues worth noting. First, the book is available abroad through the online bookshop Amazon (in a kindle edition with a helpful “look inside” tool which allows the reader to access several of its pages). Its subsequent ban in Vietnam has sparked a debate on the applicability of the country’s publishing law abroad. Are Vietnamese publishers bound by Vietnamese publishing laws even in those circumstances when their publishing activities are carried out outside the country’s borders? The deputy director of the Nhã Nam Books that published the book bluntly retorted: “From what I know, it is legal to publish book to abroad without permission from local government.” A second interesting issue relates to the different attitude of censors towards print-based and online literature which was raised by the book’s author when he was reported as saying: “those who object to the book said if these sentences are circulated on the internet, it’s ok, but not in books. I think because they think books are very noble, like a holy land of knowledge”.



indoctrination while ignoring genuine artistic merit or the tastes of the reading public.

The removal of a large layer of state bureaucracy provided a greater incentive to publishing houses to adopt business management strategies, whilst the cuts in state subsidies put pressure on them to be financially viable, forcing them to focus on books which would reflect the popular taste of their customers. Publishing houses also had to face up to strong competition from the explosion of other forms of popular culture (both domestic and foreign) such as TV shows, DVD, music, glossy magazines and from a boom in pirated copies of copyrighted materials.

In 2004, the Vietnamese government adopted the latest version of the country's Publishing Law (effective from 1 July 2005). In October of the same year, Vietnam became the 156th signatory to the *Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works* and the new publishing law incorporated copyright provisions and raised them to international standards by pledging the state's protection of intellectual property rights.<sup>17</sup> Although the law sustains the state's monopoly over publishing, it, nevertheless, opens up possibilities for the participation of the private sector. Whilst it does not permit the establishment of private publishing houses, it still represents limited progress as it allows publishing houses "to associate with private companies, authors and owners of works" for preparation of manuscripts and the printing and distribution of each publication.<sup>18</sup> In practice this means that private companies can purchase a publishing licence for a specific work from official state publishing houses. These companies are private publishers in every aspect bar name as they bear responsibility for the whole publication process. The sale of publication permits has become an important source of revenue: approximately 15 new publishing houses have been created since 2004 to act as 'mere shells' earning revenue solely from the selling of publishing permits.<sup>19</sup> The fee (tax on private companies) is currently 5 – 7% of the retail price of a book.<sup>20</sup> Vietnamese poet Nguyễn Quốc Chánh offered an ironic commentary on this practice when he said: "State publishers are a black market that professionally sells printing permits to private

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<sup>17</sup> In the same year the Ministry of Internal Affairs issued the Vietnam Writers Association with a permit to establish the *Vietnam Literary Copyright Centre (Trung tâm quyền tác giả văn học Việt Nam)*. In 2008 Vietnam's Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism set up the *Copyright Office of Vietnam*.

<sup>18</sup> *Law on Publishing*, 2004. [online]

<sup>19</sup> IPA (International Publishers Association). *Freedom to Publish in Vietnam: Between Kafka and the Thang Bom Logic*, 2012. [online]

<sup>20</sup> The retail price of a book in Vietnam comprises 30% printing costs, 15 – 20% copyright and translation costs, 40% distribution costs and 5 – 7% official publishing house fee (IPA report).

printers, but it always sells them carefully because it is afraid of getting involved with some depraved or reactionary books. Its selling is well oriented. It is the socialist orientation".<sup>21</sup>

Although there has been a significant reduction in the state's interference in publishing, it still holds ultimate power over this sector which it exercises through a complex system of screening mechanisms, licensing of publishing houses, publication permits and a book registration system. For example, the directors and chief editors of publishing houses have to be approved by and are answerable to the government, effectively acting as its extended arm. Although the law formally removed the requirement for pre-publication censorship, many international commentators, including representatives from human rights organizations, publishers and legal experts, have pointed out that, in practice, a form of pre-publication censorship/monitoring is still happening but has been mostly delegated to the directors and chief editors of publishing houses. Publishing plans need to be registered with the Ministry of Culture prior to conducting any publishing activities so there is a possibility for interference at this early stage; ten days prior to distribution of the finished book, sample copies have to be forwarded for final inspection to the Ministry of Culture which has the authority to stop release at this late stage (post-publication and pre-distribution censorship); finally, even at the final stage, after the publication and distribution to shops, books can be recalled or banned. Books dealing with particularly sensitive topics are monitored more thoroughly (this category includes, for example, books published between 1945 – 1954 in temporarily occupied zones and books published between 1954 – 1975 in the South Vietnamese Republic).

Foreign experts stress the overregulated nature of publishing in Vietnam and criticize the constraints on freedom of expression. While certain restrictions fall within acceptable controls (such as protection of public order, rights of others), many others are arbitrarily used to harass authors and prevent the publication of books dealing with sensitive topics. For example, Article 10 of the Publishing Law stipulates a range of prohibited subjects which include those deemed to constitute propaganda against the Socialist Republic of Vietnam; damage national unity; propagate violence and aggressive wars; sow hatred among nations and peoples; spread reactionary ideology, depraved lifestyles, cruel acts and culture, obscene lifestyles, crimes, social evils, superstitious beliefs which can damage social ethics and national traditions; or disclose the party's and the state's secrets, secrets of national security, economic and diplomatic secrets; distort historical facts, oppose the achievements of the revolution, offend citizens, great persons and heroes. Any creative work which does not adhere to the tight

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<sup>21</sup> NGUYỄN QUỐC CHÁNH, LÝ ĐỢI. Thơ là (thờ ơ) khoét cho cái nhục (nhã, dục, vương) bốc mùi. [Poetry is an Effort to Make the Shame Stink] [online]

rules of censorship faces the state's censure. For example, in January 2011 the Vietnamese government issued *Decree No 2 on Administrative Penalty in Press and Publication Activities* which focuses on "violations in respect of press activities, publishing activities, export and import of media, publications and advertising in media activities and publishing" and provides a detailed list of punitive measures such as compulsory amendment of publications, temporary suspension of distribution, retrieval, confiscation, prohibition from circulation, destruction, public apology, criminal prosecution etc. and financial penalties for violation of the publishing law. Vietnamese artists have grown accustomed to testing the waters as the boundaries between what is permitted and what is not are vague. For example, in a discussion of censorship in visual art, Libby notes that artists in Vietnam have learned to navigate the blurred boundaries of censorship by creating art which has, as explained by one artist she quotes, "multiple layers of meanings so we can explain it reasonably and differently to different audiences".<sup>22</sup>

In January 2012, the International Publishers' Association issued a report on the state of publishing in Vietnam entitled *Freedom to Publish in Vietnam: Between Kafka and the Thang Bom Logic*, in which the process of book screening and censorship in Vietnam is characterized as "a complex, opaque, at times irrational, and highly bureaucratic process".<sup>23</sup> The report also draws attention to the fact that apart from officially licenced state publishers and private companies operating on the basis of individual licences purchased from state publishing houses, there also exists underground (unlicenced) publishing. The report estimates that there are now around 30 underground publishing houses. These non-commercial publishing houses are forced to distribute their output for free because as they are not officially licensed they are not permitted by law to accept payments or handle bank transfers. Their books are circulated through informal channels, often involving friends and families and a typical print run is between 500 – 700 copies.

The commercialization of publishing has had a positive impact on the quality of books. Previously, books were printed in plain format, on poor quality paper with no illustration and a basic unadorned cover. Nowadays, the quality has improved significantly as books are printed on good quality paper with attractive cover designs and publishers are beginning to realise the benefit of proper marketing and promotion.

Writers, too, are growing accustomed to the new realities of the literature market and are slowly freeing themselves from dependence on the state, both

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<sup>22</sup> LIBBY, S. Inside the Authoritarian State: the Art of Censorship in Vietnam, p. 213. [online]

<sup>23</sup> IPA (International Publishers Association). *Freedom to Publish in Vietnam: Between Kafka and the Thang Bom Logic*, p. 7. [online]

financially and spiritually. Young authors in particular are more attuned to the possibilities of the market and find it easier to embrace its opportunities and deal with its pitfalls. In contrast with the older war-time generation of Vietnamese authors, the young writers have not grown accustomed to the false security of the state's protection, cushioned by guaranteed employment contracts, subsidised print runs and critical acclaim supplied by a cadre of critics and publishers or editors subservient to the communist government and its ideology. Younger writers no longer universally aspire to become members of the Vietnamese Association of Writers, nor do they count on the safety of state employment in various cultural institutions. The vast majority of contemporary writers are not career writers. The commercial market has enabled some of them to earn at least a part of their income from their literary work which they supplement either by associated writing activities such as writing for film, TV, translating, PR consultancies or alternative careers in other sectors. As discussed in more detail in the next part of this article, the younger generation is also more adept at finding alternative routes to publishing and promoting their work: the proliferation of literary websites, blogs, online journals, discussion forums, the ascent of online publishing, E-books, audio books, social media sites and general online networking is evidence of their ability to capitalize on the possibilities of the new online and multimedia market.

### **Vietnamese literature and the internet**

The fast rise of the internet in Vietnam is an unmistakable sign of advancing globalization. Vietnam has been connected to the global Internet since 1996 (with the launch of public access in 1997) and the Internet has been developing exponentially since. According to the statistics provided by the Ministry of Information and Communications through its Vietnam Internet Network Information Centre, in December 2011 Vietnam had 30,552,417 internet users, which represents internet penetration of 35.7%. While the economic and socio-political significance of the Internet is undeniable, it has also assumed a vital role in shaping cultural production and socio-cultural consciousness and is contributing to the transformation of the literary landscape in Vietnam. As argued by Marr, the internet offers young intellectuals an opportunity to make their mark by “assimilating new ideas, testing received wisdom, experimenting, debating, and disseminating the results to an expanding constituency”.<sup>24</sup> Although Vietnamese online literature is in its infancy and more time needs to elapse before its full impact can be assessed, it is clear that it has affected literature in a number

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<sup>24</sup> MARR, D. G. *A Passion for Modernity: Intellectuals and the Media*, p. 294.

of ways. The proliferation of literary websites, e-books sites (both authorized and unauthorized), personal writers' websites and blogs, literary forums and online literary journals proves the appeal of the internet. Young writers, in particular, more technically savvy and commercially conscious than the older generation, have embraced this medium with enthusiasm. It has become an indispensable tool for the aspiring writers in their quest to launch their writing careers. Not only can they reach thousands of readers but more crucially, online publishing makes it possible for them to bypass the restrictive and bureaucratic official publishing channels and to unleash their creativity without having to conform to the demands of the literary establishment. Lynh Bacardi, an outspoken female poet and an avid advocate of internet literature, insists that online literature should be given the same status as printed literature. In an interview, she highlighted the unique advantage of online literature:

“Apart from other things, the advantage of online literature, something that is completely inadequate in printed literature, lies in its spirit of freedom and democracy, and the equality among all writers and readers.”<sup>25</sup>

A similar sentiment has been voiced by others who argue that the internet will provide the only escape route for Vietnamese literature as it is “capable of putting an end to totalitarianism in the literary field”. The internet literature “will eliminate officialdom and nomenclature developed by closed traditions of village culture, which has forced literature to be strangled by hierarchy”. It is precisely this “spirit of freedom” associated with the internet and its decentralized nature which alarms the Vietnamese government. The internet in Vietnam is tightly regulated and the authorities closely monitor internet access, employing both technological means such as nationwide firewalls and filters, and legal means. Recent years have seen a significant degree of tightening of internet censorship in Vietnam: access to undesirable websites (sites considered politically threatening, religiously or sexually offensive, such as sites writing about democracy, freedom of expression, for example, Vietnamese media based abroad, BBC Vietnamese service, international human rights organizations) but also to various social networking sites such as *Facebook* is routinely blocked.<sup>26</sup> The government has

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<sup>25</sup> BACARDI, L. Chỉ những kẻ xem thường trí tuệ cộng đồng mới cả gan muốn dẫn dắt cộng đồng. [Those Who Dislike Intellectual Community Want to Lead It]

<sup>26</sup> 8 Vietnamese nationals, including online writers, journalists and bloggers, were among the recipients of the 2011 Hellman-Hammett grants, awarded annually to writers around the world for their commitment to freedom of expression and their courage in the face of persecution. The *2011 – 12 World Press Freedom Index* compiled by Reporters without

also launched a crackdown on bloggers, detaining several of them and putting them on trial for anti-state propaganda, distorting the truth and denigrating the party and state. The recent wave of arrests prompted the US government to express concerns over these cases and warn against “a disturbing pattern of increased restrictions on internet-based speech in Vietnam”.<sup>27</sup> A new ‘*Decree on the Management, Provision, Use of Internet Services and Information Content Online*’ is expected to be adopted in June 2012 (superseding the existing Decree 97/2008/ND-CP of August 2008). The emerged draft indicates that the existing regulations are likely to be tightened and the new policy will compel foreign internet companies to assist Vietnamese authorities in policing the internet. The decree reiterates the fact that it is illegal to post online anything deemed critical of the Vietnamese state and the Communist party and bans internet users from providing fictitious personal data (making it impossible to write under pseudonyms or engage in anonymous blogging).

However, such is the nature of the beast that it is virtually impossible to police effectively and people in Vietnam seem to be able to find alternative routes to gain access to what they want. The internet has emerged as a vital alternative space which can accommodate various forms of marginalized writing. In spite of censorship, this online alternative space is effective enough to enable marginalized groups to gain a public voice that is independent of or dissenting towards the state. As highlighted by Hockx in his study on Chinese online literature, the nature of the online medium creates an alternative space for genres that tend to be (for whatever reason) marginalized in print culture.<sup>28</sup> In Vietnam, a marginal literature that has emerged with the help of the internet has developed into a considerable counter-cultural force as authors who have strong political consciousness have initiated online debates on many controversial issues such as samizdat, freedom of expression, feminism ... Poetry, a less commercially viable genre, has found a particularly useful outlet online. For example, members of a Saigon-based group *Mở Miệng* (Open Mouth), have mounted a challenge to the tame official literary scene through their activities and samizdat publishing. Their underground publishing house, *Giấy Vụn* (Scrap Paper) has become a platform for what has become known as “pavement” literature, “garbage poetry (*rác*)”, “cemetery poetry (*ngôi nhà đũa*)”, “dirty poetry”, “hip-hop poetry”, “anti- poetry

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Borders ranks Vietnam among the worst countries, in the 172th position (out of 179 countries), seven places lower than in the previous year.

<sup>27</sup> RUSSELL, J. Concern in Vietnam: US Calls for the Release of Detained Bloggers as New Web Regulation Emerges. [online]

<sup>28</sup> HOCKX, M. Virtual Chinese Literature: A Comparative Case Study of Online Poetry Communities, p. 689.

(*thơ ngoài thơ, thơ phản thơ*)”.<sup>29</sup> Since its formation in 2002 the publishing house has produced around thirty projects. The group’s mission is to provide a counterpart to the official publishing system that is controlled by the state from beginning to end. The poetry of the poets associated with the group such as Bùi Chát, Khúc Duy, Lý Đợi, Nguyễn Quán is a provocative in-your-face poetry, a metaphoric scream designed to wake up the population from its cosy consumer induced lethargy and conformity. Their postmodern use of techniques such as “cut and paste”, “re-mix”, “pastiche” and “parody”, creates “accidental” amalgamations imbued with ironic and satirical capacity. The fact that these “street poets in Saigon have themselves been hardened by lamp posts, back alleys, coffee, beer and wine and anarchistic seed” is obvious in their poems which are littered with urban street slang, vulgarities and sexual explicitness. The poems may appear, as one critic noted, meaningless, annoying, vulgar, “as if written by five-year-olds or illiterate drunkards”,<sup>30</sup> but they are a means of articulating a desire for freedom. “Despite all the shock value attached to them, the relevance of the Open Mouth poets rests not in what their poems say about them as individuals, per se, but in what their poetry illicitly reports, on the ‘Kurrent State’<sup>31</sup> of Vietnamese society”.<sup>32</sup> Their avant-garde style shakes up the literary conventions and “blows a smelly breath into our literary scene, it makes us rethink the way we have been writing.”<sup>33</sup>

The group operates outside official publishing channels and conducts its activities through samizdat publishing/photocopying (their poetry reading evenings which have become increasingly popular were soon banned by the authorities) and online. In 2011 the group was unexpectedly cast onto the world stage when Bùi Chát, one of its founders, became the recipient of the “Freedom to Publish” prize awarded by the International Publishing Association (IPA) in recognition of the activities of the *Giấy Vụn* publishers. Upon his return to Vietnam from the award ceremony in Buenos Aires, Bùi Chát was promptly arrested at the airport and spent several days being interrogated by the authorities. His laptop, passport and the award certificate were confiscated. As is often the case, his arrest, which was widely reported by world media, provided vast publicity for the group and helped raise its profile among those who have not

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<sup>29</sup> Inspired by *Giấy Vụn*, several online forums/publishers have sprung up since; most of them are run as a ‘one-man/one-woman’ shows and have been, therefore, used primarily to promote the writing of their founders. For example, *Tùy Tiện* (At Random), *Cửa* (Door), *Lề Bên Trái*, *Một mình*, *Mũi Tên*, *Da Vàng* (Yellow Skin), *Ngựa Trời*, etc.

<sup>30</sup> NGA PHAM. Vietnam’s Rude Poetry Delights Intelligentsia.

<sup>31</sup> The title of a poem by Bùi Chát.

<sup>32</sup> HAI-DANG PHAN. A Deluge of New Vietnamese Poetry. [online]

<sup>33</sup> NGA PHAM. Vietnam’s Rude Poetry Delights Intelligentsia. [online]

previously heard of the group, while simultaneously alerting the world to the dismal state of freedom of expression.

Another benefit of the internet appreciated by many writers lies in its interactive nature which facilitates contact between the writer and readers and fosters direct contact with a potentially large audience of similarly-minded community. Furthermore, as highlighted by many online writers, an active involvement by means of the internet of the reader in the literary process is valuable for the author as he/she can expose writing to public scrutiny in a short span of time and without any interference. While print-based editions would have to pass through multiple layers of scrutiny, interference and censorship before reaching their audience, online literature is largely unmediated by another party and the reader is left to peruse through the available sources and make his/her own judgment on the quality of each work. The reader, therefore, assumes the role of editor, critic and censor and is more actively involved.

Young authors also take advantage of the marketing possibilities of the internet and are efficient in promoting their work online. Many maintain their own web pages where they meticulously catalogue their work, reviews and interviews (many include English language sections to reach for a global readership). They alert their followers to new works, write regular blogs and engage their readers through online forums and social networking sites or advertise their activities through Facebook, Twitter etc.

While the internet has proved an effective medium for boosting creativity and exploiting new commercial possibilities in literature, it inevitably has its drawbacks. Some critics highlighted the fact that artistic merit associated with print culture is more difficult to sustain online as the sheer volume of online writing online makes it difficult to sustain the attention of readers. Many Vietnamese authors perceive the internet as a stepping stone into print culture and are keen to have online success with their works formally “validated” by print-based editions. Di Li, Dương Thụy, Nguyễn Ngọc Tư, Phan Huyền Thu and many others have successfully made the transition from online to print. The willingness of publishing houses to take on their works is often a direct consequence of popularity initially achieved online. The emerging trend of publishing popular blogs in printed editions has catapulted many unknown authors to fame. Among the most famous beneficiaries of this trend are Trang Ha, Keng (Do Thi Thuy Linh), Gao (Vu Phuong Thanh) Van Lam (Bui Thi Doan Trang). For one of the bloggers turned-print-writer, Trang Ha, blogging has become a litmus test tool. She explains: “I consider anything I write in my blog as a draft to conduct a poll of readers before printing. Many people buy my books though they’ve read it in my blog” (Viet Nam News, 2010). While Ha sees blog followers as literary critics, the blog-generated origin is also a good



advertisement as many readers are curious to find out what has made it so popular in the first place.

Another important contribution of the internet to the development of Vietnamese literature and literary criticism lies in its capacity to act as a bridge between Vietnam, its diaspora and the rest of the world. It allows writers, critics and scholars to cross national and ideological borders to share and debate Vietnamese literature. The Internet has thus created circumstances where “the production and reception of contemporary literature in Vietnamese is no longer located solely in Vietnam”, but is “networked through online literary journals” (Hai-Dang Phan, 2012). These journals and forums provide a unique space which facilitates the formation of a global “commonwealth of Vietnamese Arts, where, regardless of geographical and political differences, artistic creativity is reunited with its original meaning, namely, the making of the new” (*Tiền vê*). Among the most influential foreign-based online journals and forums dedicated to Vietnamese culture and art are *Talawas*, based in Berlin and run by Phạm Thị Hoài (defunct since November 2010 but archived online), the Sydney-based *Tiền vê* or the online blog of the Diasporic Vietnamese Artists Network, *diaCritics* (based in the USA) and many others.

With the explosion of online activity, the authorities have grown increasingly wary of online literary forums and blogs. However, although the numerous examples of internet censorship and persecution or even imprisonment of internet authors and bloggers in recent years reflects the state’s persistent apprehension regarding the internet as a forum of freedom of speech, it is still important to remember that this medium has significantly broadened the space for polemics and alternative voices. In a study on virtual Chinese literature, Hockx argues that

“there is a simultaneous tendency among Western scholars of the Chinese internet to foreground censorship issues, as if to demonstrate that lack of personal freedom will always cause Chinese society (or literature, or culture, or politics) to lag behind the West when it comes to being transformative, innovative or empowering”.<sup>34</sup>

Similarly in Vietnam, several highly publicized internet censorship cases have grabbed the attention of international media, human rights organizations and overseas Vietnamese campaigners and overshadowed the enormous creative contribution and diversity of online writing – a significant achievement in a society which for decades promulgated in its culture only formulaic uniformity and conformity. It is, therefore, crucial to acknowledge the ‘transformative, innovative and empowering’ potential of Vietnamese online literature.

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<sup>34</sup> HOCKX, M. *Virtual Chinese Literature: A Comparative Case Study of Online Poetry Communities*, p. 690.

### **Vietnamese literature in the 21st century: a generational handover, the rise in popular urban literature and the boom in women's writing**

As illustrated above the literary landscape in contemporary Vietnam is changing rapidly. Literature mirrors the country's push for modernization and has consequently become increasingly diverse and commercial. Even though the changes taking place are relatively recent and complex, it is possible to identify several directions.

One of the most visible developments is a process of a generational change which has been occurring in the last two decades but which has been particularly noticeable since the beginning of the 21st century. While older authors who have been part of the official literary establishment, certified by their membership of the *Association of Vietnamese Writers* and ideologically safe devotees of socialist realism and politicized aesthetics, have become marginalized, young authors have been stepping into the limelight. Writers such as Trần Thu Trang, Trang Hạ, Keng Đỗ Thị Thuỳ Linh, Trương Quế Chi, Lynh Bacardi, Từ Nữ Triệu Vương, Lê Nguyệt Minh, Phan Ý Yên, Cấn Văn Khánh, Nguyễn Quỳnh Trang, Vũ Đình Giang have grown up in an era when society has been “fully unified and at peace, enjoying strong economic growth and widening regional and international interactions”<sup>35</sup> and begun writing at a time when the country has been transformed. They belong to a generation of youth with little memory and no personal experience of war and post-war hardship. As a result and in sharp contrast to their predecessors, they are stubbornly individualistic: they write about pragmatic issues of daily life, the anguish of adolescence or romantic yearnings, but are less interested in broader social issues. Their refusal to be inhibited by tradition or ideology makes their writing very personal and self-focused. They have also adjusted their style of writing which seems to replicate the fast paced lifestyle and conventions of electronic communication (short sentences, fragmentation, quick moving plotlines).

The new millennium saw an upsurge of urban writing, a trend driven by young authors who are drawn to the modern urban landscape which encapsulates the possibilities of a modern consumer-oriented society. As corroborated by recent research, the expansion of the market economy has accelerated the emergence of a new urban middle class youth which, as argued by King, “can exercise market capacity with their command of knowledge, expertise and skills”, and which “can express their middle classness by adopting a particular consumerist lifestyle and by accessing news and information, especially thorough the internet”.<sup>36</sup> The rise of the urban middle class has been relatively fast, “as has the desire for modern

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<sup>35</sup> NINH, KIM N. B. From Vietnam: Generation 8X. [online]

<sup>36</sup> KING, V. T. The Middle Class in Southeast Asia: Diversities, Identities, Comparisons and the Vietnamese Case, p. 85.

consumer goods and other elements of modernity”.<sup>37</sup> Consumption practices are particularly significant because they form “a vital element of status, image construction, identity and the everyday experience of class”<sup>38</sup> and provide important subject matter for contemporary literature. One of the main attractions of the city lies in its creation of new sites for socialisation, employment and interaction with global influences. In a study of contemporary modern urban space in Hanoi, Thomas demonstrated the conversion of Hanoi from the “ascetic, carceral” city of the past to the “sensuous, lively” Hanoi of the present<sup>39</sup> and it is precisely this societal shift from a culture of discipline towards a culture of pleasure (so unashamedly paraded in urban centres) which is reflected in contemporary urban literature.

As a result of a growing infatuation with global popular culture the new urban middle class emerged with a lifestyle “closer to the global urban middle class than to their fellow citizens in the countryside”.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, as noted by, among others, Taylor, there exists a widely accepted mutual sense of bias in Vietnam between the urban and rural: whilst the urban lifestyle with its consumer icons such as mobile phones, TVs, motorbikes and Western fashion is perceived as modern and inspirational, the local countryside remains traditional and backward:

“the city is regarded as ‘above’ (*tren*) the countryside, in its cultural and technological ‘level’. From the city one ‘goes down to the countryside’ (*xuong duoi que*), whose residents, by virtue of their limited attendance of government schools, are said to have a ‘low cultural level’ (*trinh do van hoa thap*) and whose thatched palm leaf houses are frequently described as ‘poor’ (*ngheo*). From the perspective of many people who live in the countryside one goes ‘up to the city’ (*len thanh pho*) a place identified with a built-up environment, elite cultural attainments and prosperity, attributes implied in the term *van minh* (civilized/modern)”.<sup>41</sup>

The new urban youth along with its lifestyle, values, desires and moral perspective provide a rich source of inspiration for a generation of young Vietnamese writers – mostly middle class urbanites themselves. A particularly

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> THOMAS, M. *Out of Control: Emergent Cultural Landscapes and Political Change in Urban Vietnam*, p. 1616.

<sup>40</sup> KING, V. T. *The Middle Class in Southeast Asia: Diversities, Identities, Comparisons and the Vietnamese Case*, p. 88.

<sup>41</sup> TAYLOR, P. *Spirits, Iconoclasts and the Market in Urban Vietnam*, p. 9.

discernible stream within urban literature is the prominence of women writers: women's literature has enjoyed significant growth in the last decade and the literary works of urban-based female writers can be perceived as particularly symptomatic of the deep changes happening in society. Despite the fact that the female writers do not form a homogenous group, they nevertheless share many similarities: they are young, educated, independent urban residents who possess a good command of a foreign language (usually English) which enables them to travel and engage with foreign cultures either through work or leisure. They are also highly visible through their (self) representation in the media and internet. Their writing is characterized by heightened feminist consciousness and reveals how female subjectivity and agency are being reconceptualised in a globalizing consumer-oriented Vietnam.

Literary elucidations on modern femininity form an important part of the ongoing process of re-conceptualization of gender in contemporary Vietnam. The formal study of gender issues and feminism in Vietnam is still in its infancy; one scholar went as far as asserting that "discussing feminism in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam can be an intellectually dangerous, sensitive, and imprecise task as the conceptual and linguistic structure of Vietnamese culture affords no framework for feminism as a doctrine".<sup>42</sup> For most of the 20th century, research on women's issues was incorporated into the broader framework of Marxist philosophy. Gender-related research rooted in Marxism focused in particular on women's position in the productive sphere, on promoting women's emancipation and rights and addressing practical and policy-related issues rather than theorizing gender and feminism. As highlighted by Scott and Chuyen, studies influenced by radical feminism – with a greater focus on the body, sexuality, the reproductive sphere, gender based violence, and cultural traditions that symbolize and subordinate women – have been less prominent in Vietnam but are slowly increasing.<sup>43</sup> The opening up of Vietnam, growing international exposure through globalization and mobility of scholars has been enhancing and diversifying sources on feminist and gender agendas both in academic and practitioner circles.

The domain of gender and sexuality reflects a backlash against revolutionary suppression of femininity and sexuality. As with China, where, as argued by Larson, "personal desire and sexuality have emerged as the counterpoint to revolutionary action and practice",<sup>44</sup> the post-revolutionary images of Vietnamese women stand in contrast to the masculinisation (or gender-erasing

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<sup>42</sup> DUONG, W. *Gender Equality and Womens' Issues in Vietnam: the Vietnamese Woman – Warrior and Poet*, p. 2.

<sup>43</sup> SCOTT, S., TRUONG KIM CHUYEN. *Reconciling Feminist, Socialist, and other Agendas: Approaches to Gender Analysis in Vietnam*. [online]

<sup>44</sup> LARSON, W. *Women and Writing in Modern China*.

tendencies) of the era of high socialism. In the past the powerful intervention of the state in controlling the desires and needs of the populace “was successful in implementing a regime of pleasure associated with nationalist ideals”.<sup>45</sup> But the expansion of new sites for socialisation and new outlets for the expression of feminine experience has created a situation where “the unglamorous collective priorities of building Vietnamese socialism have been transmuted into a consumer regime, but one with socialist characteristics”.<sup>46</sup> The process of change in gender roles in post-socialist Vietnam is well-documented in scholarly research (Drummond, Thomas, Nguyễn Phương An, Nguyễn-Võ Thu-Huong, Lan Duong) which substantiates the fact that “a rapidly developing consumer culture, along with exposure to global popular culture, has grafted onto evolving forms of the feminine”.<sup>47</sup> In a study on Chinese literature Berg suggested that contemporary female writers “debate the issue of freedom of expression with reference to sexuality, not politics”.<sup>48</sup> Likewise, Vietnamese literature written by female writers dislodges the traditional association of femininity with domesticity and submissiveness and highlights the new (urban) woman’s desires, subjectivities and identities.

These dramatic changes have found their way into Vietnamese literature and have gained a particular prominence in the works of young female writers such as Lynh Bacardi, Duong Thuy, Di Li, Phan Huyen Thu and others. These women are confident enough to cast aside the inhibitions of previous generations and tackle sensitive or taboo subjects such as sexuality, eroticism and desire. The protagonists of their books are confident independent women who strive for self-fulfilment and financial independence; they are on the one hand somewhat “demonised”, but on the other hand “eroticised” and perceived as “independent, modern and western” (Thomas). These authors have expanded the repertory of female images in the Vietnamese literary canon through the portrayal of a new female subjectivity characterized by agency and self-assuredness: they have focused on the empowered, pleasure-seeking women who are visible everywhere in urban Vietnam: on TV, in glossy magazines, beauty contests, fashion shows or advertising campaigns. Their novels, short stories, poems, blogs and essays portray young, confident, highly-emancipated women who embrace their sexuality and material yearning and who reject the long tradition of female subjugation both in the socialist era gender-neutral model as well as in the pre-communist, Confucian model of femininity.

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<sup>45</sup> NGUYEN BICH THUAN, THOMAS, M. *Young Women and Emergent Postsocialist Sensibilities in Contemporary Vietnam*, p. 136.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> BERG, D. *Consuming Secrets: China’s New Print Culture at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, p. 332.

The young female writers are also proving their versatility by experimenting with new genres. For example, many of their stories, novels and confessionals have been inspired by Western genres of women's fiction, in particularly the genre of chick lit. Many scholars have observed that the Western genre of chick lit has been gradually transcending borders and emerging in developing and post-communist countries, albeit in different forms. "As diverse as their locations are, these global chick lit novels especially flourish in countries that have newly opened their markets to global capitalism and, with it, the neoliberal values of consumer freedom".<sup>49</sup> But as also pointed out by scholars, Asian authors are faced with the challenge of "marrying classical chick lit themes with vastly different social conditions, gender roles, and cultural contexts". Their takes on the chick lit genre, although less explicit and less radical than in the West, are still daring and candid by local standards. In Vietnam, Western examples of this genre have captured the mood of Vietnamese youth, a fact evidenced in the extreme popularity of their translations into Vietnamese (the majority of the Western chick lit classics has been translated into Vietnamese and is readily available in bookshops). The genre's propagations of the empowered, individualistically-minded women who assert their freedom through consumption fits in well with the aspirations of the new urban youth in Vietnam. And although it is a lighthearted, entertaining genre, Western critics have argued that it has played an important part in the rejection of female victimization and in inspiring a new confidence in women as it compels them to make choices based on their own desires. Writers often adopt the first-person voice and bring out their own personal experience and individual desires. The overlapping experiences of protagonists and the writer herself turn the story into half-fiction, half-autobiography.

Whether they embrace chick lit or devote themselves to other genres, it is clear that women writers are becoming an increasingly vocal force in contemporary Vietnamese literature. Underneath its often rebellious and assertive surface, women's fiction usually hides deeper anxieties and conflicts. "They debate the issue of freedom of expression with reference to sexuality, not politics".<sup>50</sup> Lynh Bacardi (Phạm Thị Thùy Linh) is one of the representatives of contemporary female writers who have gained a prominence in contemporary Vietnam. Born in 1981, she entered Vietnamese literature first as a poet but has more recently branched out into prose, criticism and translations. As a staunch advocate of modernism in literature she believes that it is no longer acceptable to appraise new literature by old criteria, and uphold Vietnamese classics such *Truyện Kiều*

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<sup>49</sup> CHEN, E. Shanhai(ed) *Babies: Geopolitics, Biopolitics and the Global Chick Lit*, p. 3.

<sup>50</sup> BERG, D. *Consuming Secrets: China's New Print Culture at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, p. 332.

[The Tale of Kieu] or Nam Cao's work as a measure of literary quality. In one interview she even suggested that the old style literature has outlived its lifespan and proposed that it should be relocated to museums where it could be pored over by scholars.<sup>51</sup> In 2005, the author joined an informal group of female poets from Saigon operating under the name *Ngựa trời* (*Mantis*),<sup>52</sup> to publish some of her poems in a collection *Dự báo phi thời tiết* [Forecasting Weather]. Lynh Bacardi's writing is raw, candid and brazen in its description of life with all its unsavoury wretchedness. The coarse realism of her poetry which dispels any notion of romanticism and lyricism attracted accusations of being obscene and pornographic.

In 2005, another female writer, Đỗ Hoàng Diệu, sparked her own share of controversy for her sexually explicit writing. Her collection of short stories, *Bóng đê* [Incubus] revealed a strong feminist voice and earned her both acclaim and criticism. The title story, *Bóng đê* [Incubus], is a ghost story about a young wife who is haunted (and raped) by the ghost of her late father-in-law. Regular trips to her husband's family house to commemorate various anniversaries fill her with anxiety as everything there seems to be saturated with the constant reminders of the deceased members of the family. Visits to the graves, faded photographs of the ancestors on the altar and the omnipresent smell of burning incense create a heavy atmosphere that becomes particularly unbearable at night. The sexually explicit description of a nightmare rape by her father-in-law's ghost provoked criticism. Several other stories from this collection (*Tình chuột*, *Cô gái điếm và năm người đàn ông*) were also greeted with unease but at the same time confirmed her as an author who does not shy away from writing openly about female sexuality.

Another representative of the cosmopolitan generation of young female writers is Di Li (Nguyễn Diệu Linh). Born in 1978 in Hanoi, Di Li found her literary niche in a genre of detective mystery story/horror, an increasingly popular genre in modern Vietnamese literature. Di Li's life and career typify a modern sophisticated woman: well educated, she speaks English and German, works as a teacher, advertising and media manager and a columnist, blogger and translator. Glamorous photos of the author which adorn her personal website endorse further her image as a self-assured sophisticated urban woman. Her mystery thriller novel, *Trại hoa đỏ* [The Red Flower Farm] published in 2009 is an impressive four hundred pages long and has become a huge success (significantly boosted by

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<sup>51</sup> BACARDI, L. *Chỉ những kẻ xem thường trí tuệ cộng đồng mới cả gan muốn dẫn dắt cộng đồng*. [Those Who Dislike Intellectual Community Want to Lead It] [online]

<sup>52</sup> As she explained, the name *Ngựa trời* (*Mantis*) was chosen because it symbolizes a beautiful (on close inspection) and powerful creature that does not allow anybody to dominate her, including the male of her species. Apart from Lynh Bacardi, the group also includes Phuong Lan, Nguyệt Phạm, Thanh Xuân and Khương Hà.

a clever publicity stunt). Di Li started releasing individual chapters of the book online, teasing her readers by inviting them on a murder-mystery hunt. After thirty four chapters were made available online she announced that the rest of the book, and therefore, the climactic resolution will be released only in print; needless to say that the novel swiftly sold out. Her latest book is a diary consisting of fifty one entries spanning her childhood in Hanoi, life from elementary school through university and offers a slice of life of the people who were born after 1975. Like many of her contemporaries, Di Li also finds inspiration in her travel. Her collection of essays *Đảo Thiên đường* [Heaven Island] features thirty foreign locations that she has visited in the last 10 years. Phan Hồn Nhiên has also explored the possibilities of the horror genre in some of her stories, for example, *Những đôi mắt lạnh* [Cold Eyes] in which an evil spirit can grant a person special powers in exchange for death.

Traditional emphasis on family values in Vietnam discouraged social mobility. Young people were tied to their family homes through the powerful threads of Confucian-based filial piety which demanded that their individual aspirations are forsaken in the name of filial obligations towards their parents. For women, the added layer of traditional female subjugation made travelling and moving about even more complicated. By contrast, the mobility of contemporary young women has increased enormously, with young women able to move away from their families to pursue the pleasures offered by the city, away from the watchful eyes of their families, neighbours and communities. Such lifestyle inevitably threatens to display the central role of the family. In contemporary Vietnam many young writers have the opportunity to travel abroad and let themselves be inspired by their journeys. Dương Thụy is one of the most typical representatives of the globe-trotting cosmopolitan writers. Her work is inspired by her travels and studies overseas: in 2007 she published her first novel, *Oxford thương yêu* [Beloved Oxford], which narrates a romance between a young Vietnamese girl and a British man she meets while studying in Oxford. The book became a huge success: according to the author's blog, to date it has sold 53 500 copies and is currently on its 15th edition. It is clear that the book managed to strike a chord with young readers. Its simple romantic love story, however, resonates with more serious undertones. Most of Dương Thụy's books capture the arduous process of engaging with different cultures, finding the courage to expose yourself to the unknown and face up to your fears and prejudice. The book's translator introduced it as "a motivational work which demonstrates to Vietnamese youth that they can achieve their dreams as they strive for a better life in their rapidly growing economic society". This seems to echo Dương Thụy's own recognition that young Vietnamese are sometimes intimidated by the global world and suffer from a "national inferiority complex" which restrains them from embracing the possibilities of modern day life. The insecurities of the journey to adulthood are



exacerbated by confrontations with different cultures and values. Kim, the protagonist of *Oxford thương yêu* is introduced as a woman who “had immersed herself in the love of her family for so long that she almost never grew up”. Well-educated, hard-working girl from Vietnam is upon her arrival to England cast in the role of a naive, bewildered girl who is eager to succeed, eager to please but who is also painfully aware of the various prejudices attached to her being Vietnamese which seems to be encapsulated in the advice she receives: “if you come from a small country, then there is only one way, strive to not be ignored”. The author has since capitalised on her other trips to France, Italy, Belgium and various Asian countries and published several other books such as *Nhắm mắt thấy Paris* [Seeing Paris], *Trả lại nụ hôn* [Returned Kiss], *Venise và những cuộc tình gondola* [Venice and its Gondola Love Stories], *Bồ câu chung mái* [Pigeons on the Roof]...

Travel and immersion in foreign cultures has also proved inspirational for other writers such as Phan Việt (Nguyễn Ngọc Hường, born 1978) who after graduating from Hanoi’s Foreign Trade University studied sociology at the University of Chicago. In her stories, for example, *Nước Mỹ, Nước Mỹ* [America, America], she often focuses on the experiences of young Vietnamese living abroad in countries with different values, culture and lifestyle.

A special place among young female writers in Vietnam belongs to Nguyễn Ngọc Tư (born 1976) who is one of the most critically acclaimed writers in contemporary Vietnam. Contrary to most of her contemporaries, her short stories and novels avoid the hustle of urban Vietnam and are firmly located in the “provinces”, in rural Vietnam: it is the Mekong River delta and her native southern province of Cà Mau which inspire her writing. Nguyễn Ngọc Tư’s stories, imbued with powerful emotions, weave together the joys and sorrows of the lives of ordinary people in the countryside. She explains: “I’ll write when my emotions are awake. In my opinion, literature is created like clouds in the sky. Whether it flies or not depends on the winds.” Her biggest success came with the publication of a collection of short stories, *Cánh đồng bất tận* [Boundless Fields]. The title story has been lauded as masterpiece, an achievement made more remarkable by her young age, and was awarded first prize by the *Association of Vietnamese Writers’* for the year 2006. In 2008 the author received the ASEAN Literature Award. The film adaptation of *Cánh đồng bất tận*, directed by Nguyễn Phan Quang Bình has proved equally successful.

## Conclusion

Many important changes have taken place in the domain of Vietnamese literature in the last two decades as the country embraced the new globalized

consumer age. Against the background of the rapid transformation of Vietnamese society, the new literature has assumed the role of “a barometer to the turbulent changes in Vietnam’s cultural and literary climate during the latter half of the twentieth century, as well as to the global transformations of early twenty-first”.<sup>53</sup> The reforms unleashed in the late 1980s have gradually penetrated to the cultural sphere, transforming it from a state-planned and state-managed endeavour into an individualized, creative, and inevitably, commercial process. Meanwhile, the newly established market mechanisms have moulded a principal conceptual and institutional shift in cultural practices: culture ceased to be an agent of political struggle and ideological indoctrination and became an economically driven commodity. This development echoes the situation in other post-communist societies in transition. For example, sinologist David Der-wei Wang observed that in the postmodern era in China “writers have come to realize that writing does not have to be equated with political action and that literature cannot solve all social problems”.<sup>54</sup> Instead, literature is becoming “a facetious gesture, a playful action that titillates rather than teaches, flirts rather than indicts”.<sup>55</sup> This approach is well suited to the ambitions of young Vietnamese writers who have emerged onto the country’s literary scene since the beginning of the 21st century. Their creative direction and aspirations differ radically from their older peers: they are no longer drawn to the grand narrative themes from the country’s dramatic past but position their writing firmly in the globalizing consumer-oriented present. The literary credentials of young writers may not yet match those of their predecessors but what they lack in experience they more than make up for by their thirst for experiment and innovation. Their desire to catch up with the world, absorb new influences, their sense of curiosity and adventure is propelling Vietnamese literature forward.

Contemporary literature in Vietnam is part of a dynamic cultural scene where multiple influences and interests intersect and compete. While some welcome the new impulses with delight, others are alarmed by them: critical voices caution against the increasing commercialization of literary production, the decline in the quality of writing, its obsession with popular forms and superficial amusement. Others, on the other hand, are conscious of the fact that increasing commercialization has had a democratizing impact on Vietnamese literature as it weakened the authoritarian rule of the state, removed the ideological subservience of art and induced pluralisation and diversification of literary production.

The Vietnamese authorities may still impose constrictions on writers but in spite of these conditions the contemporary literary scene in Vietnam is,

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<sup>53</sup> HAI-DANG PHAN. *A Deluge of New Vietnamese Poetry*. [online]

<sup>54</sup> WANG NING. *Rethinking Modern Chinese Literature in a Global Context*, p. 6.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

nevertheless, becoming diverse and innovative. It is imbued with the youthful energy of a new generation of writers who have put aside the dramatic ordeals of the country's past to rejoice in the opportunities of the future. They have cast off the straitjacket of ideology inherited from their parents' generation and exchanged it for a more colourful attire styled by globalization and consumerism. Authors have been offered a sufficiently long leash to stimulate the literary market and while still answerable to the government, as long as they steer clear of political criticism and sensitive issues such as human rights they can pursue individualism, modernism and experiment, be it in conventional print publishing or by tapping into alternative publishing channels online.

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