

Brain Text and Vietnamese Novelists' Ethical Choices Since 1986

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Abstract After the 6th Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam in December 1986, innovation and opening-up policies were implemented in many fields, including literature and the arts. The change in the ethical environment—along with the context of reform, the market economy and international integration—helped local novels to reap many achievements, but it also unearthed non-educational works. These two aspects of the issue relate intimately to how an author writes a novel. The characteristics of a novelist's ethical identity are exceptional: novelists are both citizen and artist. Their writings are the textualisation of their brain texts and reveal the ethical choices made by each individual author while writing. If the novel is based on a valuable brain text, the work improves human truth, goodness and beauty. If, however, a writer's brain text does not contain teaching value, it cannot be considered a genuine literary work but should be forgotten or banned from publication and circulation. This article applies the theory of brain text (脑文本), an exclusive invention of Professor Nie Zhenzhao, to analyse the ethical choices of Vietnamese novelists from 1986 to the present. This study demonstrates (i) the uniqueness of brain text theory, (ii) the novel as a fruition of the textualisation of a brain text and (iii) the didactic function of contemporary novels on the basis of the brain text of Vietnamese novelists.¹

Keywords brain text; Nie Zhenzhao; Vietnamese novel; ethical choice; teaching function

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Introduction

Professor Nie Zhenzhao has affirmed that the entire history of human civilisation is the endlessly repeating process of natural and ethical selection. Ethical selection is implemented by education and it works through literature. People can only achieve edification through moral models (道德榜样) in literary writings, thereby helping humanity to complete the process of doing good and avoiding evil. That is, literature can guide humanity's ethical selection towards becoming moral persons.¹ Professor Nie's point of view illuminates two vital issues. The first one is that the writer, as an individual ethical identity, also constantly makes his or her own ethical choices to pursue an ethical selection process. The second is that literary creation and literary works are purposeful; they not only thirst to provide instructional value to readers but also to perfect the creator's personality. Literary creation is an activity that expressly manifests the writer's ethical choices and intentions to become a moral being. The author's choices are expressed through the work and what belongs to it, such as its theme, topic, content, characters and literary quality. It is arguable that the didactic values behind characters' ethical choices are one of the most direct channels reflecting an author's artistic thoughts. However, authors' ethical choices have a broader scope and connotation than those of characters in a novel. Writers are not only the originators of those characters but, in their creative animations, they must choose genres, topics, themes, narrative strategies and linguistic styles. These aspects are the core of a "writer's ethical choices", which cannot be separated from the author's brain text and the moral value of literary creation.

Vietnamese literature since *Đổi mới* (Renovation, 1986) has witnessed dramatic innovation in many aspects.² Changes in the ethical environment have required local writers to reform but have also created the conditions for them to experiment with new things. The ultimate goal of the renovation is to nourish human morality—that is, to consummate human ethical selection. In the field of novel writing, local authors have shown their courageous commitment to many forbidden territories after the Vietnam War (1954–1975), including complex cases of feudal history and land reform in Northern Vietnam in the mid-twentieth century. They have bravely looked back at historical issues and found lessons for contemporary life. Those are Vietnamese writers' accurate ethical choices.

1 See Nie, *Introduction* (Chinese edition) 6–7.

2 See A. D. Nguyen, "The Ethical Environment" 939–49.

Brain Text: An Exclusive Invention of Professor Nie Zhenzhao

According to the theory of ethical literary criticism (ELC), a writer's literary work is adjacent to their brain text: authors' works are the written expression of their literary brain text (文学脑文本). Accordingly, the novels created by Vietnamese writers from 1986 to the present are the results of a filtering and textual performance of each writer's brain text. This processing of a brain text is tied to the didactic function of the work and these two processes have an interrelated and inseparable connection that clearly shows each writer's ethical choices in creating literary works. Any analysis of the characters' choices in the novel or the writers' choices in their creative activity cannot be isolated from this process. As Professor Nie asserted:

Since literary works describe everyone's ethical choices, the criticism of literature naturally analyses the ethical choices in literary works. Of course, a deeper theory related to ethical literary criticism is brain text (脑文本); spiritual, psychoanalysis and emotional analysis in literature are all based on brain text. Because the human spirit, psychology and emotions all exist in brain text, the analysis of the human spirit, psychology and emotion should be an analysis of brain text¹. (Nie, Wu and Chen 73)

Human beings (both novelists and fictional characters) exist within a framework of many constantly evolving ethical choices that reflect each individual's brain text. Their mental, psychological and emotional aspects, as well as their thoughts, behaviours and actions, are founded on the brain text. The ethical choices of Vietnamese novelists since 1986 while writing their novels (expressed in the selection of thematic and artistic forms) indicate their choice of how to textualise their brain text system into specific works. The text must mobilise memory and simultaneously use the vocal organ to convert memories into sound signs/symbols so others can receive the specific content of a particular brain text. The exciting thing is that the process of forming, storing and transmitting a brain text is the continuous, cyclical and shifting within the human brain of an individual (in this case, the novelist) to another object, brain or individual (in this case, the readers). Before being transferred into sounds, signs or physical texts, the brain text only exists in the brain of an individual, which is private and cannot be read or perceived

1 Translations provided are by Anh Dan Nguyen unless otherwise noted.

by others.¹

Although the existence of brain text is personal and private, if it is exposed to the outside, it can deliver the shared memories of many people and can thus construct the so-called “collective brain text” or “the brain text of community.” The brain text survives in the brain through memory; one of the conditions for exposing it is by memory/recall; there is thus no need for people to die just for the brain to be damaged or cannot remember or lose memory permanently, conditions for the existence of brain text is no longer. The invention of characters (文字) thus guarantees the existence or persistence of the brain text. Humanity’s civilisational achievements are in this way increasingly thickened. To allow the brain text to reach readers in a sustainable, convenient and transmittable way, novelists materialise or textualise their brain texts—they convert them into material texts. The material text is the objective existence (the physical manifestation) of the brain text. Only after being transformed into a material text can the brain text be known and received by others. Only then does it have meaning and value. This is the nature of literary creation. As Professor Nie has stated: “Fundamentally, almost all literary works result from writers’ retrieving, assembling, processing, rewriting, storing and representing the brain text. Without brain texts, writers would not produce texts and thus there would not be written texts or digital texts” (“Sphinx Factor” 194). Every writer’s creative activity must start from their brain text. The methods and skills that each person uses to process their brain text constitute a writer’s style. Vietnamese novelists are no exception. Each specific author turns his/her brain texts into works based on the artistic intentions and messages they want to bear. Vietnamese novelists from 1986 up to the present form an extensive group that follows many different trends in presenting their brain text to readers and manifesting the “collective brain text” or “brain text of community.”

In Vietnamese novels since *Đổi mới*, each author’s artistic ideology is prominent in depicting their brain text. His/her thought is integrated into each literary work, which is the emanation through processing operations for perceiving, understanding and interpreting objective and abstract things (i.e. thinking activities) thanks to the brain concept (脑概念). These thought manipulations result in brain texts. There are many forms of brain text, but the writer, in particular, perceives the world and accumulates resources in the brain for literary activities. They then have to abstract and conceptualise those perceptions to establish the brain concept. The human brain relies on certain literary forms to think and combine its brain concepts and the brain text created through this process is the literary brain text (文学脑文

1 See Nie, “Ethical Literary Criticism” 12–13.

本). In their thoughts and practical actions, each person thus holds countless brain texts that can be characterised in different ways—that is, as philosophical, artistic, scientific, political or historical brain texts. These types of brain text take shape depending on how its owner intends to use it in real life. Each owner thus acts as an “author” when generating a brain text. Because each author is distinguishable, the characteristics, nature and level of these texts differ. When these owners share the texts in their brains outside (by speaking or materialising them), others gain a genuine awareness of the content, characteristics, properties and level of specific brain text. Literary brain texts are not inherited. They are limited according to the situation of the human brain. In literary activities thus ought to materialise brain texts to ensure that the writer’s artistic ideas are conveyed to others. The premise of this procedure is the thoughtful manipulation of the brain via the brain concept, which is a thinking tool. The combination of the signifier and signified brain concept forms thought. The human thinking process is a continuous combination of brain concepts. The brain text thus has a decisive influence on human thought and behaviour. Human thinking, consciousness, choices, judgments, emotions, actions and ethics are all determined by the brain text and what a person’s brain is like will decide that person’s virtue.¹ In the case of contemporary Vietnamese novelists, each writer’s brain text determines the quality of that writer and of his/her works. That is the reaction of their ethical choices in fiction writing activities.

Brain text occupies a crucial position in the theoretical system of ELC. As Professor Nie has emphasised: “Without brain text, there would not be oral, written, or literature for telling and writing. Without brain text, there would be no thinking, writing, editing, telling, or memory” (*Introduction* [English edition] 183). Before appearing in physical and tangible language (e.g. written texts and digital languages), humans used brain text to establish their civilisation, which is a novel insight by Professor Nie Zhenzhao, who has provided all these new terms (e.g. brain text, brain concept and literary brain text) to delve deeply into the nature of human language generation and application. This invention is very profound and creative. If Ferdinand de Saussure is one of the fathers of modern linguistics, then Professor Nie can also be considered the father of primitive linguistics. The theory of the brain text asks us to reconsider the origin of language (as well as the interconnection between brain text, language and written text) and the definition of literature.² Brain text theory certifies the basis of artistic exercise and literary composition. The act of literary creation is an extraordinary mission. Not everyone can become a writer:

1 See Nie, “The Forming Mechanism” 33.

2 See Nie, *Introduction* (English edition) 16, 183.

only those who can produce literary brain texts can be writers. Suppose a person owns a literary brain text but is not qualified to process and communicate it to the outside in a suitable form; it is also impossible for them to compose a literary work. There is thus an inseparable connection between the ethical choices in forming a literary brain text and making it into a literary work. Writers create instructional values to implement the didactic function of literature. They should therefore make legitimate ethical choices; otherwise, writers and their literary works cannot help to perfect humanity's ethical selection.

Textualisation of Literary Brain Texts and the Fruition of the Novel

The brain text is established during learning and education. Due to the richness and diversity of this process, however, the brain text formed in this way is also very plentiful. The fundamental activity for learning is reading. The content of what is read is transformed into brain text. The more a person reads, the more brain text he/she gains; his/her brain text becomes more prosperous and more diverse with reading. Along with reading texts (where literary works are a valuable channel for forming brain text), every individual's life experience is another necessary source for building brain text.¹ Writers are unique because of their experiences and knowledge, which are essential for generating valuable literary brain texts. The learning and teaching process is very distinctive in the novel writing activities of Vietnamese novelists from 1986 to the present on account of the dissimilarities in the different generations of writers (e.g. pre-1975 generation, post-1975 generation, post-*Đổi mới* generation, 8X generation and Gen Z). Specifically, each writer's knowledge and experience differ, so their novels, too, come in various realms.

Because the level of brain text creation is not the same in each writer, the choice of novelistic theme also differs. Even if authors choose the same topic, how they exploit it will not be the same. The themes present in Vietnamese novels have expanded since *Đổi mới*. The four major thematic types are historical, war, rural and urban novels.² Generally, authors who came from the battlefield wrote about the Vietnam War. Their novels are produced based on literary brain texts acquired through their personal experiences. For examples, Nguyen Quang Ha (1941–) joined the army in 1967, serving at the Thua Thien Hue battlefield, where he worked secretly with farmers in remote areas. These experiences helped him write the novel *The Concave Area*³ (2008). Chu Lai (1946–) was a special forces soldier

1 See Zhang, "Ethical Literary Criticism" 87.

2 See A. D. Nguyen, "The Ethical Environment" 939–40.

3 *Vùng lõm* in Vietnamese.

in Saigon. His novels, such as *The Beggar of the Past*¹ (1991) and *Three Times and Once*² (1999), involve the atmosphere of the Southern battlefield, with the exception of *Red Rain*³ (2016), which was set in the Thanh Co Campaign of 1972. Nguyen Tri Huan (1947–) became an Air Defence–Air Force soldier in 1965. He was later sent to the Central battlefield, where he spent his life with the 3rd Golden Star Division fighting in Binh Dinh province; this forms the primary backdrop of the novel *Swallows Fly*⁴ (1988). Trung Trung Dinh (1949–) fought for many years in Central Vietnam and the Central Highlands. Imprints of these war years can be found in his novel *Lost in the Forest*⁵ (2010). Meanwhile, Khuat Quang Thuy (1950–), author of outstanding novels such as *Firewalls*⁶ (2004) and *Direct Fight*⁷ (2015), served in the army in 1967, fighting in fierce war zones such as Quang Tri and the Central Highlands. During the war, Bao Ninh (1952–) joined the army on the B-3 Central Highlands front and retired from active service in 1975. His novel *The Sorrow of War*⁸ (1987) carries the shadow of his experience.

There are also many novels about the Vietnam War written by authors with this type of military identity, such as *The Deep Area*⁹ (2012) by To Nhuan Vy (1941–), *Sacred Forest, Pure Water*¹⁰ (2014) by Tran Van Tuan (1949–), *The Wilderness*¹¹ (2014) by Suong Nguyet Minh (1958–) and *Sandy Love*¹² (2016) by Nguyen Quang Lap (1956–). Because they were once soldiers in the war and harboured many thoughts about their experiences, they formed literary brain texts related to the past when they were a part of war. The destiny of this generation of writers is probably living, fighting, surviving and writing about war. The period of living through war formed the rough material for their novel writing and led to reality, thoughts and feelings processed in the brain text of each writer. These brain texts are meticulously related to war; their inevitably result in works written on war. The type of literary brain text produced by soldier writers differs from that generated

1 *Ăn mày dĩ vãng.*

2 *Ba lần và một lần.*

3 *Mưa đỏ.*

4 *Chim én bay.*

5 *Lạc rừng.*

6 *Những bức tường lửa.*

7 *Đổi chiến.*

8 *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh.*

9 *Vùng sâu.*

10 *Rừng thiêng nước trong.*

11 *Miền hoang.*

12 *Tình cát.*

by those not involved in war. Unlike the writers listed above, authors such as Da Ngan (1952–), Do Phan (1956–), Ho Anh Thai (1960–), Y Ban (1961–), Nguyen Viet Ha (1962–), Dang Than (1964–), Nguyen Binh Phuong (1965–), Le Anh Hoai (1966–) and Nguyen Danh Lam (1972–) have focused on depicting urban issues. These novelists are intimately familiar with Vietnamese society before and after *Đổi mới*, particularly the social and human fluctuations present in the ethical context of subsidies, the market economy and international integration. Their works are filled with the breath of urban life and its moral downsides. The tragedy of love, marriage and family is passionately described in the novel *The Tiny Family*¹ (2005) by Da Ngan. Meanwhile, Dang Than's 3.3.3.9 [*Fragments of Earthly/Naked Souls*]² (2011) presents the chaos of social morality and the abuse of evil. Do Phan's novels, such as *Almost Living*³ (2013), *Flies Are Flies*⁴ (2014) and *Falling on an Illusory Day*⁵ (2015) point out the conflicts between the ethical identities of the urban intelligentsia and those who wish to become townspeople. These novels also declare the risks of traditional cultural breakdown, the ecological environment and other matters that emerged through the power of money.

Novelists like Ho Anh Thai (author of *Ten and One Nights*,⁶ 2006; *The Human Realm Rings the Doomsday Bell*,⁷ 2009), Nguyen Binh Phuong (who wrote *Children Who Died of Old Age*,⁸ 1994; *The Absentee*,⁹ 1999; *Declining Memory*,¹⁰ 2000; *Sit*,¹¹ 2013; *At the Beginning*,¹² 2014) and Nguyen Viet Ha (*God's Opportunity*,¹³ 1999; *His Trinity*,¹⁴ 2014; and *Citizen Novel*,¹⁵ 2019) are interested in attacking high-ranking intellectual figures—including teachers, professors, artists, writers and mandarins—to expose the dark side of Vietnamese society after *Đổi mới*. In addition, Nguyen

1 *Gia đình bé mọn.*

2 3.3.3.9 [*những mảnh hồn trần*].

3 *Gần như là sống.*

4 *Ruồi là ruồi.*

5 *Rụng xuống ngày hư ảo.*

6 *Mười lẻ một đêm.*

7 *Cõi người rung chuông tận thế.*

8 *Những đứa trẻ chết già.*

9 *Người đi vắng.*

10 *Trí nhớ suy tàn.*

11 *Ngồi.*

12 *Thoạt kì thủy.*

13 *Cơ hội của Chúa.*

14 *Ba ngôi của người.*

15 *Thị dân tiểu thuyết.*

Danh Lam delves into the burgher's loneliness in modern life. These authors and their characters must answer the questions "Who am I?" and "Why do I live?" The protagonists in the novels *Amidst the Earthly Encirclement*¹ (2005), *Life Outside the Door*² (2014) and *Amidst the Lost Flow*³ (2015) often have to search for their true ethical destiny. Their adventure is always full of obstacles, and sometimes they pay with their lives.

Novelists attached to the countryside—such as To Hoai (1920–2014), Dao Thang (1946–), Nguyen Khac Truong (1946–), Duong Huong (1949–), Trinh Thanh Phong (1950–), Ta Duy Anh (1959–) and Do Bich Thuy (1975–)—engage in rural reflection. Their literary brain texts analyse the colourful life of countryside society and the fate of farmers. Since 1986, Vietnamese researchers have witnessed a stream of novels about land reform in North Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s. Typical works in this genre include *Stories of Cuoi Village*⁴ (1991) by Le Luu (1942–2022), *The Three Others*⁵ (2006) by To Hoai, *Farewell to the Darkness*⁶ (2008) and *The Old Kho*⁷ (2014) by Ta Duy Anh, *Hurricane*⁸ (2008) by Nguyen Phan Hach (1944–2019) and *Who Knows Hell or Heaven*⁹ (2010) by Nguyen Khac Phe (1939–). Vietnamese pastoral novels since 1986 also portray the struggles among rural clans for reputation, power and interests, in which the characters confront ethical tragedies. The novels *A Land of Many Ghosts and Many People*¹⁰ (1988) by Nguyen Khac Truong, *The Riverbank of Without Husband*¹¹ (1990) by Duong Huong and *The Village Ghost*¹² (2002) by Trinh Thanh Phong are powerful portrayals of farmers' calamities. The local patriarchal culture and feudal customs also lead to adversity. Do Bich Thuy's *Silence in the Abyss*¹³ (2017) is an excellent and haunting story about the miserable fate of women oppressed by depraved customs and the patriarchy.¹⁴

1 Giữa vòng vây trần gian.

2 Cuộc đời ngoài cửa.

3 Giữa dòng chảy lạc.

4 Chuyện làng Cuội.

5 Ba người khác.

6 Giã biệt bóng tối.

7 Lão Kho.

8 Cuồng phong.

9 Biết đâu địa ngục thiên đàng.

10 Mảnh đất lắm người nhiều ma.

11 Bến không chồng.

12 Ma làng.

13 Lặng yên dưới vực sâu.

14 See A. D. Nguyen, "The Ethical Choice" 47–58.

Writers passionate about history—such as Nguyen Xuan Khanh (1933–2021), Nguyen Quang Than (1936–2017), Hoang Quoc Hai (1938–), Tran Thuy Mai (1954–), Vo Thi Hao (1956–), Tran Thanh Canh (1959–), Bui Anh Tan (1966–) and Phung Van Khai (1973–)—produce historical novels. The historical novel in Vietnam traces its roots back to the medieval period and has developed to the present day, and such novels have flourished within the new ethical environment since 1986. The brain text writers at this period played an essential role in the blossoming of historical novels. Local novelists have sought to rediscover and reanalyse Vietnamese history from various perspectives in the spirit of democracy and looked directly at the past to be fair to the present. The authors have decoded the obscure points, hidden corners and deep mysteries of history as inspired by profound assumptions, demystification and contemplation. Historical novels since 1986 have thus become personal impressions, experiences and reflections.¹ This change has transformed writers' historical brain texts (i.e. about historical knowledge) into literary brain texts (in which the light of the literary imagination operates through history). The novels *Storms of the Royal Court*² (2003) by Hoang Quoc Hai, *Secret of Imperial Harem*³ (2012) and *Nguyen Trai*⁴ (two volumes, 2010) by Bui Anh Tan and *Queen Mother Tu Du*⁵ (two volumes, 2019) by Tran Thuy Mai resonate with the fierce struggle of royal power and palace in-fighting, thus highlighting the good and evil inherent in the characters. The merits and crimes of some of the controversial figures in Vietnamese history, such as Tran Thu Do (1209–1264), Ho Quy Ly (1336–1407), Nguyen Trai (1380–1442) and Le Loi (1385–1433) have been evaluated with a more even hand in the novels of Hoang Quoc Hai, Nguyen Quang Than, Tran Thanh Canh and Nguyen Xuan Khanh. Tran Thanh Canh has tried to create a line of historical novels about one of the most brilliant dynasties in Vietnamese feudal history, the Tran Dynasty (1226–1400), through three works: *Saint Tran* (2017), *Tran Thu Do* (2020) and *Tran Nguyen Han*⁶ (2021). Nguyen Xuan Khanh, meanwhile, has made a remarkable impression with his cultural-historical novels, and his *Our Lady of the Forest Palace*⁷ (2006) and *Bring Rice to the Temple*⁸ (2011) resonate with unique cultural life and local customs, while also

1 See V. H. Nguyen 36.

2 *Bão táp cung đình.*

3 *Bí mật hậu cung.*

4 *Nguyễn Trãi.*

5 *Từ Dụ thái hậu.*

6 *Đức thánh Trần, Trần Thủ Độ* and *Trần Nguyên Hân*, respectively.

7 *Mẫu thượng ngàn.*

8 *Đội gạo lên chùa.*

depicting the ethical conflicts between that local culture and other cultural entities.

On the whole, the novelistic content that Vietnamese writers since 1986 have provided to readers is the fruition of the textualisation of their literary brain texts. There are individual similarities and differences for each author as they materialise this brain text. This characteristic has led to various literary trends that have shaped the diverse and rich appearance of Vietnamese novels. Textualising the literary brain texts is, meanwhile, strictly attributed to each writer's ethical choices. Each particular novel is a specific embodiment of the writer's ethical choices when writing, and these ethical choice since *Đổi mới* are conveyed in two striking aspects: content and technique. One of the most important contributions of writers of war novels is that they portrayed the Vietnam War and its victims through a new humanitarian, regardless of whether those victims are Vietnamese or American. For pastoral novels, in addition to portraying local colour over time, one of the novelists' bravest ethical choices is to enter fearlessly the "forbidden area" of land reform—a campaign that led to many achievements but also resulted in many mistakes by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV). By these choices, Vietnamese authors have boldly rephrased a bitter page in Vietnam's history. More vitally, they have analysed human tragedy in a very exceptional ethical context to supply moral enlightenment for the present. The urban novel, meanwhile, has a contemporary rhythm that shows many painful of the aspects of post-war Vietnamese society, such as its moral crisis, human loneliness, urbanisation, ecology, feminist problems and sexual instincts. Last but not least, historical novels since 1986 have used historical and fictional relationships to re-interpret history. The past has been dissected from many angles, which provides readers a new experience of Vietnamese history.

From the creative perspective, Vietnamese writers' ethical choices are situated in the ethical context of the literature of *Đổi mới*. Innovating in the art of fiction has become a vital requirement for writers. If these authors cannot meet the demands of artistic renovation, the community of readers with increasingly sophisticated aesthetic tastes and expectations will no longer be interested in them. Novelists have thus reformed their artistic concepts, diversified their modes of expression and engaged in structural and narrative innovation.¹ They have thus actualised the poetic characteristics of a new literary period, distinguishing it from the previous one. The physique of contemporary Vietnamese novels has become more muscular.

From Brain Text to Executing the Didactic Functions of the Novel

The writer's ethical choices determine the value of his or her literary works. This

1 See A. D. Nguyen, "The Ethical Choice" 39–59.

is clear for Vietnamese novels since 1986. Excellent novels concern human fate, the ethical situation and the moral state. True literary works guide people towards humanism and the values of truth–goodness–beauty (真善美), thus improving the human world in a positive way by successfully executing the teaching function of contemporary Vietnamese literature. Banned books,¹ meanwhile, partly show that the writer’s literary brain text is not appropriate to the ethical criteria accepted by society. Such works have no rational educational value. Without an edifying function, literature in general—and novels in particular—cannot survive, as Professor Nie has stated: “As long as it is literature, no matter ancient or contemporary, Western or Chinese literature, teaching is its fundamental function. It can even be said that literature without teaching function does not exist” (“On the Ethical Value” 14). The ultimate role of literature is to help humans become moral and then to consummate each person’s ethical selection. This function has an obvious purpose, and it is valid in all literary genres and periods. It does not change the utmost aspiration despite fluctuations in the ethical environment. As Professor Nie has argued: “Literature, no matter if it is in the written form or oral form, embodies social institutions, laws and rules derived from ethical choices. The moral teaching function of literature remains unchanged despite the changes of conditions” (*Introduction* [English edition] 165). His proclamation thus warns writers as they work on their novel: without brain texts that contain edifying values, the work will be unreasonable. In fact, Vietnamese literature since 1986 has witnessed many “không tải” (literally, “empty” in English or “空载” in Chinese) novels.² Although the ethical environment dictates the style in which brain texts are formed and despite the changes in the environment, the absolute function of literature has not vanished.

The moral teaching function of literature can only be realised when literature transforms the recipients’ brain texts. Readers receive the knowledge and education described in the work by thinking; they turn the content over their thoughts and build new brain texts after reading literary works. The dominant aim of this process is to acquire the edifying value from the work and to start a self-education process. Readers can then adjust their behaviour, change their thinking and inaugurate a better life. As Geoff Hall pointed out: “For ethical criticism, the first and most urgent question is to explore the meaning of the text as also a search to establish ethical

1 E.g. *The Crystal Messenger* (*Thiên sứ*, 1988) by Pham Thi Hoai; *The Age of Deities* (*Thời của thánh thần*, 2008) by Hoang Minh Tuong; *Lovesick* (*Dại tình*, 2009) by Bui Binh Thi; *Chains* (*Sợi xích*, 2010) by Le Kieu Nhu; and *Queen Termite* (*Mối chúa*, 2017) by Dang Khau (another pen name of Ta Duy Anh).

2 See A. D. Nguyen, “The Ethical Environment” 945–7.

significance. Is this text worth reading/good/bad, why might that be, i.e. how can a reading of this text contribute to a better life, whether the critic be a Marxist, an ecocritical reader, feminist or neoliberal, or perhaps some combination of these or other ethical positions" (63). The didactic function of literature is for everyone, and the difference lies in how receptive each person is and how well they convert what they read into brain text. From ancient times, literary texts have been a guideline for how people become human. In the phrases "learning to be human" or "learning to be a moral human", ELC not only emphasises "learning" but also focuses on the role of "teaching" and "moral". A human being needs to learn and to be educated. Teaching and learning have an intimate relationship with each other. ELC attaches significance to the teaching and learning methods that help a man become a moral person.¹

In Vietnamese novels since 1986, readers can witness how a lack of instruction can lead to immoral people and actions. Many ethical choices break ethical taboos and violate the moral standards of society portrayed in contemporary Vietnamese novels. The people who make these choices are often uneducated and need more adequate instruction from school and family. Characters are often affected by the violence of those around them, including the violent tendencies of family members. They are also negatively influenced by the ethical environment (e.g. the imperfect side of the market economy and international integration). An outstanding example of this is Lep, a male character in the pastoral novel *Sugarcane River* (2004) by Dao Thang. Since childhood, he lived in a community of hired farmers who talked smut, told obscene stories and loved loud singing as well as eating and drinking indiscriminately. The man is the result of a secret affair between the landlord and a poor woman. Lep thus has to live with a hidden ethical identity and needs to receive a proper education. These facts transform the male farmer into a demon as part of this fate as a deformed man; he is an illustrative Sphinx factor: one part is human (an unwed child) and one part is animal (his appearance is heteromorphic, like a fish or a creature of rivers). When Lep is a man, he knows his human ethical identity. When he is an animal, Lep lets his instincts act freely. In many cases, Lep is controlled by a natural will that kills his human part. He thus engages in ungratefulness, violence, rape and murder in his village. Witnessing his evil, Mr Nghia, another character in the novel, thought: "He was born in evil spirits, raised in bitter hatred, and educated in an unnatural way, which has stimulated feud and division. The conciliation of evil consolidates him" (Dao 161). Growing up in an awful ethical context, with a lack of rational education, surrounded by hatred and cruelty, Lep turns into a devil's minion. Notably, in his ethical identity, he is an uneducated farmer, but not everyone

1 See Nie, "Analysis" 6.

with that identity acts inhumanely.

Losing rational control over the natural will is an elementary explanation for the poor ethical choices in some of the novels on land reform. In pastoral novels by Le Luu, To Hoai, Ta Duy Anh, Nguyen Khac Phe, Nguyen Phan Hach and Dao Thang (mentioned above), illiterate farmers are dominated by unacceptable motives such as greed, revenge, power, status and sexual desire, which incite them to engage in unrighteous actions. In a context in which land reform has drastically changed the ethical environment, the ethical identity of the farmers has also been transformed. The uneducated peasants are guided by natural will that pushes them into criminal behaviour. They are the perpetrators of sexual assaults, false defamation and violent attacks; they even directly or indirectly cause others to die. In the novel *Hurricane* (2008), for example, Nguyen Phan Hach describes a young landlady, Lan Vien, and her mother, Mrs Nghe Nguyen, as victims of land reform. They are intelligent characters who differ from ordinary farmers. Because they are educated, they understand the ridiculous reality no matter how many injustices they suffer. The two ladies sympathise with the dilemma of Ham and Hung, who were forced to write papers denying the family relationship with their mother and wife. Owing to their knowledge, Lan Vien and her mother also comprehend the present wrongness. They believe in their honesty, and the two women await a “correction”¹ order. They are given back their properties, reunited with loved ones and, most importantly, still preserve their lives. In another work, *The Three Others* (2006) by To Hoai, mistakes and unjust ethical choices come from educated people representing the CPV and the revolution. Cu, Boi and Dinh are land reform operators; these three men are incarnations of power. Their level of awareness and education is higher than that of the farmers, but they are also opportunists, utilitarians and selfish officials. They take advantage of the reform and the farmers’ stupidity and childishness to commit wrong acts, including using communist power for personal gain and sexually abusing village girls. These are immoral choices and should be condemned. In these novels, not all peasants are evil, nor are all educated people good. The characters’ ethical choices rest on the contemporary ethical context, their ethical identity and,

1 Land reform in Northern Vietnam was carried out from 1953 to 1956 to redistribute agrarian areas, which helped to provide farmers with land while destroying hostile forces and feudal culture. The campaign sought to develop rural societies and agriculture, thereby devoting itself to the proletarian revolution of the nation. The actual implementation, however, involved many serious violations: many people were wrongly and unjustly killed. Therefore, in February 1956, the Central Committee of the Vietnam Worker’s Party (the predecessor of the CPV) admitted its mistakes, suspended the revolution and made corrections.

most vitally, whether the strength of their rational will is enough to subdue their natural will. The biggest lesson for each person is to protect the rational will against malicious impulses. Only then can human beings survive in any situation, even if it is the “world-shaking” ethical context of land reform.

Pastoral novels on the land revolution should also be viewed as voices raised to eliminate class hatred, which would lead to national harmony and democratic equality. These writers are very audacious in choosing a susceptible topic that could affect their writing career, but their ethical choices are not to defame history or criticise the mistakes of the CPV. Their greatest desire is to provide enlightenment for present life through the rediscovery of history. History contains mistakes that should not be repeated. An honest writer does not rely on the darkness of land reform to deepen hostility but courageously examines the truth, even if it is shadowed by mistakes, to say farewell to the past and to greet a better future. These are the crucial edifying values that novels on sensitive topics, such as land revolution, can bring to readers.

From another perspective, depicting ugliness and evil is also a way to propagate the didactic message of Vietnamese novels since 1986. By specifically portraying the villains, novelists show the significance of instruction in developing human personality. In an urban novel by Ta Duy Anh, *Looking for Characters*¹ (2002), the writer presents a beautiful prostitute who is very cruel. Her lover deceives her. She falls pregnant and gives birth alone. In taking revenge on the depraved man, however, she loses her rational will and humanity: she hatches and carries out a cruel, unimaginable revenge plot. She raises her daughter into a pretty girl to seduce her ex-lover; the daughter, ignorant of her relationship to the sexual buyer, violates the ethical taboo of having sex with her biological father. The poor girl's mother intentionally created this crime, and the mother is happy and satisfied with her plan. She has avenged herself against the man who betrayed her in the past without worrying about motherly love, bloodline relationships or social morality. The failure of her first love, the feeling of enmity and the impact of her job (prostitution) greatly influenced the prostitute's ethical choices. All these factors push the female character to engage in dehumanisation. For Ta Duy Anh and other Vietnamese novelists, engraving evil images in their works is not intended to praise the bad but to alert readers so they can understand evil clearly and draw moral lessons for themselves. The stories of such villains raise the awareness of the audience, thus helping them to learn and teaching them to become virtuous. In

1 *Đi tìm nhân vật.*

the novel *The Oath Ceremony*¹ (2009) by Nguyen Quang Than, for example, the generals of the Lam Son insurgents are rough, rude, intolerant and unkind, primarily due to their background. Their ethical identities are peasants and the rural heroes who had little contact with books. The author poses a question worth pondering: “Is it because they have never read *The Book of Songs*?” (24), an anthology of ancient Chinese poetry, which here not only means a classical literary work but stands in for all so-called “holy books”. In the writer’s opinion, books contain moral and ethical scriptures to nurture people’s humanity; *The Book of Songs* here is an allegory of the didactic function of literature. Because they refuse to read books, even if they are generals or heroes, these characters are less moralised. Unlike the characters in *The Oath Ceremony*, Hoang Quoc Hai and Nguyen Xuan Khanh present heroic images adept with both the pen and the sword. In the novel *Storm of the Tran Dynasty*² (2003) by Hoang Quoc Hai and in *Ho Quy Ly*³ (2000) by Nguyen Xuan Khanh, the protagonists are leaders who regularly read books to find the best way to rule the country. These characters depict the importance of reading and learning in perfecting the human personality.

The didactic function of Vietnamese novels since 1986 is indisputable, because it is one of the foundations for the existence of genuine works. As Vietnamese scholar Le Huy Bac has commented: “Like all other art forms, literature does not ignore the purpose of educating man. Teaching is an immutable principle for any artistic creation, whether implicit or explicit” (89). The function of contemporary Vietnamese novels is often subtly hidden through a new, innovative artistic style. This makes it possible to reject the rigid, blatant didacticism associated with political goals, as proved in the revolutionary literature (1945–1975). Particularly in the post-war ethical environment of the country, when the wave of renovation and international exchange is opening up, there are still gloomy factors that have crept into every corner of life despite the many favourable conditions and flashy achievements of the era. Writers must thus combine their novel creation with moral and social responsibility by fighting negativity via literature. This task is difficult, because the novelist must avoid falling into the trap of subsidised literature, which is severely affected by class ideology. Authors also have to innovate in their literary art so that the moral didactics achieve a profundity that is acceptable to the souls of readers. Thus, Vietnamese novelists have unearthed various pathways to integrate moral and ethical themes into their works. Nguyen Binh Phuong, for example,

1 *Hội thề.*

2 *Bão táp triều Trần.*

3 *Hồ Quý Ly.*

has paid much attention to social and ethical issues. He is a quintessential writer in this field. His series, mentioned above, addresses many excruciating matters of contemporary life, and these illnesses are a consequence of the negative side of *Đổi mới* in Vietnam. These ailments cause moral crises, human connection loss and broken families. Contemporary characters lose their dignity, honour, conscience, personality and morality in this ethical context. Characters who are moral traitors in Nguyen Binh Phuong's works are divergent. They can be immoral state officials or high-ranking, disorganised and undisciplined intellectuals. They plot darkly to compete for rights, conspire to embezzle public funds, participate in wild games and engage in adulterous relationships. Such men can be found in two novels, *The Absentee* (1999) and *Sit* (2013). In the former, not only the intellectuals are depraved, but even naturally honest farmers can be corrupted by the chaotic whirlwind of the market economy and urbanisation. The latter novel, meanwhile, reflects inhumanity and violence at all levels—individuals, families, communities—and all subjects, including human beings, animals and nature.¹ The unethical choices of the characters illustrate immorality. By revealing these poor choices, the writer contributes to the struggle against evil to protect the good, and the value of moral teaching is engrained in the novelist's writings.

In addition to Nguyen Binh Phuong, other writers such as Ho Anh Thai, Nguyen Dinh Tu (1974–), Suong Nguyet Minh and Do Bich Thuy also describe evil to remove it from society. Due to the differences in each novelist's brain text, the values they propagate are not identical. Although there are diversities, they all share a desire to help literary readers choose good from evil. This familiar aspiration satisfies the moral standards of the community. This then constitutes the community brain text and constructs a community teaching value. Since 1986, many novels have depicted the bad, the pessimistic and the evil of people and society. These writings are a way to fight against the darkness, with the ultimate goal of maintaining the ethical order of society. Writers who delineate evil, even evil would be unimaginable in reality, are not accomplices to crime. They do not encourage moral catastrophe to take over life and deny the role of good. Rather, in essence, their works guide human goodness. Belief in literature's educational path and didactic function is shared among contemporary Vietnamese novelists. A noticeable example can be found in Ho Anh Thai's novel *The Human Realm Rings the Doomsday Bell* (2009), in which a mother is cruelly tortured to death during the Vietnam War. Before she passes away, she prays for her daughter to be able to punish evil in the future, and this curse is placed on the heroine, Mai Trung, who

1 See Bui.

does not feel happy, even if evil is against her. Mai Trung is not happy to be chosen as the avenger; rather, she seeks to protect humanity. Her actions contradict her mother's dying wish. According to common judgement, in betraying the plight of the mother (as a war victim), it is easy to accuse Mai Trung of being unfilial. The innocent girl's ethical choices have two essential meanings. First, the mother's vow embodies hatred. If humans use enmity to deal with evil, the human realm cannot find a good path, and Mai Trung deceives her past mom to follow a more relevant path. Second, she believes the human race does not deserve such harsh discipline: it is still possible to teach them by education. "Human beings," said the lady, "are not worthy of such painful punishment. They can still be influenced and changed by education" (Ho 205). Evil must be penalised, but humanity can be transformed through teaching and learning. This is a very humane view, and the novelist's moral concern is transferred to the reader via virtuous ethical choices based on the creditable brain texts that dignify the novel.

In the context of contemporary Vietnam, the cultural sphere is changing. Economic status is replacing artistic status and has become a severe risk. Art and literature, in general—and novels in particular—need to stand at the centre of culture. As La Nguyen has argued: "In fact, economics has strongly impacted on man's mentality, changing the thinking and discourse style of the times" (85). This statement forces readers to revise the socialist-oriented market economy that the CPV implemented since the 6th National Congress in 1986. Renovation policies indubitably guided the country to overcome the crisis after the Vietnam War, but economic development creates many forms of aftermath, including generations who worship materialism. Such consequences seriously affect the integrity of ethics. The continuation of literature, in turn, is greatly challenged by this ethical environment. "Once one is opening one's mouth to talk about economic affairs, taking economic language to discuss everything in life, who cares whether it's literature or not?" (La 86) In this ethical context, the destiny of Vietnamese novels is strictly linked to their didactic function. As long as a literary work apply moral models, the fate of ethics is guaranteed. As he contemplated morality, Le Huy Bac requested that national education concentrate on training students to be human. This is adjacent to the ELC focus on "learning to be human." The Vietnamese scholar explores the moral flow of this process of becoming human in local culture:

A human must have morality,¹ generally known as 'Human Ethics'.² Morality

1 "Đạo lý" in Vietnamese or "道理" in Chinese.

2 "Đạo Người" in Vietnamese or "人之道" in Chinese.

appeared long ago and has been preserved, supplemented and developed. Morality requires each person and community to aim for three primary goals: individual, national and humanity. Human ethics today is limited within a nation or a country and needs to be broader. Contemporary men are world citizens. Moral personality is distorted by abandoning these goals, which makes it difficult to match and integrate with the national community and humanity. (24-25)

Vietnamese novelists have genuinely attended to all three main goals in cultivating human ethics for themselves (as individuals) and for readers (as representatives of the nation and humanity). Unfortunately, their success in worldwide literary circles is not impressive; for example, no Vietnamese writer has ever won a Nobel Prize. However, they are at least trying to approach the world level through novelistic philosophy, narrative art and artistic methods. In terms of content, Vietnamese writers have struggled to reflect issues of universal scope, such as Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* (1987), which is immersed in the context of the Vietnam War as Bao Ninh attempted to illustrate the multiple relationships between us and others, between goodness and badness and between justice and injustice. In the novel, war is no longer judged from an ideological standpoint but from a human one: the nature of war is evil because it is against human beings. Bao Ninh and other Vietnamese writers generally strive to portray what is anti-human and inhuman. They put good and evil together, and then they force protagonists to make choices within the established dilemmas and predicaments. Their works are tools to support people in identifying morality and immorality, ultimately orienting readers to choose the good. They thus help to achieve human ethics at the individual level through the creation of a moral person.

Conclusion

When writing novels, writers confront various complex moral relationships. They bear the ethical identity of both a verbal artist and a general citizen. This identity defines their creative and social responsibility. It also affects novelists' ethical choices in their fictional productions. Vietnamese writers' ethical choices appear in their novels through content and form. Regardless of their selections, the premise of these choices lies in whether their brain text in general—and their literary brain text in particular—is valuable or not. If a novelist composes a work that does not provide favourable teaching values, then his/her ethical choices are atrocious. In contrast, if a novel escapes from a marvellous brain text, then the writer's ethical choices are legitimate. The reality of post-war Vietnamese literature clarifies that, in specific ethical contexts,

not all authors make appropriate ethical choices. Some writers were expelled from Vietnam, such as Duong Thu Huong (1947–), while some novels were banned from publication and circulation, including works by Pham Thi Hoai (1960–), Hoang Minh Tuong (1948–), Le Kieu Nhu (1983–), Bui Binh Thi (1939–2016) and Ta Duy Anh. In these cases, the deviation in their ethical choices sprang from their moral motivation and attitude towards the specific issues they included in their works. Poor choices are the result of fallacious literary brain texts and cannot execute the teaching function. Overall, Vietnamese novelists since 1986 have reaped bountiful harvests in showing their social responsibility through novels. Moral and ethical matters related to humans and society, of a nation and the world in the past and the present, have been reflected with valour and have provided readers with actual edifying values. As we search for the root of this phenomenon, we are grateful to the theory of brain text, an exclusive creation of Professor Nie Zhenzhao.

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