

The Ethical Choice in Vietnamese Pastoral Novels after 1986

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Abstract: Vietnamese novels after 1986, set in a new ethical context, has witnessed its own developments since the war ended in 1975 and the Communist Party initiated Doi Moi (renovation) in 1986. Pastoral life and people became one of the four most prominent novelistic themes along with war, urban, and historical contents. Under the influence of new ethical environment, Vietnamese novelists not only depicted cultural beauties in peasants' lives but also took opportunities to look back on the past, particularly those events that once had a severe impact on people's ethics such as the land reform and farmers' ethical identity in wars. In depicting either the past or the contemporary affair, writers focused on both positive and negative aspects of Vietnamese rural communities and paid particular attention to ethical dilemmas that bring about characters' ethical choices, ethical taboos, and ethical tragedies. Through typical topics such as conflicts between families and clans, the battle between good and evil, the struggle between tradition and modernity, and relations between conservative and progressive thoughts, Vietnamese writers offered a vibrant picture of pastoral life as well as manifested profound edificatory values.

Key words: ethical choice; Vietnam; land reform; pastoral novel; edificatory function

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标题: 1986 后越南农村小说中的伦理选择

内容摘要: 自 1975 年战争结束、1986 年共产党发动革新以来, 1986 年后的越南小说在新的伦理语境下见证其发展。农村生活和农民与战争、城市、历史内容并列成为小说四大主题。在新伦理环境的影响下, 越南小说家不仅描写了农民生活中的文化美, 而且还借机回顾了过去, 特别是那些曾经对人类伦理产生过强烈影响的事件, 如土地改革和战争中的农民的伦理身份。作家

们关注过去以及当下越南乡村社会中积极和消极的两面性，特别关注导致人物伦理选择、伦理禁忌和伦理悲剧的伦理困境。越南作家以家庭与宗族的冲突、善与恶的斗争、传统与现代的矛盾、保守与进步思想的关系等典型题材，呈现出一幅充满活力的田园生活图景，体现出深刻的教诲价值。

关键词：伦理选择；越南；土地改革；农村小说；教诲功能

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Introduction: A New Ethical Context and A New Literary Movement

The termination of the American-Vietnamese war on April 30th, 1975 paved the way for a new era in the history for the country with both advantages and disadvantages. Due to a dilapidated economy that is the consequence of wars, the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) conducted a new policy called “the centrally planned subsidised economy” from 1975 to 1986 as an endeavour to develop the whole society. Under the new policy, individual businesses were obliterated and the state-directed economy played a more major role. Along with absolutely distributed goods via “the tem phieu system” (one form of special currency that could only be used to buy one particular kind of goods), the central government also controlled both domestic trade and international trade. The planned economy was not as robust as authorities had wished it to be; on the contrary, it generated a severe crisis for the local people and ceased in the late 1980s following the 6th National Congress of VCP that took place from 15-18 December 1986 in Hanoi. The event was initiated to applying “the Renovation” (Doi Moi) to the national economy, aiming to establishing a socialist-oriented market economy. The innovation not only involved economic scope but also was related to every aspect within the society on politics, education, culture, the publishing industry, the press, and literature.

In the case of literature, due to the Renovation, the government implemented an “coi troi policy”, or “unshackling policy”, that allowed local authors to be more independent and creative in art composition. After 1986, in the light of democracy and freedom, Vietnamese literature thrived and witnessed a prominent movement of novels with many famous novelists such as Bao Ninh, Duong Huong, Pham Thi Hoai, Le Luu, Ma Van Khang, Nguyen Xuan Khanh, and so on. This new background, which was termed as ethical context (伦理环境) by Ethical Literary Criticism (ELC), helped the writers discover many matters of daily life, on the one hand, and rethought historical issues, on the other hand. The pastoral novels along

with war novels, urban novels, and historical novels, known as the four significant novelistic categories, played an essential role in the whole stream of Vietnamese novels after 1986. The rural life and peasant characters as the familiar topics in the previous literature, however, were different from the theme and artistic images of the characters described in the contemporary pastoral novel. Given the new ethical condition, the local novelists showed a fresh approach about the countryside and farmers. Authors manifested peasant characters and rural life vividly with the present images. Some internal issues in pastoral areas and farmers' life such as the struggle for family powers and rights, traditional morality and belief, culture and customs were embodied in the novels. Moreover, they looked back to some historical events that were inseparable from the rural communities including the land reform and farmers' tragedy in wars. Through an ethical perspective, local writers were also concerned about some ethical matters that strictly impacted the ethical choices of the novelistic characters. Vietnamese novelists also noticed ethical taboos like incests and homicides, the good-evil struggle, ethical tragedies that were expressed in the love, marriage, and gender relations. By analysing and displaying ethical attitudes for these moral matters, Vietnamese pastoral novels after 1986 further explained the so-called "edificatory function" (教诲功能) as the theory of ELC.

The Land Reform: Ethical Dilemmas and Unethical Choices

On September 8th, 2014, the Vietnam National Museum of History exhibited approximately 150 relics that are associated with the land reform in the past. These are rare, valuable documents, pictures, and relics that were shown off for the public for the very first time.

The land reform (also known as the land revolution) was carried out in Northern Vietnam by the Workers' Party of Vietnam (a name of VCP at that time) and the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam from 1953 to 1956. The reform was conducted during the war, influenced by the communist theory of Soviet and lessons from China's experiences of the land revolution (土地改革). It aimed at getting rid of the feudal culture, defeating the treasonous, reactionary and exploitative classes, re-allocating agrarian areas for farmers. Authorities tried to redistribute lands in a fair way to develop the socio-economic aspect and improve the mental well-being of the national citizens. "From 1953 to 1956, there were eight times of mobilising the public to reduce the rent in 1,875 communes, and five times of agrarian reform in the plain, midland areas and 280 northern mountainous communes. In 3,314 communes, with 10 million people, more than

700,000 hectares (44.6%) of the land were given to nearly 4 million farmers.” (Ngo) These figures “reflected the process and results of the reform” (Ngo) for the local peasants who had undergone feudal landlords and colonialists for a long time. It is noteworthy that the exhibition was not a whole picture of the land revolution. There were some dark parts that were hesitated to point out by local historians and politicians but were seen as chances for some anti-communist elements to attack the system. The core policy of the reform was quite revolutionary for the exploited classes, particularly the peasant class who had experienced almost life without their own land for cultivating. Unfortunately, due to executors’ weaknesses (such as the limited cultural and political capacity; the hasty mind, subjective and mechanical manners; the low degree of civil wisdom), this reformed encountered a number of crucial flaws. The revolutionists wrongly identified the kind of classes, killed a lot of innocent people, destroyed many cultural and historical relics, created a climate of social tensions, and damaged people’s confidence in the party and the regime. At the beginning of 1956, the party and the central government found faults in the reform and decided to stop it and make corrections. On August 18th, 1956, President Ho Chi Minh sent the citizen and officials a letter to state achievements and errors of the agrarian reform. Although some apologies were spoken out by those who played the crucial role in the reform and amend the faults for the victims of the revolution, people could not erase such painful memories.

Not until nearly 60 years later were Vietnamese people able to view the event via an official exhibition, its reality had already existed among the local community and history. That is the reason why there was a different display of the reform, which was earlier than the governmental one, in Vietnamese novels after 1986. Local writers did not ignore the phenomenon and described it in their writings with their own experiences and analytic evaluations. According to the sensitiveness of the matter, it should be noticed that novelists’ descriptions would not be aimed at political points but at ethical purposes. Through a moral analysis and serious attitude when looking back to the history, the fictionists attempted to explore ethical situations and peasants’ fate in the land reform. There were seemingly not any reform-related writings in the previous literature. One of the most remarkable reasons is that any other issues, especially a sensitive topic as the land reform, could be discussed during the wartime other than fighting spirit. It was not the case after 1975, notably since the beginning of the renovative movement in 1986. Living and writing in such a new ethical background, the post-war authors displayed the reform in literary works courageously: *Story of Cuoi Village* (1991) by Le Luu, *The Three Others* (2006) by To Hoai, *The Age of Deities* (2008) by Hoang Minh Tuong,

Farewell to the Darkness (2008) and *The Old Kho* (2014) by Ta Duy Anh, and so forth.

Most of the novelists presented some wrong actions during the revolution. The most apparent faults, for example, were to wrongly identify classes, crimes, and punishments. Due to implementers' inaccurate methods, plenty of guilty peasants suffered great miseries and tragedies. In the arena of a "public denouncement", farmers were denounced and told of crimes they had or had not committed, and then passively receiving their accusations, criticism, reproof, condemnation, even dishonouring, and wounding. For these victims, not only were their status, prestige, and reputation overturned, but their ethical and moral characters were also severely damaged. In a chaotic arena, some executors took unfair advantage of the situation for their own interest or commit sexual abuses while some others stole properties or revenged personal feuds, even killed their fellows. As a result, to protect their own human life and benefits, some farmers were unfaithful to the morality and made many unethical choices. The land reform witnessed the subversion of ethics, the destruction of ethical relations and ethical values. Therefore the revolution was a catastrophe for the farmers. The old Kho, the male protagonist, in the novel of the same name by Ta Duy Anh is a typical victim of the reform. The man was a hero of his Tho Village before the land revolution happened. As a needy and unlearned farmer, the old Kho's life changed when the communist revolution (in French-Vietnamese war) occurred in his hometown. He became the president of Hoang Commune and kept trying to improve his people's life. The man was always willing to make great sacrifice for and held a sincere belief to his communist leaders in his heart. Even just two days after his wife had given birth to a daughter, he left the two to come back to his short-term theoretical course of co-operative management that he believed "How can it be without me?" (Ta 87) However, "He was too well educated about the spirit of sacrifice. Individuals, families, villages, communes and the whole people and country are the factors that prevent the world from cosmopolitanism! He carries a great mission to sacrifice first. If his son, for some cause, for example dies because of him, he still has enough reasons to prove to his wife that this is just one of thousands of sacrificial expressions." (Ta 87) Flooded with a solid faith, the rustic farmer believed in what he was building, but he did not predict that everything has been changed suddenly when the agrarian revolution appeared. During the ups and downs of history, the old Kho's ethical identity (伦理身份) has transformed from a hero of a pastoral community to a harmful individual who was bound tightly by rope and led as a buffalo, bearing the public shouting down with him. They detained the last hero into a filthy store.

He was beaten and judged by those who had been saved and supported by his own compassion before. The public denouncement, as a necessary part of the revolution, on the old Kho, was conducted very quickly with the participation of his relatives and neighbours. All of them owed him a debt of gratitude. Scenes of the free trial demonstrated people's ethical values and ethical tragedies. The neighbour of the old Kho was an opportunist who did not hesitate to betray his kindness no matter how Kho helped him in the harsh time. On the contrary, there were also some characters who took part in the denouncement with a reluctant willing, for example, the victim's foster sister, or who refused to join the denouncement against relative such as the old Kho's uncle. The uncle definitely knew that everything happening at the moment was a big mistake for his nephew, so he said nothing, and then screaming mournfully, falling, vomiting blood, and passing away. He died because of his anger with the trial and wrong crimes that his nephew had been accused of. In front of authorities, he chose not to be subdued, more importantly not to betray the moral nature that a righteous man must have. His writhe of outraged morality was a response of good-nature inside an ethical man. Unfortunately, his action was not common among most of the poor farmers during the period when the implementors predominated over political positions and power.

The local novelists described the executors of the reform as opportunists, hogs, wolves, horse-leeches, and sensualists. They destroyed the happiness of other people's families, vandalised the peacefulness of rural community, performed sexual abuses with village girls, and even vigorously raped them. These weak conductors were the direct or indirect causes of other's death, which is an ethical taboo (伦理禁忌) for ELC. Although the core goal of the innovation was benevolent, the implementor's immoral faults pushed others into ethical troubles and moral tragedies. In other words, they created the ethical dilemma (伦理两难) and ethical predicament (伦理困境) that impacted on the peasant's ethical identity. One of the most terrible sins of the executors that were usually depicted in the novels of this period was sexual-related actions. Hieu, a northern Vietnamese soldier in *Stories of Cuoi Village* (1991) by Le Luu, had to leave the peaceful village where his beloved wife and his old mother were living because of the war. The innovators came to the countryside while the soldier was fighting with foreigner enemies in the south of Vietnam. It is hard for him to imagine that one of the innovators sexually abused his wife. The crime happened many times inside and outside his poorly furnished cottage, although the mother knew the guilt. She remained silent due to her fear of the authorities. In the beginning, the young lady acted just as her mother-in-law. She did not dare to put up resistances of the executor, let alone the fact that she committed fornications with the

executor little by little. It means that her ethical identity moved from a sexual-abuse victim to an immoral accomplice. Hieu's wife was to be in cooperation with the implementor of the reform undermining ethics.

Sexual abuses and sexual relations among the reformative members and village ladies in the land revolution, as explained by the writers, are caused by 1) the villagers' fear of authorities, 2) their desires to protect themselves and their own family members, 3) their hope to earn benefits based on their intimate relationship with the executors, and 4) their own libido. Due to fears of authority and wish for saving themselves, villagers chose to be liars and told untruths about others in the public denouncement, which could let them go safely but pitifully put their friends, their neighbours, and their relatives into troubles. Even those lies could execute them. There were some ladies who recognised the executors' power and made a win-win relationship with these men to get profits from the reform. In this case, the biggest involvement was agrarian portions, and the country girls used their body, especially their own ethical values, to make exchanges with the reformative group. It became a typical overturn between material values and ethical values. Duyen, nearly-married, in *The Three Others* (2006) by To Hoai is a precise example for the moral downfall. She was willing to sleep with reformative men, not only leader Cu but also the leader's staffs, Boi and Dinh. She put Boi's shirt on her body to show villagers her close relationship with one of the members of the revolutionist team. Duyen did not care about neither her fiancé nor her dignity. She was only interested in some fertile field parts that these men promised to give her. Ironically, Duyen had given them everything, including her virginity and conduct but then obtained nothing. Cu, Boi, and Dinh were three core communist officers who appeared in the village to lead the missions. One part of their missions was to live with some village families in order to find out the status of the whole place. They lived together with the family and slept with daughters of the family. In the novel by To Hoai, it is not clear to list achievements of the reform, but it is undoubtful to watch a popularised sexual abuse. Leader Cu married some wives during the process (in fact, it was his black conspiracy to regularise his sexual relations with these women), and did not forget enlisting opportunities to have sex with other ladies. Boi performed body-games with Dom when he lived in her family, had sex relations with Duyen while staying at her house, and made sexual cuddles to a lot of other female partisans. Dinh, one of the three officers, was not different from his colleagues. More seriously, he was imprisoned, tortured, and forced to admit a sudden crime that Dinh did not know where it came from. His ethical identity that was unexpectedly transformed into another side was also a chance for him to look

back to his victims when he stood on the commanding position. The prisoner, while being taken part in a public denouncement and about to be shot, understood the misery he had created for others.

The Three Others, originally titled “Stories of the Three”, was first landed in 1993, but the book was immediately withdrawn and suspended for the reasons related to sensitive issues of the agrarian reform. More than twenty years later, in 2006, with a more open mind, To Hoai changed the novel’s original name to “The Three Others” and published the previously banned work again. For literary creations of the theme, compared with other novels, To Hoai’s *The Three Others* took another way in describing and explaining the land reform. Some contemporary books depicted the phenomenon by the observer’s eyes, whereas in *The Three Others*, the author used an experienced angle of a person who was believed to have participated in the project in the past. There are some similar points between To Hoai and the main character Boi in the novel. As a result, many scholars advocate *The Three Others* as a self-narrative novel by the writer. Actually, from today’s perspective, the novel is still the most authentic and influential book about land reform. In any case, the purpose of To Hoai, Le Luu, Ta Duy Anh, and other outstanding novelists is to state a shadow part of Vietnamese history, to remind the regime and the nation of a real historical period, and to avoid repeating mistakes like the past. Moreover, this was the authors’ endeavour to show and analyse the fate of ethics and people’s ethical tragedy in the painful time. It was also the main ethical posture of contemporary Vietnamese fictionists towards the theme of land revolution.

Historically, in 1956, President Ho Chi Minh and the Workers’ Party of Vietnam earnestly discovered the limitation and inaccuracy of the activity, and they quickly adopted some methods to amend them. On behalf of the party and the government, Uncle Ho straightly and sincerely conceded critical faults of the campaign to the parliament. “His tears fell because of the shortcomings due to subjectiveness, ignorance to listening to the people, and lack of coordination with practice. In front of the national compatriots, He did not hesitate to state these defects of the party, of the highest leader who is him.” (Duong) The Vietnamese dignitaries were very brave and responsible for they were able to recognise the errors, offer a public apology, and correct the fault. For the local writers, creating literary works with a reality-passed theme was also a way to express history and its truth, as well as the ethical penitence and moral repentance to the past. Under a new ethical context with the democratic and “free speech” atmosphere, primarily supported by a reliable ethical manner, the novelists after 1986 were brave enough

to stand up and present a previously forbidden place in literature. This kind of earnest creation was necessary for Vietnamese readers. Because without the pastoral novel, it would be difficult for them to get close the secret of history, which now becomes one kind of trauma in Vietnamese society, particularly for those having gone through the land reform.

Family Conflicts and Desires for Power: The Fate of Morality

As for the novelistic theme, family conflicts are one of the significant topics in contemporary Vietnamese novels. Regarding culture, the institutional type of Vietnamese pastoral society depends on the culture of the community, lifestyles of villages with the vital role of clans and families. “In rural Vietnam, awareness and traditions of clans and families play a critical role, considered as the ultimate mission and the glue that connects the village and the community (sense of community). On the other hand, to protect their own clans and villages, they are willing to fight against other ones (autonomy).” (Bui) Intercommunity and autonomy create the traditional character for Vietnamese village society about the management of social life, cultural activities, and religious rituals. The prominence of clans and families also causes some negative influences to the relations among human communities and the economic, political, and cultural development. It was not until after 1986 that the writers focused on this problem, however the previous literature had written much about these aspects. It is notable that in a new context of Vietnam’s economic improvement and international integration, the matter of villages and its cultural heritages has become an indispensable part for the whole progress, so writers were more concerned about this issue. Each writer while writing on the theme of rural areas often tried to build their own artistic images of the village, which bears their own aesthetic characteristics and ethical messages. In the past literature, Nam Cao initiated his Vu Dai Village where the famous short story writer reflected the fate of peasants under the French colonial rule. The novel after 1986 did not seem to pay more attention to the outside enemy but focused more on the inside one, which existed among complicated relations, and tenacious conflicts of the power of clans and families. Ta Duy Anh created Tho O Village (*Farewell to the Darkness*) and Dong Village (*The Old Kho*). Nguyen Khac Truong had his Gieng Chua Village in the novel *A Land of Many Ghosts and Many People* (1988). Le Luu invented Ha Vi Village and Cuoi Village in his writings *A Distant Time* (1986) and *Stories of Cuoi Village* (1991), respectively. Nguyen Binh Phuong described Tho Village in *At the Beginning* (2014), and so on. The face of morality also appeared vividly through these villages in writings after the wartime.

The authors described many events related to the theme of rural communities to provide readers with a realistic picture of village life in Vietnam. They also depicted characters' ethical identities that were locked in some ethical dilemmas within the family fightings. Under the influence of certain ethical situations, it was not easy for people to make ethical choices accurately. They were stuck in their own relatives and other families that were sometimes associated with their lovers, beloved friends, dear neighbours, and their social positions. Hence, aside from some who could extricate themselves from ethical dilemmas, most of them encountered tragedy and misfortune. Nguyen Khac Truong in his rural novel *A Land of Many Ghosts and Many People* (1988), for example, constructed an inherited hatred between two big clans of Gieng Chua Village, Vu Dinh families (with Vu Dinh Phuc as the representative) and Trinh Ba families (Trinh Ba Thu as the leader), and a lot of unethical issues that rooted from their animosity. The two clans' enmity that originated a long time ago was associated to marriages, ground, position, and power among them. In a bid to promote the family's reputation and interests, they tried to strengthen their powers by competing or buying seats in the village government, as well as hatching conspiracies to harm the opponent. As described, Vu Dinh Phuc and his son secretly broke into Trinh Ba Hoanh's house and damaged the picture of Trinh's sacred tiger, which was believed as the clan's tutelary genius. This was an immoral action that exacerbated the conflicts between the Trinh and the Vu families. Till to his last breath, Trinh Ba Hoanh could not revenge the Vu, but he still did not forget the hatred and gave his last will to Trinh Ba Ham, his son. Afterwards, Trinh Ba Ham continued to intensify the situation between the two families. He and his partners dug up the new grave of Vu Dinh Phuc's father, who had been buried recently, to turn it upside down and made an exorcism. The Trinh hoped to stop the adversary's power and influence. As a result, they made a choice that is unacceptable in Vietnamese culture and tradition. Their action violated the dead and hurt the living. The Vu discovered the immorality, and the culprit was imprisoned. To get rid of the contender's hands, Trinh Ba Thu (Trinh Ba Ham's younger brother) hatched a plot and forced his brother's wife, named Son, who had been Vu Dinh Phuc's old lover, to trap him. The extremist also constrained the poor woman to write a fabricated petition accusing Vu Dinh Phuc of ravishing her. The consequence was that Son had to suffer great shameful misery, and her ethical choice was a suicidal decision because she could not escape from the ethical dilemma. If Son told the truth, she would be unfaithful to her family; If the woman told lies, she would be at fault to her old lover; more importantly, she would betray her own conscience. Thus, the lady drowned herself into a river of

the village to terminate her inglorious life. Their fighting for domination and power not only made one poor woman lose her life, but also undermined their younger generation's happiness. Despite the fact that Tung (the Vu's posterity) deeply loved the lady Dao (the Trinh's descendants), the two families hindered their relation. They only cared about the social position and powerful influence. The morality was nothing to them. Without authentic ethics, their choices were unethical and inhumane. Son, Dao, Tung, and many others in Gieng Chua Village were chess pieces in some representatives of their families. Fortunately, one of the Vu's members, the young man Tung with his friend's support, stood up and denounced both his own family and the Trinh's sinful actions. His brave choice was based on a good ethical standpoint that helped him to stop the two clans' race of influences and to regain his beloved lady, Dao.

Not a happy ending as it is in *A Land of Many Ghosts and Many People*, most of the characters in *The Wharf of Without Husbands* (1990) by Duong Huong, due to the oath of Nguyen and Vu families, experienced ethical tragedies. Nghia, one of the Nguyen's talented sons, is quite similar to Tung in the novel by Nguyen Khac Truong. He loved a girl of the Vu, named Hanh, but that was an ethical plight for him: If Nghia still gave his heart to Hanh, he would betray his people; If the man did not live with his real feeling, he would be a faithless lover for the girl and himself. Finally, the young man dared to overcome the conflict between families to achieve his own happiness. The couple's marriage might be hope for deconstructing the two families' disagreement, but they could not resolve the status because of their childlessness. This trouble pushed Nghia into another lady's hands. Hanh decided to divorce him, not because of Nghia's adultery but her true love for him. Hanh sacrificed her own happiness to cultivate the other family's happiness, which was one of her great ethical expressions. Tragically, the lady was caught into another sad situation with Nguyen Van, a member of the Nguyen. The male character, a veteran, lived a hard life with the so-called "ideal" to maintain the balance of ethical scales. He tried to keep the image of a true communist soldier. His belief to the communist party was so tight that it erased his individual desire, which was very popular for people in the wartime. That is the reason why Nguyen Van denied the love of Nhan, who was Hanh's mother. The veteran was not courageous enough to get over the obstacle of clans and families' clash. His ethical thought and ethical choice relied on a firm basis that was "the revolutionary ideal" while the woman did not overcome the public opinion and the old-fashioned idea to live with him. However, then Nguyen Van, spending almost his whole life preserving ethics, in a stormy night got drunk and uncontrollably satisfied his

sexual desire with Hanh. This could be seen as an act of incest or an ethical taboo. When Nghia and Hanh were young, they lived in Nguyen Van's cottage, and the old soldier adopted them as his children. Hanh also considered the man as her father. Additionally, Nguyen Van loved Hanh's mother. From their ethical identity, the sexual activity between the two was the father having sex with daughter, the mother's lover having sex with the lover's daughter. The old man's last choice showed his emerging ethics: he jumped into the river to kill himself. For a man who always wanted to keep the right morality, once committed the ethical sin, he must repair the fault, no matter what cost it would take.

The struggle for social positions, influences, interests among the clans significantly impacted the ethics of families and communities. The conflict even happened inside one group, one family as the case of two branches of the Nguyen family in *The Old Kho* (2014) by Ta Duy Anh. The Giap branch and the At branch belonged to the same clan in Dong Village. Their animosity was rooted from the dispute of the grave of the forefather between the two branches. The old Kho, a member of the Giap family, who was inspired by the responsibility of a communist soldier and a revolutionary mission, led a civil defence group to demolish buildings of the wealthy leader of the At branch. The wealthy man and his people were determined to revenge the old Kho to save the family's fame and tradition. The hostility became means of existence for the At family's men who waited for the day of vengeance. Many years later, Tu Voc, one of the men of the At, returned to the village and conspired with a kinsman, the old Nam, to recover the branch's worship shrine and purge their archenemy. For the old Kho, he could not forget the miserable and unhappy life as a slave in the At leader's place. For this reason, when he had the authority in his hands, which was believed as the authority of the farmer class in the revolution, he did not hesitate to chastise the domination. A class feud had existed inside the old Kho, and after destroying the landowner's property, he ignited a new family hatred that followed both of the two sides steadily. The old Kho had been living a covered-by-hatred life and his other relatives had always been in a state of revenging. The animosity made them become blindfolded humans. Tu Voc and his kinsman were so beset with images of vengeance that they killed each other in a crazy situation. It is worth mentioning that the death of the antagonist did not satisfy the old Kho; in contrast, he felt the emptiness of the feud and life also. "The old Kho feels horribly lonely. His enemies stab each other following a certain fate. It is terrible assuming there is that kind of fate. He is lonely because he is extremely tired of the elimination. What is the meaning of life anyway? Because he refuses to find it out, his life is

struggling, useless, and meaningless. The most terrible thing is meaninglessness. It does not give people the opportunity to reincarnate in the future lives.” (Ta 187) The old peasant’s immense sadness showed the rise in ethical consciousness, which had been concealed a long time in the world of clashes. Behind the story, Ta Duy Anh’s message is that there were nothing more horrible than a boring life. If people take morality to exchange authority, power, position, and property, it will be an insignificant choice. Unless based on a rational ethical foundation, which decides people’s thought and behaviours, humankind will perform an immoral incarnation. Without a wise ethical choice, people will probably construct a bad world where monsters live with human beings as the name of a little drama within *Farewell to the Darkness* (2008) by the same author. Coordinated to the title of the novel, “darkness” symbolises the power of evil and Ta Duy Anh’s central philosophy is that people need to say farewell to the bad, the crime, and the immorality. It also means that in the battle between good and evil, the writer believes that the former will win eventually the latter. Providing the novelist’s opinions, there were various manifestations of evil forces in the society, such as the presence of alcoholics, adulterers, thieves, and murderers. These men were still living with others whether in the countryside or other places because they were one part of the society. On account of the co-existence of both an evil person and a right man, their different nature and confrontation with each other never abolished, but forever generated and sustained.

Regarding the good-evil thematic concerns, *At the Beginning* (2014) by Nguyen Binh Phuong is viewed as one of the most iconic works about this theme. The core content of this novel involves a male protagonist called Tinh. His father was an alcoholic and caveman. Inheriting his father’s negative attributes, Tinh gradually became a malignant man. During his childhood, he did not play with anyone and had not gone to school also. He was happy when killing tiny insects and regarded this action as a form of amusement. He liked to make friends with lunatics, and those who would give him incredible feelings like Phung and Hung. The former was a poor writer who often burned his manuscripts in front of Tinh’s face. The fire made him crazy: “Tinh likes fires, he does like it, he dances happily.” (P. Nguyen 19) The latter was a veteran who usually told stories of fighting with American soldiers and beating the enemies’ necks. Hung’s homicide-related stories gave Tinh much of inspiration. Besides, the protagonist was also interested in watching others kill pigs and gradually became a pig slayer himself. He even secretly went to villagers’ houses to kill pigs in the dark. Because of his father’s influences, his relations with lunatics, especially the violence of sticking pigs, Tinh

seemingly saw others as animals that are objects for him to kill. He was fascinated by staring at people's neck and would like to stick that position as he did to the pigs. The man had a beautiful wife, called Hien, who wanted him to see her as a woman every night. He did not touch the wife's sexy body but only fastened his eyes upon her neck. He did not have the sexual desire with her; instead, what covered him was the desire of killing that made Hien the country woman experience marriage misfortune. In the wedding night, Tinh slept like a log meanwhile Hien took her clothes off, turned the light on and contemplated her own naked body. She even once "takes the shirt off, bows down to the ground, rubs her breast towards the rocks. Her breasts are scraped, ooze blood. Tinh touches the blood on the rock, sticks out his tongue and tastes it, and his face is shining." (P. Nguyen 96-97) Since malignancy had controlled his human nature, Tinh finally broke a serious ethical taboo. He did not only kill animals but also kill several people in his rural place. Originated from a fire-related story of Hung, Tinh set his neighbour's house on fire and burned the drunk-host inside the cottage. "At the time, his face is slightly glowy." (P. Nguyen 31) He felt comfortable with the evil that he created. Afterwards, the hostess felt wretched with her husband's death. She felt ill and left the world behind. Tinh killed one life directly and another life indirectly. Moreover, he murdered one mad boy savagely. He stabbed an evangelist namely Khoa and then coming back home to find Hien, his wife, who was having a bath at that time. It was the first time Tinh had seen Hien's naked body thoroughly, and the pure beauty of this lady, which was glowing with the yellow sunshine. This was the core factor in reviving Tinh's rational willing (理性意志). He suddenly recognised his crimes and stuck himself to end the life of a demon.

His ethical choice marked the recovery of ethical willing that made him transform into a genuine person with two parts of the Sphinx factor (斯芬克斯因子): human factor (人性因子) and animal factor (兽性因子). The Sphinx jumps to the abyss to commit suicide after answering the puzzle of her true ethical identity. Tinh also killed himself after getting the enlightenment of ethical consciousness. The original ethical beauty saves human beings' human factor and takes them back at the beginning. It is one of the most prominent ethical reminders that Nguyen Binh Phuong wishes to propagate via his pastoral writing.

Traditions, Belief, and Sex: Ethical Taboo and Edificatory Function

As an integral part of Vietnamese culture, the village culture in rural society has its own characteristics that include rich and colourful depictions written in the local pastoral novels after 1986. It should be mentioned that the culture, which

involves both superannuated traditions and new problematical ones, becomes one kind of ethical conditions that brings about some ethical tragedies to people. Furthermore, in the face of the plight, it is tough for the characters to make their ethical choices correctly, and sometimes they fall into the ethical taboo. Nguyen Thanh, a local literary scholar, in the book *Vietnamese Literature after Thirty Years of Innovation (1986-2016): Creation and Reception* (2017), points out: “Most remarkable in the pastoral novels after 1986 is the obsession with people’s tragedies because of various reasons: unsound customs, wars, miserable life and infantile ideologies from the command period, some faults of the land reform, and people’s depravations.” (T. Nguyen and Ho 269) The critics only see the sources of people’s tragedy as that belongs to the past but still do not realise the influence of contemporary matters. Some local novelists sang the praises of the beauty of Vietnamese rural culture, simultaneously they paid more attention to its shortcomings and negations that were chiefly described via some underdeveloped traditions and customs, superstition, and backward thoughts. They also wrote about some matters such as sex, love, and individual happiness, which were rarely demonstrated in the previous literature. With the strong support of a new ethical condition, the writers had lots of advantages to declare situations of characters’ moral problems and spread educational values via the writings.

About the traditional culture in rural areas of Vietnam, “rural culture” or “common culture” has become an indispensable part of pastoral life in this country. It existed among the community and played an inherent component of peasants’ life. After 1986, the rural novels focused on depicting this national tradition as a particular characteristic to provide the audiences with a lot of cultural colours, and people’s plentiful soul world, which can be seen through *The Wharf of Without Husbands* (1990) by Duong Huong, *Stories of Cuoi Village* (1991) by Le Luu, *A Land of Many Ghosts and Many People* (1988) by Nguyen Khac Truong, *The Dagged Board* (2004) by Mac Can, *The Three Others* (2006) by To Hoai, *The Age of Deities* (2008) by Hoang Minh Tuong, *Farewell to the Darkness* (2008) and *The Old Kho* (2014) by Ta Duy Anh, *At the Beginning* (2014) by Nguyen Binh Phuong, *Silence in the Abyss* (2017) by Do Bich Thuy, and so forth. These novels portrayed the positive images of traditional beliefs in peasants’ life. They also expressed some old and conservative aspects, which influenced people’s life and led to their ethical tragedies. The tradition of “wife-abduction” in the novel by Do Bich Thuy, for example, was a humanitarian voice for those who were living under some strict cultural situations. Wife-abduction mentioned a traditional custom of the H’mong minority, also called Mong or Meo, who primarily settled

in northwestern Vietnam. For the tradition, the two lovers would be dating on the same day and in the same place, and the male shall “catch” his lover. The girl also pretended to fight against and cried because she believes that these actions would make the marriage happier. After three days residing at the catcher’s house, the girl officially becomes a wife. In case the girl does not fall for the man, he is not allowed to abduct her. If the man ignores that fact and deliberately catches the lady, she can find ways to escape from his place within three days. If she fails to do that, she still is his wife. The excellent feature of wife-abduction is that it shows the men’s braveness and a true love for his sweetheart. It also manifests the H’mong ethnic minority’s freedom marriage and a way out for poor men who do not have enough money to afford wedding-presents. Besides, “It can be said that the wife-abduction tradition has a profoundly humanitarian meaning, affirming the freedom of marriage, contributing to the removal of some unsound customs such as ‘parents set where children sit’, challenges of wedding-presents, and suitable alliances...” (Diep) Unfortunately, some people make use of the tradition to “catch” their wives without any permission, which makes the custom transform into a frightening fact for the mountainous ladies and their family. To Hoai mentioned this type of cultural topic in his very famous short story *The Couple A Phu* (1952) in the before-1986-literature that depicted a pitiful victim of the tradition via the life of My. This H’mong girl suffered much misery in her husband’s house, and then the light of the communist revolution liberated her. Being different from To Hoai, the after-1986-writer Do Bich Thuy chose an alternative way to approach the same matter in her novel *Silence in Abyss*. There were no any rescues for both the catcher and the abducted girl, inversely the price they had to pay was a tragic life.

Giang Senh Vu’s plan of catching Giang Thi Sua (or Sua) was failed because of the appearance of a third party, Trang A Phong (or Phong), who unilaterally loved Sua and suddenly knew the couple’s intention. When the lady opened her eyes in a strange room, and the catcher was not her lover, she was feeling awkward and exceedingly painful. It was not a happy dream as she had imagined. Sua was confined to Phong’s room. The rich man violated Sua brutally. He treated her like a sex slave. She escaped from the terrible house, went to the forest, and stood on the edge of an abyss. If there were not the appearance of Chia, who was Phong’s dumb sister-in-law, just at the moment when Sua intended to commit suicide, she would jump down to the abyss. There were no other choices, and the poor girl had to turn back to the catcher’s place and undergone her ethical plight: in front of her was Phong, while in her heart was Giang Senh Vu (or Vu), between the two she did not know how to continue her life. “How to live on? How to see the

sun rising everyday, falling everyday? How to continue to think about Vu without being heart-broken? Sua does not see anything worth stepping forward.” (Do 36) She wanted to end her life by hanging herself. The dumb girl appeared timely to stop her suicide. Later then, surprisingly, Chia gave Sua the signal for running away, and Sua took such rare chance to leave the house. However, when Sua met Vu by chance on her fleeing way, she gave up the intention that her lover could not understand the reasons. “Does Sua want to decamp? She does. However, Sua cannot stand seeing Vu like this. Sua has nothing left for Vu. He does not deserve gnawing a maize that was gnawed by an inhumane man. No Mong man has to do it, the better he is, the less he has to.” (Do 45) Sua’s ethical choice was based on her deep love for Vu and her moral consciousness, which was related to her virgin situation. Out of weariness, she let things run its course. The pretty girl became a shadow of herself. She silently borne her husband’s daily sex. Sua tried to do housework to postpone sexual affairs that she was fully soundless whenever it happened. On one occasion, the wife decided to flee from her husband. Ironically, she found out she was pregnant. She did not want any Phong’s children and wished to leave out the foetus. The pregnant woman came to the river to drown herself, but the water was not deep enough. She climbed up the hill and rolled over on the ground, but nothing happened to her. Then the baby was born. It was like a string of fate tightening Sua, causing her to be attached to this family forever. The son also made his father change personalities, but the baby did not much improve his mother’s feelings. She was still a quiet shape: “The shadow is able to walk, work, cook, nurse, pamper her child, who is in front of Phong’s face, but there is no way for him to catch her.” (Do 141) The lady’s manner and frigidity made him so angry that he committed an incestuous case with his sister-in-law, Chia. The true cause of his ethical taboo is that he wanted to revenge the wife. While discovering the true nature of her brother-in-law’s action, in which he only used her as a vengeance tool, Chia came to the abyss, where she saved Sua’s life before, and jumped down to the darkness. Simultaneously, Phong found out his true ethical identity as an adopted son, and, along with his emptiness about the marriage, he jumped down to the same abyss, where he knew was exactly the position of Chia’s corpse. Sua came to the cliff and felt that “Life is ending now. Sua only feels that thing when winds are blowing from the bottom of the abyss that seem to dragging Sua down.” (Do 205) There were no any liberations for them all. The remains were moral pangs. All came from Trang A Phong’s wrong ethical choice at the beginning, and then from a series of ethical chaos among characters’ thought, behaviours, and actions. The most underlying reason for this tragedy is people’s attitude to the wife-abduction or

the traditional heritage. They should have paid respect to the tradition, which is an expression of morality. Once people break through the ethical values, it will cause troubles for them. The wind still blew up from the bottom of the abyss in the novel, which could be the ethical - moral wind, to touch the hearts of those who were living in the present life.

With the tragedy brought about by rural culture to people, Vietnamese novelists after 1986 tried to show the tragic life of love, sexuality, and marriage. The aim was to break the cultural and ideological remnants from the feudal society, to clarify some conservative and backward concepts and customs, and to serve the development of farmers. Compared with literature before 1975, this content was an improvement of the local novel. The pastoral characters described in the previous texts were a collective image, a tool of revolutionary war, a figure that had no personal feelings but only patriotic ideals. Correspondingly, the ethical choice made by peasant characters in the before-1986-literature was one kind of collective ethical choice. The situation was different after 1986 when the local authors not only expressed the collective characteristics of farmers but also pointed out their personal ones. The local fictionists were concerned about the private world of pastoral characters, reflecting their feelings, aspirations, dreams, desires, but most of their wishes were reduced to a tragic state. The reason for each person's tragedy is different. For Nguyen Van in *The Wharf of Without Husbands* it is his mechanical ideal; For the old Kho in the same name novel, it is his sacrificial belief; while for the protagonists in *Silence in Abyss*, it is love, marriage, and the tradition. For Nguyen Binh Phuong in *At the Beginning* it is the sexual desires of Hien and her mother-in-law, Lien, which make them make some ethical mistakes. Because Tinh did not satisfy Hien's sexual appetency, the wife had to please herself by some dramatic ways including contemplating her own naked body and rubbing her breast onto rocks. As a married woman, she even perpetrated two ethical taboos including seeking sexual satisfaction via the writer Phung and accomplicing with her mother-in-law's adultery. The two female characters' ethical identities were not the same, but the similar point between the two was their unsatisfied sexual tragedies. This is a feministic voice of Nguyen Binh Phuong for a topic that seemingly has long been forgotten in the literature about the rural theme. People's demands needed to be seen carefully and met fully in an ethical perspective. If their libido were either ignored or were satisfied in an immoral way, ethical taboo would emerge, which influenced human being's real values.

The manifestation of the farmer's matters was also a kind of new humanitarianism in Vietnamese pastoral novels after 1986. In particular, the

revelation of peasants' love dreams and sexual aspirations was a remarkable contribution of the local authors in comparison with the previous literature. Through these contents, the readers were able to explore the characters' moral conflicts, ethical plights, and their ethical tragedy. Since they could not resolve the contradiction between private desire and reality, they were all stuck in this tragedy. On account of the ethical dilemma, sometimes the characters broke the ethical prohibitions that were majorly homicide and incest. The little boy Thuong in the novel *Farewell to the Darkness* (2008) by Ta Duy Anh, for instance, with the help of the secret evil force, unintentionally killed several lives in the village. Although no one else knew about the perpetrator of the killings, he recognised the true face of the terrible crimes. For this reason, he was finally determined to say goodbye to the darkness in order to protect others' lives. The old Phung, another character in the novel, often fabricated false things against others. Phung had calumniated his uncle in the land reform, and the man was so angry that he vomited blood leading to death. One of the most outrageous crimes of the character was that he frequently raped his daughter-in-law. When his son uncovered the incest, he took a knife and came to see his father. "You are my child, if I tell you to die, you have to die. How worthy is your wife? If I borrow her once, nothing matters. Not only me, there are millions of people out there willing to do the same" (Ta 187), said the unethical father. The son shouted and cut a leg of a buffalo calf off, and went away. Since then Phung freely violated the poor daughter-in-law until she gave birth to a deformed child, and both of them had been kicked out of the house by the old man. The price he had to pay for his incestuous crime was unexpectedly falling into a well and died painfully. He was unscrupulous and did not deserve to be a father. The contemporary fictionists realised and analysed such issues of the ethical taboo. The purpose was to show the evil nature of human beings on the one hand, and to provide the moral example and edificatory values for the readers on the other hand.

Most of the sinners who have fallen into the ethical taboo were influenced by the ethical context or the ethical environment. In other words, the environment of pastoral communities had a severe impact on the development of people's personality and quality. Even a pure and beautiful girl like Hien in the novel *At the Beginning* sometimes wants to stab her vicious husband, Tinh. This means that under the influence of the violence, human being's moral and ethical values are likely to be emasculated and corrupted if they cannot make righteous ethical choices. The local novelists who wrote pastoral writings in Vietnam after 1986 have reminded readers of ethical values, which are available via edificatory functions of literature as defined by ELC: "As long as it is literature, whether

ancient or contemporary, Western or Chinese, edification is its basic function. It can even be said that there is no literature without the function of education.” (Nie 249) Reflecting on some moral novelistic models, the readers obtain ethical lessons that allow them to be truly ethical individuals.

Conclusion

Generally, according to the introduction of a new ethical condition, which was inextricably linked with the political and economic innovation led by the VCP since 1986, the local writers stood on a new perspective to reflect and evaluate the rural life. The new ethical basis allowed them to recall and analyse some sensitive issues in the history that had not been demonstrated by the previous literature for some reasons. The fictionists also focused on depicting peasants’ internal matters related to traditions, customs, beliefs, culture, and lifestyles. They also manifested some contemporary problems in rural society such as families and clans’ fights, authority and position conflicts, individual and collective contradictions. The primary content of the local pastoral novels after 1986, especially the images of peasant characters, described both good and bad aspects. It aimed at embodying the true nature of life, which is a Sphinx organism that contains both human factors and animal factors. These two sides of the pastoral society showed the different angles of Vietnamese society and culture. Among them, the novelists discovered some people’s ethical issues such as the farmer’s ethical identity in the families struggles, their ethical dilemma and ethical tragedy in the land revolution, the ethical taboo in the incarceration of the undeveloped customs and traditions. As a local author’s title “A Land of Many Ghosts and Many People” (1988), the Vietnamese rural community was an intricate combination of good and evil, demons and human beings, light and darkness. Whether it is a reflection on the past or a depiction of contemporary life, positively or negatively, the pastoral theme is one of the biggest ones of Vietnamese literature after 1986 that offers some valuable lessons to readers.

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