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**NEW WRITERS, NEW READERS, AND THE FORMATION OF MASS  
LITERATURE IN SOUTHERN VIETNAM IN THE LATE 19<sup>TH</sup> AND  
EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

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**Abstract:**

The transition of Vietnamese literature from the traditional China-like paradigm to the modern Western paradigm first began in Southern Vietnam. As residents of a French colonial territory, Southern Vietnamese were early exposed to Western culture and literature, which aided in the formation of mass literature herein. Because mass literature realistically reflects experiences and lives of ordinary people, it is an important source to gain insight into social reality and consciousness during the period. It is also worth noting that mass literature is neither a compilation of cultural consumption related values, nor is it a means of communication that has a significant influence on the public's thought, nor is it an anti-cultural entity. However, this literary tendency, especially in Southern Vietnam in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, has gone unnoticed in Vietnam for years. This paper studies the emergence of new generations of writers and readers, focusing on both their cultural, psychological, and intellectual foundations, and their significant roles in the formation of Vietnamese mass literature.

**1. Introduction**

The development of Romanized Vietnamese literature first began in Southern Vietnam, which had already been colonized by the French since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. There were preconditions for the emergence of mass literature in colonized Southern Vietnam, particularly Saigon, including the early promotion of easy-to-learn Romanized Vietnamese script, the appearance of Western-style press and publication, and a system of French-Vietnamese schools that played an important role in producing new generations of writers and readers. As a result, mass literature was created. Some of its characteristics include (1)

primarily about the everyday life; (2) simple styles, aimed at the public at large; (3) the quality of merchantability and entertainability. It is also notable that mass literature in Southern Vietnam was inextricably linked with the press, with most works being published in feuilleton and written in Romanized Vietnamese script. Thus, Vietnamese mass literature differed greatly from Vietnamese traditional literature, which followed the Chinese model of literature, was written in Sino-Nôm, and primarily served the needs of a small and specialized social class.

Unquestionably, mass literature was a component of Vietnamese modern literature. It is thus necessary, albeit difficult, to distinguish between elite and mass literature. A large number of Vietnamese writers have chosen to become mass literature authors in order to not only become more popular and well-known to the public, but also to gain significant economic benefits; however, among those, there are also writers who are classified as authors of elite literature due to the fact that they are true literary talents whose works can withstand the test of time. Therefore, when writing the history of Vietnamese literature, it is necessary to pay more attention to mass literature.

As previously stated, mass literature emerged very early in Southern Vietnam. In this paper, I describe the appearance of a new type of writers and readers in Cochinchina in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the two factors that played critical role in accelerating the Westernization of Vietnamese traditional Chinese-style literature. I attempt to indicate how their cultural, psychological, and intellectual foundations influenced the process of producing and consuming literature. In addition, I will explain why this flow of literature has been rarely studied in books on history of Vietnamese literature and scholastic debates in Vietnam for years.

## **2. The Two New Generations of Writers and the Beginning of Vietnamese Mass Literature**

The generation of intellectuals associated with the beginning of Southern Vietnamese literature, including Trương Vĩnh Ký (1837-1898), Huỳnh Tịnh Của (1834-1907), Trương Minh Ký (1855-1900), Nguyễn Trọng Quản (1865-1911), are usually considered the bridge between medieval literature and modern literature. They were all trained abroad, served in essential social roles, and always had a great fervor for their country's culture and literature. Trương Vĩnh Ký graduated with honors from schools in Pinhalu (Cambodia) and Pinang (Malaysia) with excellent results. He was fluent in a slew of foreign languages and once served as an interpreter in a delegation to France led by Phan Thanh Giản. When he returned to Vietnam, he taught at Collège de Administrateur Stagiaires and Collège des Interprètes, and he founded the newspaper Gia Định báo (1865). Trương Vĩnh Ký was considered not only an excellent Vietnamese intellectual, but also one of the world's eighteen most outstanding scholars at the time. Huỳnh Tịnh Của, after graduating from Christian school in Pénang (Malaysia), returned to Saigon and was appointed District Chief. He was also placed in charge of translating judicial papers for the Cochinchina colonial government before becoming the editor-in-chief of Gia Định báo. Trương Minh Ký was a student of Trương Vĩnh Ký. He studied abroad in Lycée d'Alger, then returned to Vietnam to teach at Collège Chasseloup Laubat, Collège des Interprètes, and Collège des Mandarins in Saigon. He was also a capable correspondent for Gia Định báo before becoming its editor-in-chief between 1881 and 1897. Nguyễn Trọng Quản— Trương Vĩnh Ký's student and son-in-law, studied abroad in Lycée d'Alger (Algérie) in 1890 alongside Diệp Văn Cương and Trương Minh Ký. After returning to Vietnam, he was appointed Director of L'École Primaire de Saigon (1890-1900). He was also the author of the well-known *The Story of Lazaro Phiên*.

It should also be noted that in fact, literary composition was not these intellectuals' major occupation. Instead, they indirectly became literary authors while working as scholars or cultural activists. Their primary concerns, as mentioned, were translation, scholastic research, journalism and the popularization of Romanized Vietnamese script. Their accomplishments were critical to the formation and flourishing of modern Vietnamese literature. They primarily concentrated on phonetically transcribing, giving commentaries to and publishing traditional literary works, as well as translating foreign literary works into Vietnamese, and experimenting with new literary styles and forms. All of these were tenaciously conducted with a conscious aim to surpass the great influence of literary platitudes that had existed and governed Vietnamese literary tradition for centuries. In the field of translation, Sino-Nôm transcription and text annotation, Trương Vĩnh Ký stood out. He was an expert in various disciplines, including history-geography, linguistics, translation, collecting and phonetically transcribing Nôm folk narratives and Vietnamese medieval literary works, etc. It should be also stressed that Trương Vĩnh Ký was instrumental in the formation and development of Gia Định báo (first issued in 1865) – the first Romanized Vietnamese newspaper. Huỳnh Tịnh Của, a contemporary of Trương Vĩnh Ký, presided over the creation of the first Vietnamese dictionary Đại Nam quốc âm tự vị (1895), which contributed to the unification of Vietnamese language and its development into a language capable of producing belles-lettres. Trương Vĩnh Ký's descendants, including his students, such as Trương Minh Ký and Nguyễn Trọng Quản, together carried on his work. And it is undeniable that the translation and research efforts of this generation of intellectuals contributed not only to the public dissemination of common knowledge, but also to the development and popularization of Romanized Vietnamese script. Nguyễn Trọng Quản was a pioneer in experimenting with new literary styles and forms, laying the groundwork for Vietnamese modern Western-style novels in terms of both content and form. His novel The Story of Lazaro Phiền (1887) had a profound influence on many subsequent generations of writers. Furthermore, Trương Vĩnh Ký's meticulous and scientific records of customs, culture, and history in The Journey to Tonkin 1876 (1876) and Notes on the Kingdom of Khmer (1876) marked the beginning of the genre travel writing, which later thrived in modern Vietnamese newspapers and magazines. Trương Minh Ký's translations of French and Chinese fables published in Gia Định báo, and Huỳnh Tịnh Của's notes and records in his Chuyện giải buồn [Folk Tales] (1886) demonstrate the ability of Romanized Vietnamese to convey artistically, which thus encouraged following writers to experiment and create more.

The majority of this first generation of writers were Christians. Some of them were even appreciated by Western missionaries, and expected to contribute to the propagation of this religion in their homeland. However, the sociocultural context made them to transform from outstanding Christians and interpreters to authors of Romanized Vietnamese literary works, and a great number of them chose to remain permanently associated with the profession of writing throughout their lives. Trương Vĩnh Ký was a typical figure: despite his ups and downs as an interpreter, he was always devoted to books until his death.

The long-standing Christian literary tradition had a strong influence on this first generation of writers because they were, as previously stated, faithful followers of Christianity. Western civilization thus naturally had a great impact on them. As a result, they were more Western than Confucian. Nevertheless, in our opinion, these intellectuals never drifted away from traditional culture. By contrast, their very fluency in various foreign languages and their deep insight into Western culture both opened new horizons to them and provided them with true scientific and critical thinking, which remarkably assisted them with their attempt to promote and modernize Vietnamese academic tradition on the basis of new perspectives. More importantly, what they learned from the West was successfully applied in

their studies of Vietnamese culture and literature. When confronted with a sudden break with their tradition, these intellectuals might feel glorious and proud of themselves as pioneers, while also resentful that their patriotism was sometimes questioned by the public. They are the epitome of how a modern intellectual should be: always using scientific methodologies and being aware of their missions and responsibilities. Mostly concerned with practical matters, these intellectuals chose themes, topics and plain style of writing that are very accessible to the general public. It may be debatable whether the cultural activities they participated in were in fact a conspiracy of French colonizers. Yet it is conspicuous that what they achieved outweighed any loss they may have caused. Self-confidence and self-responsibility were their two most noticeable characteristics, as Nguyễn Trọng Quán confesses in the dedication written to his friends in his well-known *The Story of Lazaro Phiên*:

“Do you remember us walking along those roads, cigarettes on our lips, murmuring our wish that our beloved Cochinchina would brightly flourish in the future. My dear friends, I hope that this humble work of mine dedicated to you may start the process of making our dream come true” (Nguyễn Trọng Quán, 1887,4)

Literary activities of this first generation of writers contributed significantly to the reformation of literature in Southern Vietnam in particular, and in the whole Vietnam in general, in terms of both themes and writing styles. Vietnamese intellectuals at the time had a new conception of literature as a result of their early exposure to Western culture, and thus played an important role in the constitution of a new literature, in which Romanized Vietnamese script and prose were mainly used with an aim to serve the mass public. Thanks to their works, Vietnamese literature has developed prosperously in terms of literary forms and genres. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Vietnam, Chinese-like model of literature was, in fact, the popular artistic standard; however, this first generation of writers pioneered the reformation of it.

In the 1910s and 1920s, the development of the colonial French-Vietnamese educational system aided in the production of the second generation of modern Vietnamese writers. Trần Chánh Chiêu (1867-1919), Hồ Biểu Chánh (1885-1958), Lê Hoàng Mưu (1879-1942), Phú Đức (1901-1970), Bửu Đình (1898-1931), Biền Ngũ Nhy (1886-1963), Tân Dân Tử (1875-1953), Phạm Minh Kiên (?-?), etc. were the most well-known writers of this generation. They were also the ones who were instrumental in shaping the characteristics and position of Vietnamese mass literature. Most of these writers attended French colleges or colonial French-Vietnamese schools. Trần Chánh Chiêu had French nationality, and was trained in Collège Chasseloup Laubat. Hồ Biểu Chánh received an excellent diploma from Collège Chasseloup Laubat. Lê Hoàng Mưu studied in a French-Vietnamese school in Saigon. Tân Dân Tử graduated from Collège des Interprètes. Phú Đức was a graduate of the École Normale de Saigon. Bửu Đình attended Collège Quốc-học de Huế. Biền Ngũ Nhy graduated from Collège Chasseloup Laubat and then went onto study medicine in Hanoi. And it is evident that new knowledge acquired in these colonial schools became foundation for their cultural and literary trajectories.

However, it should be noted that their academic background was not entirely Western-based. It is because besides studying in colonial French-Vietnamese schools, they also absorbed great influence of Confucian knowledge and traditional moral values since childhood. Prior to enrolling in the French educational system, most of these writers had already been taught Chinese script and important teachings of Confucianism, and had memorized some lines of *The Tale of Kiều*, *The Tale of Lục Vân Tiên*, or Vietnamese folk poems, which then became obsessive archetypes in their works. To put it another way,

Western-based knowledge that these intellectuals embraced was, to some degree, driven by the traditional Confucian scholarshi

It should be also stressed that these intellectuals were not aiming at the elite but the general public. They hence did not pay much attention to strengthening the position of traditional literature in the contemporary era, like the way academics in Northern Vietnam did at the same time. And thanks to this, a new paradigm of literature was formed, albeit it was not completely new. However, the problem was how much time it would take for the mass public to become true readers of the new literature. Despite their remarkable development, colonial French-Vietnamese schools were not such a popular educational system in which all Vietnamese citizens could enroll. In addition, while the popularization of Romanized Vietnamese script and modern cultural institutions, such as press and publications, did exist and became more and more familiar with the public, yet from deep down inside, their aesthetic ideals remained deeply rooted in the traditional paradigm, which was heavily influenced by Eastern wisdom. It follows that writers in Southern Vietnam during this period, despite their efforts to reform the national literature, had to be aware of this reality at all times. And as a result, their literary works prominently expressed collisions between the new and the old, the personal and the collective.

Furthermore, while being exposed to French culture, these intellectuals were suppressed by the motherland's policies of assimilation. Consequently, far from being obviously committed to their ethnic-cultural tradition, they even viewed their cultural identity as a leverage to protest against French colonizers' assimilation policies. This spirit did have a strong impact on literature of the time: writers in contemporary Southern Vietnam, says Nguyễn Văn Trung, "only adopted Western literary techniques, and specifically novel-writing techniques" (Nguyễn Văn Trung, 1987,19).

It was the fact that over a hundred years ago, the French arrived in Cochinchina with arms and violence, which led to immense turbulence and a process of social reconstruction. After Vietnam had been conquered, a colonial administration was established, facilitating the introduction of French culture into Vietnam. The Europeanization movement started to develop early and strongly, especially in Cochinchina. Intellectuals were those who were most sensitive and paid most attention to this social turmoil. Yet their fear of being uprooted was to some extent understandable. The territory of current Southern Vietnam had been under Vietnamese control for only 200 years at the time, and a settled Confucian social structure had just been established; however, they were soon confronted by the impact of exotic culture. It should be also emphasized that Southern Vietnamese intellectuals made more effort to preserve the national tradition because people residing in Cochinchina were far distant from the Northern Vietnam where Vietnamese culture originated centuries ago. In the North, where social order was more strictly maintained, writers tended to focus on personal issues, and personalism, to some degree, was facilitated to develop as a resistance against agonistic standards. In his classic *Tố tâm*[Pure Heart](1925), Hoàng Ngọc Phách sometimes revealed his desire to preserve Confucian moral values, which prompted lots of contemporary readers to criticize the novel. On the contrary, in Southern Vietnam, a great number of people were interested in novels by Hồ Biểu Chánh, despite his passionate discussions about ethics and morality in most of his works.

Only a few Southern Vietnamese writers could make a living solely through their writing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Most of them were government officials, journalists, or teachers. And it is a fact that at the time, not only in Southern Vietnam but also throughout Vietnam, the press environment played an important role in stimulating them to compose literary works. During this period, a brand-new type of writer emerged: the literary

composer-journalist. In 1971, Nguyễn Công Hoan, one of the most well-known Vietnamese writers of the time, reflected on the early days of Vietnamese modern literature and journalism, saying, “In the past, literary composers also participated in journalism, and conversely, while working as journalists, they did not forget writing literary works. Almost all newspapers and magazines published literary works at the time. To put it another way, the press gave birth to literature during this time period. There was no literary magazine, and there was no publishing house that published literary works as well [...] It was ambiguous to differentiate between a literary composer and a journalist at the time” (Nguyễn Công Hoan, 1971,54).

To summarize, the emergence of a new type of writer in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Southern Vietnam marks the transition of Vietnamese literature from a traditional to a modern paradigm. In such a transitional era, these writers faced a dilemma between tradition and modernity. This characteristic influenced their writing styles as well as their contribution to the development of early Vietnamese mass literature.

### **3. Readers: The Factor Determining the Flourishing of Vietnamese Mass Literature**

Popular readers, as opposed to elite readers of Vietnamese medieval literature, were important consumers of Southern Vietnamese mass literature in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This period of time witnessed a strong emergence of popular readers in Southern Vietnam. This class of readers included the bourgeoisie, small vendors, students, housemaids, and city dwellers with little academic background. They mostly graduated from colonial French-Vietnamese primary schools. As a result, more people became literate, allowing the press and publishing to flourish. They were thus a determining factor of the formation and development of Vietnamese modern mass literature.

Yet what may be the sources of their being “popular”?

Prior to the French colonial era, Southern Vietnamese people, who were mostly migrants from different regions hundreds years ago, had a strong “tradition of mass culture”. The first group of migrants, who originally resided in Nam Ngãi, a region in the central part of today Vietnam, played an important role in identifying the distinct traits of Southern Vietnamese culture. They were mostly poor, yet indomitable and generous. They were also said to have “minimal” academic background, implying that they were little dominated by Confucian teachings. When migrating to the South, they had opportunities to interact with Hoa people (Vietnamese people of full or partial Han Chinese ancestry), and thus also gradually developed their commercial awareness. The second group of migrants were Chinese people, the majority of whom came from Guangdong or Fujian. Their strengths lay in commerce and navigation, and they were the ones who contributed the most to the development of vibrant urban areas, especially Saigon, which detailed in the historian Trịnh Hoài Đức’s classic *History and Description of Gia Định* (Trịnh Hoài Đức, 1998, 175-202).

This tradition of mass culture had a great influence on the elite as well. Võ Trường Toản, a Chinese immigrant to Southern Vietnam in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was usually considered the intellectual who was instrumental in constructing a distinctive academic atmosphere in the South of Vietnam. Focusing primarily on practicality (learning is essentially to know how to behave), loyalty (ethical values should be appreciated) and social engagement (learning is not to earn a living, but to serve the nation and the ethnicity), this academic atmosphere was, to some extent, very familiar to the mass public, and had the tendency to liberate itself from the Confucian scholastic tradition (Cao Tự Thanh, 1996, 232-249). These academic identities

can be found in almost all well-known Southern Vietnamese scholars, such as Ngô Nhân Tĩnh, Trịnh Hoài Đức, Lê Quang Định, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, Bùi Hữu Nghĩa.

It should be noted that the increase in land exploitation in Southern Vietnam, particularly the Mekong Delta, during the French colonial era resulted in a number of people becoming extremely wealthy. Despite their wealth, these landowners were mostly little educated, and their mind did not differ much from the popular, and their thoughts were similar to those of the general public. They always hoped, however, that their children would be well educated, so they generously invested large sums of money to send them to study abroad or domestically in colonial French-Vietnamese schools. As a result, since the 1920s, in Southern Vietnam, there existed a class of Western-based elite intellectuals who were simultaneously very attached to the pop culture, and thus did not approve the personalist spirit. This explains why Southern Vietnamese scholars at the time did not specialize in any field. These sociocultural conditions resulted in the fact that highbrow readers, or in other words, professional were scarce during this period. Southern Vietnamese intellectuals, as mentioned, preferred practicalism, and thus always paid close attention to hot social issues. For instance, when the reformation movement began to spread in Southern Vietnam, intellectuals expressed their support through practical contributions, specifically appealing Vietnamese people to expand their business in order to compete with Hoa, French and Indian businessmen. Another example was the writer Trần Chánh Chiếu, who sold out all of his lands in Rạch Giá before moving to Saigon and investing a large sum of money in publishing his own newspaper, and at the same time establishing his business firm to compete with foreigners (Son Nam, 2019, 35-39).

To summarize, due to aforementioned sociocultural conditions, three distinct characteristics of Southern Vietnamese people, including both elite intellectuals and the mass public, were practicality, generosity and popularity. Southern Vietnamese literature, as a result, was much affected by these: both writers and readers had popular aesthetic ideals. Southern Vietnamese people traditionally disliked embellishment, preferring instead a plain-writing style that was more familiar to the public, and thus more socially engaging.

However, it should be investigated that which factors contributed to the remarkable development of popular reader type. In addition, what were their impact on Southern Vietnamese literature?

It is apparent that the equivalence between Southern Vietnamese characteristics and the identities of emerging urban areas during the time is a plausible explanation for why Southern Vietnamese literature was primarily aimed at the general public. Popular readers, on the one hand, stimulated the vibrancy of the literary marketplace, yet on the other hand, indirectly motivated writers to experiment more and continuously refresh their mind. Popular readers, while reading, did not seek to contemplate profound and abstract philosophical issues, or to discover new literary forms and devices. Instead, what they expected was to entertain themselves. This type of readers, for Đỗ Lai Thúy, is referred to as “reading consumers”, who “prefer tales, always seek for the plot of any story, passionately devour troublesome events and strange and tricky scenes” (Đỗ Lai Thúy, 2011,254).

It follows that a literary market serving the mass public emerged very early in Southern Vietnam, with popular readers having significant influence on writers’ writing styles. It is apparent that readers in Southern Vietnam during this period were far wealthier than those in the North and the central of Vietnam, allowing the literary marketplace to flourish. Obviously, those who entered this marketplace, to some degree, had to defer to their readers, who “preferred familiarity” to novelty. Southern Vietnamese greatest authors of the

timewereundoubtedly aware of this gist. Works written by Hồ Biểu Chánh – one of the most popular authors in Southern Vietnam during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, for example, usually had “relatively common plot, characters, writing directions, techniques as well as thought”, yet they were still appealing to the public because of their interesting writing techniques (Phạm Thế Ngũ, 1997,254). Sharing the same idea with Ngũ, Võ Phiến puts it that:

We disparage Hồ Biểu Chánh, claiming that he is shallow and does not describe thoroughly the psychology of his characters. However, what has piqued the interest of Southern Vietnamese mass public in Hồ Biểu Chánh’s novels is partially the rapid and flexible changes of story events. This can also explain why such a long novel like *Châu về hợp phố* [The Pearl Has Come Back to Hepu] by Phú Đức was written with series of events depicted in numerous pages, which sometimes dazzles its readers (Võ Phiến, 1959,26).

It is easily seen that from Phiến’s perspective, “we” are elite readers, like himself, who are obviously uninterested in this type of mass literature written by Southern Vietnamese authors. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that these authors, in fact, were fully capable of “writing elite literature”. Yet they chose to serve the mass public. Nguyễn Văn Trung, dean of the Faculty of Letters (University of Saigon), also indicates such misunderstandings of elite readers:

I have studied and taught literature in Southern Vietnam for over 20 years, but I have only recently begun to read Hồ Biểu Chánh’s novels. It is because I used to disparage his literary works. After reading a few, I was concerned that my opinion was not objective, so I asked one of my colleagues, who is of Northern ancestry and has been in Saigon for years, to read the novel *Cay đắng mùi đời* [The Bitterness of Life] and recommend it to his wife and his children. He then confessed that though he was over 60, he was so much moved by the novel, and nearly bursted into tears after finishing it. His wife and children were all middlebrow people, yet also really loved it and wanted to borrow more books by Hồ Biểu Chánh (Nguyễn Văn Trung, 1987,12)

Popular readers, as previously stated, draw little attention to literary reformation, particularly in terms of literary forms and devices. They are sometimes seemingly “conservative”, yet always have an essential role in any literature all over the world, especially in the context of globalization: they help preserve literary “archetypes” and cultural traditions while tensions between the exotic and the traditional persist. It is undeniable that clichés in mass literature are in fact the legacies of elite literature. Hence, it is argued that mass literature extends the lifespan of literary genres and forms which have already fulfilled their historical mission in the sphere of elite literature. Furthermore, mass literature writers can compose works which are both modern and nationalistic. Hồ Biểu Chánh can be considered a top-ranked writer, who early got exposed to Western literature, and also drew much attention to literary reformation. Therefore, he could undoubtedly plan an elite-oriented writing direction. However, his own choice was to serve the public at large, and so did other writers of this era, which on the one hand demonstrates the modernity of Vietnamese literature during this period, but on the other hand restricted their creativity. In his memoir *Đời của tôi về văn nghệ* [My Writing Life], Hồ Biểu Chánh puts it: “That year, one publishing house informed that my upcoming novel was written in a more modern style and its plot was also reformed. Right after that, I received a slew of letters from my readers, requesting me to follow my familiar writing style, not to reform or change anything” (Nguyễn Khuê, 1974,270).



The enormous influence of the mass public in the literary marketplace clearly manifests itself through the translation of foreign literature in Southern Vietnam in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is a fact that while literary translations help readers develop their tastes, their demands and reading proficiency also affect remarkably the translating literature. Southern Vietnamese people early got exposed to Western culture, yet the mass public showed a biased preference to the translation of Chinese literature, as evidenced by Yan Bao's research in the book edited by Claudine Salmon (Claudine Salmon, 2013, 163-195).

The question is, why were so many Chinese classical novels chosen to be translated into Vietnamese during this time period? Furthermore, why were not Chinese romantic novels preferred? The immense impact of Southern Vietnamese mass public on the contemporary literary marketplace can plausibly explain these investigations. The majority of Southern Vietnamese people at the time had little education, but always had thirst for new knowledge. Their thirst for knowledge and adventure, and their chivalrousness as well, might be inherited from their ancestors – early migrants who had arrived in this land about three hundred years ago. Yet it should be noted that, according to Nguyễn Văn Xuân, their very living conditions and characteristics resulted in their habit of reading and writing, which was essentially speaking and performing, not writing (Nguyễn Văn Xuân, 2002, 543). The Tale of Lục Vân Tiên by Nguyễn Đình Chiểu demonstrates clearly this trait of Southern Vietnamese literature. In Southern Vietnam back in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, there even existed a popular genre called reciting Lục Vân Tiên.

Chinese classical novels were composed in the Ming and Qing dynasties, most of which were based on folk tales. They were then renarrated by outstanding authors and became classical works. These novels dignify four virtues: loyalty, filial piety, faithfulness, and righteousness, and they were thus very compatible with the characteristics of Southern Vietnamese people in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, Chinese classical novels can be easily adapted into performative arts, which was also compatible with popular reading interest in Southern Vietnam. It should be noted that prior to the movement of translating Chinese novels into Vietnamese, the main characters of well-known Chinese classical works, such as *The Three Kingdoms*, *Water Margin*, *Xue Rengui's Campaign to the East*, etc. began to appear in Tuồng theatre and scholastic poetry. When these classics were translated into Romanized Vietnamese, they were read again in a new sociocultural context and from a new perspective. Young intellectuals, who could read and write Romanized Vietnamese script, and had interest in traditional culture, enjoyed these translations and recited them to the elder, which gradually created a popular trend in Southern Vietnamese literary marketplace. It is sometimes said that the translation of a large number of Chinese classical novels were in fact a political intrigue of Hoa businessmen in Cholon. They wished to defeat their rivals from France and India by utilizing the power of culture. However, it is undeniable that the taste of popular readers during this period majorly resulted in this reality. During this time, Western literary works were also translated into Vietnamese. However, their major theme was also the dignification of morality and ethical values. Sometimes, the translations were “labeled” moral works by the translators, for instance, *Phú bần truyện diễn ca* [A Verse Tale of Poor and Rich] translated from *Riche et Pauvre* by Trương Minh Ký, *Tiền căn báo hậu* [Previous Causes, Future Consequences] translated from *Le Comte de Monte Cristo* (Alexandre Dumas) by Trần Chánh Chiếu, etc. These cases indicate more clearly that translating literature in Southern Vietnam during this period were mostly aimed at the public at large.

The formation and development of this type of reader resulted in a democratic literary environment, which greatly contributed to the modernization of Vietnamese literature. It should be emphasized that this democraticness manifested itself in the emergence of a

community of female readers, who did not only constitute to the diversity of the contemporary reading public, but also proactively expressed their ideas towards literary issues. For example, Nguyễn Nam, in his 2010 research, studies a special reaction of Vietnamese female readers to contemporary literary works: a lot of them killed themselves after reading novels (Nguyễn Nam, 2010, 53-65).

Nonetheless, on the contrary to the large and diverse community of mass readers in Southern Vietnam in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, there were just a few professional critics. Literary criticisms at the time were mostly conducted by amateurs, and book reviews were what they majorly wrote. Furthermore, they mostly assessed literary works through the lens of sociocultural context. As a result, says Nguyễn Huệ Chi, new literature in Southern Vietnam at the time “has not been appreciated by the professionals” (Nguyễn Huệ Chi, 2002, 18), and gradually faded into obscurity. On the other hand, as a result of overindulging their readers, some Southern Vietnamese authors produced low-quality literary works that were quickly forgotten. These are possible reasons why Southern Vietnamese literature has not piqued researchers’ interest for a long period of time.

#### 4. Conclusion

The French invasion of Vietnam had a great influence on almost every aspect of Vietnamese life. Yet it should be noted that in the colonial Southern Vietnam, preconditions for the literary reformation appeared: Romanized Vietnamese script and Western-based knowledge were gradually popularized to the public; press and publication developed significantly. In such sociocultural conditions, the emergence of popular writers and readers boosted the modernization and Westernization of Southern Vietnamese literature.

In my opinion, the mass literature in Southern Vietnam during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries needs further scholastic investigations. It is because, at first, some works of mass literature may become classics in the literary history: the case of Hồ Biểu Chánh can absolutely exemplify this. Second, it can not be denied that mass literature always has a powerful influence.

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