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The Intelligentsia's Literary Identities in Transition and the Quest for Nationalist Sentiments in the Early Twentieth-Century Southern Vietnam: A Look into Tân Dân Tử's Historical Novels

Abstract

Early twentieth-century Cochinchina underwent major transformation: spread of the romanised script, rising French cultural interest and an emerging capitalistic printing market dominated by Chinese translations. The new intelligentsia responded by employing newly introduced forms, especially the historical novel, to arouse national consciousness. This paper investigates the nationalist aspirations embedded in the historical novels of Tân Dân Tử (1875-1955), a key intellectual of this transitional era. Educated in Classical Chinese and French schools, he adopted the modern script to write his major trilogy: *Gia Long flees the country*, *Prince Canh in the West* and *Gia Long retakes the country*. An analysis of his works reveals the duality of his era: strong advocacy for Confucian teachings and continuation of traditional writing styles, yet absorption of modern stylistic and structural elements. This blending of the two traditions served a purpose of nationalist, yet pro-French, aspirations.

Riassunto

La Cocincina agli inizi del Novecento subì una grande trasformazione letteraria: diffusione della scrittura romanizzata, crescente interesse culturale francese e un mercato editoriale emergente dominato dalle traduzioni dal cinese. La nuova intelligenza introdusse in risposta nuove forme letterarie, in particolare il romanzo storico, per risvegliare la coscienza nazionale. Il presente articolo studia le aspirazioni nazionaliste incorporate nei romanzi storici di Tân Dân Tử (1875-1955), intellettuale chiave

di quest'epoca di transizione. Istruito in cinese classico e nelle scuole francesi, egli adottò il sistema di scrittura moderno per redigere la sua trilogia principale: *Gia Long fugge dal paese*, *Il principe Cánh in Occidente* e *Gia Long riconquista il paese*. L'analisi delle sue opere rivela la dualità del suo tempo: forte difesa degli insegnamenti confuciani e continuità con gli stili tradizionali, unite all'assorbimento di elementi stilistici e strutturali moderni. Questa fusione delle due tradizioni servì lo scopo di aspirazioni nazionaliste, seppur filofrancesi.

Keywords: Tân Dân Tử, Intelligentsia, Transition, Historical Novels, Nationalist Sentiments, Southern Vietnam

Parole chiave: Tân Dân Tử, intellettuali, transizione, romanzi storici, sentimenti nazionalisti, Vietnam del sud

Introduction

[H]istorical novels bring to life a variety of characters, temperaments and languages, joy, anger, love, hate, and thought, [...] so much so that readers are made to sit down to read, as if they were turned into travellers and able to see a certain character, making it easy for readers to feel the emotions in their hearts and conceive them in their minds¹.

In the preface to the first novel in his “Gia Long” trilogy², Tân Dân Tử (1875-1955) expresses his ardent admiration for historical novels for their capacity of exciting powerful emotions in their readers. As the authors of the present article will strive to highlight, this appeal to the emotions was not a mere way of entertaining the reading audience, but was used to create a lasting feeling of attachment to their country, that is, a sense of national identity and pride³. In the context of colonial

¹ «[L]ịch-sử tiểu-thuyết thì tỏ đủ các nhơn vật sơn xuyên, tánh tình ngôn ngữ, tảo tới hi, nộ, ái, ố, trí nào tinh thần, [...] làm cho các độc giả ngồi xem quyển sách, miệng đọc câu văn, mà dường như mình đã hóa thân đi du lịch một phong-cảnh nào kia, xem thấy một nhơn-vật nào đó, khiến cho kẻ đọc ấy dễ cảm xúc vào lòng, dễ quan niệm vào trí». Tân Dân Tử 1930, Preface, pp. IX-X.

² His three novels under study include *Gia Long flees the country* (*Gia Long tẩu quốc*) (1930), *Prince Cánh in the West* (*Hoàng tử Cánh như Tây*) (1931) and *Gia Long retakes the country* (*Gia Long phục quốc*) (1932).

³ The focus on the use of emotions for political purposes reflects the current “emotional turn” in research on politics. Emotions then are not only a mere subject matter of research, but the perspective for a new epistemological turn. See González 2017, p. 27.

Cochinchina, the intellectual and writer Tân Dân Tử chose the historical novel, an emerging literary genre in Vietnamese at the time, as a medium to express his political ideas and to win people over to his cause. The interconnection between the Chinese tradition, French literary models and libertarian ideas, and the birth of a Vietnamese national conscience, are surprisingly intertwined in the evolution of the Vietnamese modern novel, as they trace the life of the founder of the Nguyễn dynasty, the protagonist of the Gia Long trilogy, who sought the assistance of the French to fight against enemies and establish his reign in the country. This complex relationship, where patriotism and the search for modernisation simultaneously accept and reject foreign influences, is also paralleled in the historical context of the era and in the life of these new intellectuals, who move between the worlds of the old and the new.

After a brief overview of the evolution of the Vietnamese intelligentsia in colonial Cochinchina, and how this evolution is mirrored in the rise of a printed literature in the emerging national script, with special attention to the novelistic genre, the analysis will turn to the intellectual and writer Tân Dân Tử and his Gia Long trilogy, showing how the transitionality of his works reflects a trend in the modern literary scene, also adopted by his peers. The new intelligentsia sought to blend traditional values and newly introduced literary aspirations for nationalist purposes, in the conviction that only a change in the individuals' minds could bring a revolution in contemporary Vietnamese society.

1. *Vietnamese intelligentsia in colonial Cochinchina*

1.1 *Colonial policies in favour of French and romanised Vietnamese*

As the present authors have illustrated in another paper, entitled “Lingua scritta e identità nazionale nel Vietnam coloniale francese: il caso del vietnamita romanizzato”, upon their arrival in 1858 the linguistic policies of the French colonisers contributed to shaping an evolving linguistic situation, which resulted in the

establishment of modern Vietnamese as the national language⁴. Classical Chinese was the language of literary studies and public administration, only accessible to the educated elites. Vernacular speech, the language of the dominant ethnic group, was used in everyday speech and could be written in a complex system utilising Chinese-inspired logographs, called *chữ Nôm*, which still required its speakers to have previously learned to master Chinese writing. Since the seventeenth century, a system of transliteration based on the Latin alphabet had existed, later called *chữ Quốc ngữ*, devised by European missionaries, but this was in use exclusively in the Catholic circles. The French saw the potential of this romanised script as a way to bridge the introduction of French as the language of administration and education, and to sever the cultural ties to imperial China.

The reaction and attitudes of the intelligentsia vis-à-vis the introduction of romanised Vietnamese were mixed, and Trịnh has identified three generations of Vietnamese colonial intellectuals between the last decades of the nineteenth century and the year of 1954: the 1862 generation, or classical intellectuals, the 1907 generation, or generation of two different worlds and the 1925 generation, or Westernised intellectuals⁵. These generations as devised by Trịnh photograph three phases in a number of intertwined processes: the gradual introduction of French culture and the calculated decline of Classical Chinese influence, the disappearance of Vietnamese written in the Chinese-derived script (*chữ Nôm*), the spread of romanised Vietnamese (*chữ Quốc ngữ*) as the national language and as a symbol of national identity, and the emergence of a nationalist movement that eventually led to the independence of the country.

The intellectuals who had been educated in the traditional way, studying the Confucian classics and focusing on Classical Chinese literature fiercely opposed the introduction of *chữ Quốc ngữ* and defended the logographic script of Chinese origin, both for a sense of nationalism against the alphabet of the French

⁴ See Nguyen and Lampacrescia 2024.

⁵ Trịnh 2013, pp. 25-29.

colonisers⁶ and for a prejudice against a script that, in the light of their Confucian upbringing, rendered education too easy and banal⁷. On the other hand, other intellectuals of the same period, coming from the Catholic circles, favoured the idea that romanised Vietnamese could become the national language and tried to spread their ideas through the emerging periodical press. A pioneer in this regard was Trương Vĩnh Ký (1837-1898), also known as Pétrus Ký⁸, who played an important role in founding the first local newspaper in romanised Vietnamese in 1865, called *The Chronicle of Gia Định*⁹.

When the French imposed a mastery of romanised Vietnamese as a requirement to work in the administration, intellectuals who were deeply rooted in Confucian learning and recently exposed to Western civilisation, understood that a cultural and educational reform was needed to replace the old with the new: this was the base for intellectual movements in the early twentieth century, in particular the Duy Tân (Renovation) movement¹⁰. Their position was that of severing ties with the immobilised Confucian mind and opening up to new libertarian ideas coming from the West and ushered through French culture and literature. The attitude towards France was thus twofold: a resource for modernising the country, but also a foreign colonial power to oppose, at least for a growing number of intellectuals. In this scenario, romanised Vietnamese was seen as a means to facilitate the diffusion of their ideals and to increase the literacy rate in the population because the Latin-based script was considered easier to learn, use and spread. For example, in the 28 March 1907 issue of the periodical *The Miscellaneous* (*Đăng cổ tùng báo*), *chữ Quốc ngữ* was favoured against Chinese and *chữ Nôm*, which were seen as obstacles to the modernisation of the country¹¹.

⁶ Pham 2018, pp. 419-422.

⁷ Le Calloch 1985, p. 310.

⁸ Ivi, p. 310.

⁹ Nguyen and Lampacrescia 2024, p. 101.

¹⁰ Hung 2022, p. 398.

¹¹ Schneider 1907, p. 2.

Finally, and as a twist of fate, many intellectuals that were educated in the French colonial system were those that protested against the colonial regime and led the movement that brought upon the independence of Vietnam in 1945, among whom was the future president Hồ Chí Minh. Here lies the contradiction of the French linguistic policy in colonial Vietnam, which was also present in other colonial contexts: Franco-Vietnamese schools produced a golden generation of intellectuals between the 1920s and the early 1940s. These talented journalists, poets and novelists inspired a new wave of thinking into Vietnamese literature. They were people of great personality, many of whom were involved in the anti-French movement, devoting themselves to national liberation, but also opposing the concept that Franco-Vietnamese schools only trained lackeys¹². At the same time, there were Vietnamese intellectuals who advocated for modernity, yet favouring the French tutelage, especially in cultural reforms.

1.2 *The rise of a thriving commercial printing market*

The imposition of romanised Vietnamese in the school system did not take off immediately, and there was also a practical reason for that: the lack of reading materials in *chữ Quốc ngữ*. Both the native intellectuals and the French administration saw clearly that, in order to favour the diffusion of romanised Vietnamese, literature of quality had to be written in it, against the prejudice of some French administrators that Vietnamese was an inferior language, incapable of expressing more than ordinary ideas¹³, as well as the neglect of some members of the local elites that considered it a feminine language, only adequate for everyday exchanges¹⁴. This may explain why some of the first periodicals in *chữ Quốc ngữ* were bilingual, such as the monthly, then weekly *The Chronicle of Gia Định*.

¹² Trần 2009, pp. 19-20.

¹³ DeFrancis 1977, pp. 142-143.

¹⁴ McHale 2008, p. 396.

The print business in romanised Vietnamese increased steadily but slowly in the following decades, mostly because it was suffering from heavy state censorship, as well as from a low rate of literacy outside the literary elites. By the end of the 1920s, however, the production and use of printed materials, both periodicals and books, soared, perhaps owing to two combined factors: the shift of print technology and the increasing readership, as a result of the school policy¹⁵. The print business, which was establishing itself as a capitalistic enterprise, was trying to exploit the potential of a growing new market – thanks to the spread of literacy – by catering to the tastes of the curious reading public. However, the colonial administration lamented the violent tone of the press, the scarcely serious themes and the research for scandals and sensational stories. Only in the 1930s did the periodicals start to have some political influence on the masses, which was to become the main and recurring concern of the colonial administration towards the printing market¹⁶.

Given the modest number of traditional or contemporary literature composed in the Vietnamese language, publishers resorted to translations of Chinese and French novels and short stories¹⁷. Bao talks of a wave of translations from Chinese fictions starting from 1905 until the arrival of the Japanese during the Second World War, or even of a translation movement. Publishers sought to encourage reading habits in romanised Vietnamese by printing novels and translations in serial instalments, so much so that the growth of publishing and the literacy rate fed each other ever increasingly over the first decades of the twentieth century¹⁸. Hung maintains that the massive translation of Chinese works has another reason, that is, the commercial interests of the Hoa (Vietnamese

¹⁵ Ivi, pp. 384-385.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 391.

¹⁷ Some of the first translations from French were such popular works as Antoine François Prévost's *Manon Lescaut*, Alain-René Lesage's *Gil Blas* and Alexandre Dumas' *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, as well as plays by *Molière* and Jean de La Fontaine's *Fables de La Fontaine*. There were also translated works with more local adaptation, for example, an adaption of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* by Hồ Biểu Chánh (See Note 27).

¹⁸ Bao 2013, pp. 170-171.

Chinese) people in Saigon, who monopolised the Cochinchinese marketplace: they thought that to popularise Chinese culture was a way to improve their economic situation¹⁹.

However, Schafer and Thế Uyên maintain that, as emerged clearly from the preface to early novels in romanised Vietnamese and from articles in newspapers, southern readers quickly grew tired of stories translated from Chinese and set in a fantastic past, and began to hunger for locally set narratives²⁰. It cannot be denied, though, that the influence of Chinese literature, as a source of inspiration and part of a cultural heritage, as well as the translation of French works, are the bases over which novels in romanised Vietnamese developed in the early twentieth century.

2. *Evolution of the novel in colonial Vietnam*

2.1 *Traditional forms of narration*

Modern novels, conceived as a relatively long fictional narrative written in prose, emerged in Vietnam in the romanised script starting from the late nineteenth century. Long fictional stories were traditionally composed in verse. The word used in Vietnamese, *tiểu thuyết*, may be now employed to refer to both traditional verse narratives and modern prose novels, in a way to emphasise the continuity in the literary developments from the indigenous tradition under Western influence²¹. However, prior to the diffusion of the romanised script, the first prose stories – which moved with the passing of time from folk history and mythology to more novelistic narrations about everyday people and events – were written in Classical Chinese, while Vietnamese can be found mostly in poetic compositions using *chữ Nôm*. In this regard, the most famous and praised verse narrative in the Vietnamese literature is the epic poem *The Tale of Kiều* (*Truyện Kiều*) issued in 1820²². Schafer and Thế Uyên identify

¹⁹ Hung 2022, pp. 401-403.

²⁰ Schafer and Thế Uyên 1993, p. 863.

²¹ Cao and Schafer 1988, p. 758.

²² Ivi, p. 760.

the thematic and formal elements of these traditional narratives that influenced the development of Vietnamese fictional stories first and novels then, especially in Southern writers such as Hồ Biểu Chánh and Trương Duy Toàn.

On a thematic level, we can find two types of stories, of Chinese derivation: the stories of knights-errant and scholar-beauty stories. The heroes of knight-errant fictions travel from place to place, exhibiting their virtue – physical prowess and generosity – by aiding people in distress. The scholar-beauty tradition, on the other hand, features a talented poet or a man of letters that distinguished himself in poetry contests and acts of mental courage; the story also includes a contrasted love with a beautiful woman, which eventually concludes in a happy ending, not before both the hero and the heroine have overcome a series of obstacles. If the traditional stories are imbued with Confucian morality, the first Vietnamese verse stories also explore new moral grounds and less refined topics, including themes such as revenge and sexual desire, as is the case with the already mentioned *The Tale of Kiều* (which can be included in the scholar-beauty tradition)²³.

On a stylistic and structural level, one recurring element is formulaic language: chapters begin with a short summary in verse, shifts in the plot are conventionally marked with a fixed formula and each chapter ends with an invitation to continue reading in order to discover what will happen next. The style of traditional knights-errant and scholar-beauty stories is also far removed from the modern novel model. Two elements are particularly evident, more so in the Vietnamese prose than in its Chinese counterpart: implicativeness and ornateness. The former refers to a tendency to suggest rather than providing a full description of mood or character. The latter refers to the literary style that tended to contain ornate diction and literary allusions, even in the speech of the characters²⁴.

²³ Schafer and Thế Uyên 1993, p. 860.

²⁴ Ivi, p. 861.

2.2 *French models combined with traditional marks*

The introduction of prominent French authors to colonial Vietnam in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was part of the French linguistic policy to modernise/westernise and develop the country through education. Authors such as Alexandre Dumas, Gustave Flaubert and Victor Hugo became particularly popular in Franco-Vietnamese schools, especially Hugo, whose sympathy for the poor and the oppressed resonated with the aspirations of the colonised Vietnamese²⁵. A Vietnamese translation of Hugo's *Les Misérables* appeared in 1926 by Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, a Francophile scholar who sought to enrich the Vietnamese language by drawing from French vocabulary and giving more prestige to the romanised script. His belief was that only through modernisation could the country achieve its autonomy²⁶. *Les Misérable* was adapted in the same year by the already mentioned Hồ Biểu Chánh, under the title *Blades of Grass in the Wind* (*Ngọn cỏ gió đùa*), where the events and the characters of Hugo's masterpiece are fully transposed to a Vietnamese context but with a modern Western style²⁷.

The transition of the style of storytelling from the knight-errant and scholar-beauty stories towards the modern novel is best exemplified by Hồ Biểu Chánh in his novel *Who Can Do It?* (*Ai làm được*), which the author first published in 1912 and then revised in 1922. Even though the plot is certainly traditional (a scholar-turned-clerk falls in love with a strong-willed woman, whose cruel stepmother contrasts their relationship through evil machinations, until the happy ending), as are the themes (the attack on greed and selfishness embodied by the villains), the novel offers a realistic portrait of life in contemporary Cochinchina, especially of the poor in a modern urban environment (Saigon), not in a mythological China. As far as the form is concerned, each chapter starts with the traditional heading, and the traditional, explicit and formulaic transitions are also featured. The departure from the tradition can be seen,

²⁵ Do 2017, pp. 114-115.

²⁶ Ivi, p. 117.

²⁷ Ivi, p. 121.

even though not apparently so obvious, in the choice to write in prose, and also in the style, which is close to ordinary southern speech, thus distancing itself from the classical ornateness²⁸.

Hồ Biểu Chánh's 1922 version of the novel shows a refinement in his prose style, especially in what is commonly known as "straight-line narration". This traditional device consists in putting down events in strict chronological order, with little space for descriptions of scenes and feelings. Also, background information is provided by interrupting the main story and by relating this previous story from start to end. In his revised version of *Who Can Do It?*, the author provides more information to clarify events, more description and dialogue, so as to render the actions more plausible and to reveal the inner thoughts of his characters²⁹. Other changes were a different organisation of the story in chapters and the removal of the formulaic plot transitions³⁰. To conclude, the development of modern novels in Cochinchina is influenced by French works in a twofold way: if French novels provided a more fluent and spontaneous narrating style, the fear of deracination as a colony directly controlled by France made it so that southerners clung more to traditional Confucian morality as a way to assert their cultural identity, whereas novels in the North emerged through a violent disruption to traditional forms and themes.

2.3 *The rise of historical novels in Cochinchina*

One of the first Southern Vietnamese historical novels might well be *A Drop of Faithful Blood* (*Giọt máu chung tình*) by Tân Dân Tử, written in 1926, inaugurating a prolific period of works of the same genre by a number of authors, such as Tân Dân Tử

²⁸ Schafer and Thế Uyên 1993, pp. 865-867.

²⁹ As already mentioned, the novel, part love story and part adventure story, recites the constant struggles and suffering of a couple, who then ends up marrying each other and leads a happy family with two children. Instead of citing classical poetry or using lofty poetic phrases, the characters speak in a simple and direct manner and use a southern accent, which helps better depicting their characters and emotions.

³⁰ Ivi, pp. 877-879.

himself, Phạm Minh Kiên, Nguyễn Chánh Sắt, Phú Đức and the already mentioned Hồ Biểu Chánh. Hung finds it fitting that the novel was published when Vietnamese modern nationalism was on the rise and argues that the emergence of historical novels in Southern Vietnam had a precise political purpose: to protest against the foreign hegemony of both China and France and to reaffirm national identity³¹.

The choice of events and figures ranged relatively widely within Vietnamese history, featuring prominently emperors who founded feudal dynasties and heroes who contributed to the defence and liberation of the nation, with the addition of fictional characters. While Phạm Minh Kiên focused on characters and events of the North, probably to reinforce the idea of a single Vietnamese nation, Tân Dân Tử focused more on the Southern part's history, especially on the figure of the emperor Gia Long, founder of the Nguyễn dynasty, as a symbol of a unified nation³². The prefaces and forewords to these novels are also particularly interesting, as they can be seen as the writers' manifesto vis-à-vis the role of historical novels. Novelists are generally concerned with the lack of awareness in the public of their historical roots and proposed their works as a remedy to reform social consciousness and instil a nationalist spirit into Vietnamese people's minds. The novelisation of national history, where historical events intertwine with the emotions and thoughts of historical figures and romantic love stories, was, in their opinion, the easiest way to pique Southern Vietnamese readers' interest³³.

When Hung says that Vietnamese people have always constructed and strengthened their cultural identity while both protesting against and adopting influences from China, the authors of this current paper would add that the same can be said of France. The historical novel was an established genre in France and, as was said before, Vietnamese intellectuals were familiar with French classical works through their education in

³¹ Hung 2022, p. 399.

³² Hung 2022, p. 405.

³³ Ivi, pp. 400-401.

Franco-Vietnamese schools. Not only did the novelistic form borrow extensively from the French classics, but the very idea of nationalism was very likely to be learned from those novels brought by the colonisers. The topos of the dethroned monarch who tries to reclaim the throne is well-analysed by Maxwell, who brings as examples *Les Trois Mousquetaires* by Dumas and *Notre-Dame de Paris* by Victor Hugo. It would also be impossible not to cite Lukács' renown study on the historical novel, where he associates its rise with the emergence of a sense that history is experienced by the masses and not only by a few illustrious figures, and with the development of a nationalist sentiment in Europe, where the sense of belonging to a nation is linked to the greatness of its past history. It is also plausible that the Vietnamese writers of historical novels may have found a parallel for their reforming intentions in Hugo, whose approach was a moralistic one, i.e., that history provides moral lessons³⁴. In any case, it is clear how the colonial Vietnamese intelligentsia worked towards independence through a change of mentality more than sparking a revolution, as the later generation of intellectuals would do, even though some of them, being pro-French and pro-modernity, would not directly advocate for an independent Vietnam.

3. *Tân Dân Tử and his historical novels*

3.1 *Biography*

Tân Dân Tử is the pen name of Nguyễn Hữu Ngỗi, born in 1875 in the ancient province of Gia Định (now under the administrative subdivision of Hồ Chí Minh City) from a family of Confucian tradition. His grandfather was a scholar of Classical Chinese, while his father, also proficient in Chinese characters, held the position of village chief. He studied Chinese characters as a child and then went on to study French in the school for interpreters in Saigon. He later found a job as a clerk

³⁴ Lukács 1983, p. 77.

in the Chinese-inhabited Chợ Lớn quarter and was eventually promoted to district magistrate. Alongside the official job, his writing career included contributions to newspapers and periodicals, and poems, alongside a number of novels. The last two years of his life were spent in Saigon in bed due to a disease, until his death in 1955.

3.2 *Summary of his historical novels*

The three novels which are the object of the present analysis are *Gia Long flees the country* (1930), *Prince Cảnh in the West* (1931) and *Gia Long retakes the country* (1932). The novels are set during the Tây Sơn rebellion, a series of military conflicts that upturned the country between 1771 and 1802. For the most part of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, Vietnam was ruled by different powers, even though the official ruling dynasty was the Later Lê. Indeed, Northern Vietnam was effectively ruled by the Trịnh clan, who manipulated the Later Lê royal court, deemed as merely symbolic. Meanwhile, Southern Vietnam, territorially enlarged over the time, was in the control of a Nguyễn clan, turning Vietnam into a long-lasting Trịnh-Nguyễn conflict³⁵. Following a peasant revolt at Tây Sơn in Central Vietnam, three brothers, Nguyễn Nhạc, Nguyễn Huệ and Nguyễn Lữ, led the revolutionary forces and overthrew the ruling Vietnamese dynasty and ruling clans of the time, proclaiming themselves rulers of Vietnam. The heir of the previous ruling family of the South, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, from his exile organised a military offensive that resulted in his regaining the throne as Emperor Gia Long and unifying the country in 1802. In his endeavour, he sought the aid of France with some territorial concessions; therefore, he is widely considered responsible for having ushered in the French colonisers later in the century. When the country was under French control after 1858, the South became a French colony under the name of Cochinchina, while the Centre and the North were protectorates. The Nguyễn imperial dynasty

³⁵ For a brief historical account of this period, see Boon Dar 2017.

ruled over the central part of Vietnam, yet only in name, until the independence of the North in 1945.

The first novel tells the story of a young and inexperienced Nguyễn Ánh, who manages to escape captivity during the Tây Sơn uprising thanks to faithful men, and goes into exile. The heart of the novel is the long period in which the protagonist roams the South of Vietnam, often in desperate conditions, living disguised as a peasant, fisherman or merchant, and faces treason, disease, hunger and danger. In his exile, however, he manages to make strategic alliances, especially with the French (in particular with the bishop Pigneau de Béhaine). The book ends with Nguyễn Ánh beginning to rebuild his forces, foreshadowing his eventual return to power.

The second novel centres on the story of Nguyễn Phúc Cảnh, the eldest son of Emperor Gia Long, who is sent to France as a young boy as a part of his father's plan to ask France for support. During his time in Europe, Prince Cảnh receives a Western education and develops a cosmopolitan worldview, gaining exposure to new political ideas and systems. Upon his return to Vietnam, he is granted the title of Crown Prince (Đông Cung) and receives training from some of the most respected scholars of the time³⁶.

In the third novel, after escaping and consolidating power, Nguyễn Ánh begins the second phase of his campaign. Supported by Siamese and French allies, he rebuilds his military forces and strategically targets Tây Sơn strongholds across southern Vietnam. Over several years of intense warfare, he gradually recaptures key territories, enforcing Neo-Confucian administration and reviving the Nguyễn clan's legitimacy. The narrative culminates in his decisive victory over the Tây Sơn in 1802, his coronation as Emperor Gia Long, the unification of Vietnam, the establishment of the Nguyễn dynasty and the formal adoption of the name Việt Nam.

³⁶ Prince Cảnh died prematurely in 1801 at the age of 21 and never ascended the throne.

3.3 *Transitionality*

As a scholar of the early nineteenth century in colonial Cochinchina, Tân Dân Tử had witnessed and had himself made remarkable contributions to the significant changes in society, particularly in the local literary scene. He not only sought to modernise literary productions, but also aspired to diffuse Confucian morality, aiming at raising Vietnamese people's awareness of their own history and instilling in them nationalist sentiments and a sense of national pride. Juggling between traditionality and modernity, his works can be seen as a co-habitation of both classical and novel literary elements. This characteristic of his novels is mirrored in the fact that romanised Vietnamese is his chosen script for literary productions. More particularly, the blending of the two literary traditions is noticeably visible in the co-existence of divergent organisational structures and stylistic elements on the one side, and the newly imported descriptive and analytical focus on characters' psychological status and developments on the other.

3.3.1 *Choice of scripts*

As mentioned earlier in the present article, colonial Vietnam in the early twentieth century underwent fundamental linguistic changes: Classical Chinese in rapid decline, *chữ Nôm* in oblivion and romanised Vietnamese taking the leading role in print, both in official communications, particularly in Cochinchina, literary productions and popular newspapers. Indeed, as Nguyen and Lampacrescia argue³⁷, it was not until the late 1920s and early 1930s that *chữ Quốc ngữ* was concretely considered Vietnam's national language and part of its identity. It came as no surprise that Tân Dân Tử adopted this romanised script for his moralistic and nationalistic historical novels as he himself advocated for the diffusion of the nation's past among the common people. His linguistic choice also reflected that of a

³⁷ 2024, p. 106.

new generation of intellectuals, who, like him, were educated in Classical Chinese, yet later trained in French and involved in the colonial administration. However, one must bear in mind that the use of *chữ Quốc ngữ* was not necessarily synonymous to an anti-French position since there was significant divergence in the Vietnamese intelligentsia's attitudes towards the colonial regime. A common trend, different from (clandestine) separatist intellectual movements, was that intellectuals favoured upgrading Vietnamese culture and national self-awareness in the common public by learning from and/or aligning with France under French tutelage³⁸. Tân Dân Tử might find himself in this direction, probably thanks to which his works enjoyed widespread circulation and readership. The situation seemed totally different for some of his peers, whose historical novels were censored and banned for their implied anti-colonial messages³⁹.

Another feature of the transitional era in which he lived and worked was the ununified form of *chữ Quốc ngữ*, especially in terms of orthography. This phenomenon can be noticeable in the denomination of places. For example, the town Rạch Giá was written in several orthographical forms throughout his novels, including Rạch-giá⁴⁰ and Rạchgiá⁴¹. The same can be seen of the town Gia Định, written in such forms as Gia-đinh⁴², Gia-định⁴³ and Giadịnh⁴⁴. The hyphen used to separate words composing proper nouns or compound nouns, most of which were transliterated from Chinese and French, was an interesting feature of transitional romanised Vietnamese, which, however, gradually went into decline in the following decades. Moreover, the co-existence of both words and phrases in Chinese, French and romanised Vietnamese brings to attention the linguistic

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ A notable example is the historical novel, entitled *Thunderbolts in a Winter Night*, by Tonkinese author Nguyễn Tử Siêu (1887-1965), which was banned by the colonial regime.

⁴⁰ Tân Dân Tử 1930, p. 56.

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 7.

⁴² Ivi, p. 60.

⁴³ Tân Dân Tử 1931, p. 13.

⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 74; Tân Dân Tử 1932, p. 126.

transitionality of the author himself as well as of Vietnam's then multilayered society and reading audience. For instance, right in the preface of the first volume of *Gia Long flees the country*, written by an administrative delegate, one can see two poetic lines in romanised Vietnamese, which is immediately followed by Chinese. This may attest to the idea that Chinese, although in decline, still resonated, at least, with some portion of intellectuals and readers trained in Confucianism-oriented schools. In the author's preface of the same novel, he uses French to list his opinions on why there had been so few historical novels: *1e'* and *2è*. Moreover, throughout his novels, it is common that the name of a place is first written in romanised Vietnamese and followed by its French equivalent in round brackets, for example, Miến-Điện (Birmanie)⁴⁵ and Ai-Lao (Laos)⁴⁶. The accompanied French translations may be interpreted as showing the author's knowledge of the language and giving help to those numerous readers of the 1930s who had been trained in Franco-Vietnamese schools founded by the colonial regime. The diffusion of French among readers can be seen more clearly in the fact that even some local places were given French equivalents, which seemed more familiar to the French-reading public, including Côn-lôn (Poulo Condor) and Hội-an (Faifoo)⁴⁷.

Moreover, the novels are also filled with anecdotes in romanised Vietnamese, which were translated from Classical Chinese (and now are often called Sino-Vietnamese)⁴⁸. These phrases were then explained in a more mundane way, probably for a general public. From the analysis given above, it can be seen that Tân Dân Tử's choice of the romanised Vietnamese script indicates its increasingly solidified status as a national language and writing system for all classes of society. However, the ununified orthography throughout his works and his attention to utilising French and translated Classical Chinese when deemed necessary highlight his multilayered background and the transition through which Vietnamese society was going.

⁴⁵ Tân Dân Tử 1930, p. 15.

⁴⁶ Tân Dân Tử 1932, p. 139.

⁴⁷ Tân Dân Tử 1931, p. 131.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Tân Dân Tử 1930, p. 15.

3.3.2 *Style and structure*

All of his three historical novels follow the chapter-based model of Classical Chinese novels. First of all, the beginning of each chapter often starts with a couplet or a quatrain of seven-syllable lines, which summarises the entire content of the chapter usually surrounding a certain event or matter with a clear starting point and a resolved ending. Below is a couplet at the beginning of the second chapter of the first novel in the trilogy that summaries what will happen⁴⁹:

Bùi-Khắc-Phú ỷ thói dâm ô,
 Châu-văn-Tiếp cứu người thực nữ.
 (Bùi-Khắc-Phú shows his lasciviousness,
 Châu-văn-Tiếp saves a girl of good conduct)

Furthermore, another feature of Classical Chinese novels that can be observed in Tân Dân Tử's works is that shifts in the plot are conventionally announced with some kind of markers. Phrases used for this purpose include "Here let's remind us of [an event that was already told]"⁵⁰ and "Here [In this paragraph] let's talk about [a new event or story]"⁵¹. In these paragraphs, background information, which interrupts the main story, is usually provided. Moreover, as a continuation of the writing style favoured by generations of intellectuals trained in Classical Chinese and Confucian Classics, Tân Dân Tử incorporates numerous well-known anecdotes and figures dating back to ancient China, often to build up or highlight characters, to whom some references to the ancient times can be made. Some notable references are Wang Mang (45 BCE-23 CE) and Cao Cao (c. 155-220), who plotted to overthrow their respective rulers. The two figures were considered similar to a general serving Gia Long, who became increasingly powerful and defiant against his ruler's orders⁵². More noticeably, the three novels under study are imbued with four-syllable idiomatic expressions, a

⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 15.

⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 79.

⁵¹ Ivi, p. 15.

⁵² Ivi, p. 161.

characteristic of traditional writings, heavily influenced by the Chinese literary tradition. Some examples are such phrases as “tham tài háo sắc, hãm hại lương dân” (crave for wealth and be lecherous, harm common people)⁵³. Lastly, Tân Dân Tử carries on the classical scholars’ practice of using a few poetic lines to give a concluding moral comment after having presented an event or a story. For example, after having narrated the story about the above-mentioned plotting general, who was then executed, Tân Dân Tử composes a seven-syllable quatrain to remind his readers to take the general’s case as an example and guard themselves against greed⁵⁴.

Despite his alignment with the conventional literary practices, which is also accompanied by his overall style of ornateness and implicativeness, Tân Dân Tử does stylistically deviate from the tradition in some aspects. A notable example is that the end of each chapter does not always end with an explicit invitation to continue reading to discover what will happen in the next chapter. Furthermore, straight-line narration is also abandoned to favour a non-chronological order, which features in particular flashbacks and flashforwards. Such methods give a breath of fresh air into prose narrations and force readers to piece together the timeline.

3.3.4 *Characters’ psychological descriptions*

With the arrival of French novels in Cochinchina, much more space is given to the emotional and psychological developments of characters in modern historical novels, contrary to the limited descriptive and analytical space of manoeuvre in traditional writings. Especially, there can be noted an increasing focus on the characters’ internal train of thoughts. Also, narrative space is not only granted for protagonists of his novels, but also given to other supporting characters, each of whom often has a side story.

⁵³ Ivi, p. 16.

⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 173.

More noticeably, there has been a move away from purely external and linear narratives of good versus bad since, in Tân Dân Tử's novels, characters may be depicted from multilayered perspectives and sometimes have contrasting thoughts and actions. For instance, in the story about the violent interactions between a Tây Sơn general, depicted as evil, and Ngọc Sương, a virtuous common girl, the former, in facing the latter's fierce and courageous resistance against his menacing words and promises for wealth and fame, felt repented and ashamed of his outrageous deeds⁵⁵, even though he did not abandon his intention of sexually harassing the girl. Likewise, depictions of some other Tây Sơn followers are also multilayered. General Tứ Khẩu Oai, when captured, refuses to surrender and serve Gia Long despite death threats⁵⁶. It can be seen that chivalric conduct is presented in full display by this character. In short, some evil characters or enemies are shown as not totally bad since they still possess some kind of virtue.

3.3.5 *Discussions about his political ideas in relation to the subject matter of his novels*

The preface to the first novel in his Gia Long trilogy is a good starting point to discuss Tân Dân Tử's political ideas in relation to his writing choices. He begins by saying that the flourishing of historical novels should be taken as an indicator of the level of civilisation of a country⁵⁷. Whereas what he calls «historical summary» is a curt, chronicle-like, report of historical events and circumstances, the historical novel is able to bring historical characters to life, and only in so doing can the attention of the readers be captured⁵⁸. Tân Dân Tử then provides a series of examples of historical novels from the Chinese tradition, such as the *The Three Kingdoms*, and from French nineteenth-century works that he finds inspiring: *Les Trois Mousquetaires* (1844),

⁵⁵ Ivi, p. 32.

⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 107.

⁵⁷ Ivi, Preface, p. IX.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

Les compagnons de Jéhu (1857) and *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* (1844), all three of them penned by Dumas⁵⁹. A key word here is «excitement»⁶⁰, which is in tune with the adventurous stories by Dumas, yet set in a historical past. If we connect the two ideas, we can jump to the conclusion that he is expressing his admiration for the Chinese and the French civilisations, since he presents them as excelling in the production of historical novels, implying that the Vietnamese do not. In fact, he goes on stating that, apart from the cultivated, most of the people are indifferent to, or ignorant about, Vietnamese history, while they seem well-versed in Chinese legendary heroes. In his analysis, the causes of this are two: there have not been many historical novels set in Vietnam, and Vietnamese scholars have devoted themselves to other literary endeavours, such as «long poems and moonlit laments»⁶¹. That is why he does not hesitate to undertake the task of adding to the literature in romanised Vietnamese by researching the history of the South and to use his research as the topic matter of historical novels. In doing so, he combines three purposes: entertaining the reader, fostering a patriotic love for the past of the country and providing moral examples. However, the use of foreign aspirations and literary models in constructing a Vietnamese national awareness is not restricted to *Tân Dân Tử*, but, as Nguyen and Lampacrescia argue, this is only an example of a larger trend that brought Vietnamese intellectuals to create a sense of national identity⁶².

Let us go back for a few more considerations. The last two didactic aims are already clear in an earlier passage of the preface: that a novel based on moral principles is beneficial to human society, while any novel that is written carelessly and speaks nonsense, regardless of morality and common sense, will surely cause resentment in people's hearts and corrupt morals. What emerges here is a typical trait of Confucianism, which the author clearly embraces: the fact that the intellectuals, possessing a higher education and culture, are naturally the leading elites

⁵⁹ Ivi, p. X.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ Ivi, pp. XII-XIII.

⁶² Nguyen & Lampacrescia 2024, p. 100.

and have the moral duty of educating and illuminating the masses through their writings⁶³. Another Confucian element is the conception of historical and national awareness presented by Tân Dân Tử as a devotion and worship for the people's collective ancestors. Finally, the images of harmony between mother and child as well as husband and wife, especially when a novel without a historical source is compared by Tân Dân Tử⁶⁴ to a wife without a husband, seem to be imbued in typical Confucian values respecting societal roles. Indeed, throughout his three novels, such Confucian conducts as filial piety and loyalty are diffused in numerous events and stories. For example, the girl Ngọc Sương is characterised to have shown not only absolute bravery to save her virginity when threatened with force, but also perfect filial piety to her dying father and faithfulness to her faraway husband, who is one of Gia Long's trusted generals.

As far as relationships with Chinese culture are concerned, the author is clearly ambivalent: on the one hand, Chinese historical novels are highly praised as a genre which the contemporary intellectuals should imitate, since he has already said that the historical novels flourish in the most highly civilised countries. On the other hand, imitation of Chinese literary models (moonlit laments) by Vietnamese intellectuals is also quoted as the main cause for the lack of historical novels at the present time. This may be considered to constitute an appeal to set the bases for a new literary tradition in the Vietnamese language, one that has its sources in the Sino-Vietnamese literary tradition but that also goes beyond.

Looking at the relationships with France, the preface mentions a debt towards those classic French novelists mentioned above, who are known to have provide a new literary model, as well as a wave of new, libertarian concepts. However, no direct mention to the historical situation is made, i.e., the colonial regime. This can be read in at least two ways. Either Tân Dân Tử is clearly pro-French, meaning that, at least in his time, Vietnam needs the

⁶³ McHale 2008, p. 401.

⁶⁴ Tân Dân Tử 1930, Preface, p. XI.

aid of France to modernise itself, or – and this would only be left implied – his idea is that, though France is a superior civilisation, the Vietnamese need to know their history and take awareness of their being a nation, if they want to gain independence, or at least elevate themselves in civilisation. A hint towards the author being pro-French is also given by the choice of subject matter: as was stated before, Gia Long is presented as the founder of a unified Vietnam, but the aid this emperor sought from France is an indication of the need of contemporary Vietnam to be guided and elevated thanks to the French colonial regime. Indeed, the trilogy traces Gia Long's courageous journey from being exiled to being crowned Emperor. Moreover, his pro-French attitude is also expressed throughout his novels since France is said by his characters to be a civilised, generous and prosperous empire that is willing to give Gia Long a hand in his agenda to regain the country⁶⁵.

Furthermore, through the narrative reconstruction of historical figures, Tân Dân Tử expresses his disdain for some unfounded local cultural practices and advocates for a knowledge-based rational approach. This position reflected a common attitude in Vietnamese scholars, who often looked up to France as a model to follow and dismissed traditions and ways of doing considered to have been blindly borrowed from China⁶⁶. For example, in the third volume of *Gia Long retakes the country*, through the conversation between France-educated Prince Cảnh and one of his father's mandarins about a shrine honouring the ancient Chinese military general Guan Yu that they happened to see on their way, Tân Dân Tử transmits his opinion that common people usually worship figures that are alien to their national history and believe in stories that are not founded on the basis of critical thinking, knowledge and science⁶⁷. This is clear evidence of the influence of European thinking on Vietnamese nationalism. He goes on to contend that superstitions and irrational beliefs were attributed to an empty

⁶⁵ See, for example, Tân Dân Tử 1931, p. 128.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Phan's phenomenal book (2005).

⁶⁷ pp. 169-170.

mind, which otherwise could be cultivated with knowledge and lofty thoughts⁶⁸. His alignment with France, coupled with a guarded and somewhat critical attitude towards Chinese influences, highlights a complex phase of Vietnam's history in which different ideas and traditions as well as the old and the new met, complemented one another and even came into conflict.

Conclusions

Our paper has examined how early twentieth-century Southern Vietnamese intellectuals, particularly through Tân Dân Tử's historical novels, navigated profound cultural shifts to foster nationalist sentiments. We aimed to show how these writers, leveraging *chữ Quốc ngữ* and French literary influences, used new literary forms to instil Vietnamese historical and cultural awareness. Our analysis of Tân Dân Tử's Gia Long trilogy revealed a duality in his literary identity, blending traditional Confucian values with modern stylistic innovations. Tân Dân Tử's novels, while upholding Confucian morality and traditional writing, also embraced modern elements, such as the romanised script and deeper psychological characterisation. This transitionality reflected a broader trend among his contemporaries, who synthesised indigenous heritage with new literary aspirations for nationalist goals, aligning with pro-French cultural reforms. The portrayal of Gia Long, who was considered to have brought in French intervention, highlighted a common contemporary attitude in favour of a French tutelage on Vietnam as a way to modernise the latter. It is hoped that these observations can in some way contribute to the largely ignored scholarship on "nationalist, yet pro-French" Vietnamese literature, especially enriched by authors who are now in oblivion. This work may provide a foundation for further discourse on literary and national identity complexities in colonial contexts, suggesting that future research explore reader

⁶⁸ p. 171.

reception or comparative studies with Northern Vietnamese literary movements.

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