

Southeast Asian Detective Stories from a Post-colonial Perspective: The Case of Vietnamese Detective Stories in the Early Twenty-first Century

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[*Abstract*]

Southeast Asian detective stories and their scholarships have shown new understandings of justice and identity in this region. This study on Vietnamese detective stories in the early twenty-first century contributes to post-colonial discourses to reflect how colonial structures were constructed and reconstructed from the past until now. Starting with transnational characters and contexts, we demonstrate the subversion revealed in the way the perpetrator-victim are transposed and their motivations for the crimes. The Vietnamese detective novelists adjust the conventions of detective stories to address these issues of law, ethics, and truth that arise in the post-colonial context. These multidimensional narratives of crime and justice also serve as resistance to the grand narratives of power that have dominated Vietnam for years.

Keywords: Vietnamese detective stories, Southeast Asian detective stories, Vietnamese literature, Crime Fiction, Post-colonial studies

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I . Introduction

Postcolonialism is considered to have originated from the work titled "Orientalism," written in 1978 by the Palestinian-American scholar Edward W. Said. In his work, Said elucidated the power relations between the East and the West, which influenced the formation of literary discourses. According to Said, the Orient has been imagined as "the Other," "the subjugated," and "the mysterious and primitive," in contrast to the Western world. Postcolonial theory was formulated and became popular in the West around the 1990s of the twentieth century, and it is one of the key theoretical foundations of postmodernism in literature. Postcolonialism is an effort to counter Western theories that position Europe and America as the center of global power and culture. It opposes hegemonism and the monocentrism of Western civilization over the rest of the world. Said studied the nature of imperial culture and the formation of Orientalism as "the Other" constructed by the West. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak specialized in third-world feminist criticism, while Homi Bhabha focused on cultural positioning and opposed the cultural oppression of former colonies by major powers. Frederic Jameson was interested in third-world literature, advocating for it to have a status that enabled equal dialogue with European and American literature. Postcolonial theory, in essence, is quite complex and lacks consensus among researchers on various aspects, which stems from the researchers' backgrounds and nationalities. Many elements of postcolonial literature, such as time, scope, artistic perspectives, and terminology still exhibit considerable differences among researchers today. However, postcolonial theory has provided writers and literary researchers from the third world (mostly nations that were colonies in the nineteenth and twentieth century) with a significant suggestion for establishing and exploring their own identities, transcending and surpassing the dominant cultural frameworks of Europe and America.

Postcolonial theory, introduced into the literary scene in Vietnam over the past two decades, shows new effects and concerns. While some young literary researchers quickly embrace and apply it in their studies, others approach it with modest consideration. There

have been two Vietnamese translations of Said's *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*. Hoàng Lương Xá and Nguyễn Quốc Anh wrote two introductions to Said's *Orientalism*. Phương Lưu introduced "Phê bình hậu thực dân" (Postcolonialism Criticism) in his *Lý luận phê bình văn học phương Tây thế kỷ XX* (Theory and Criticism in Western Literature in the twentieth century). Other scholars applied postcolonialism to the practical research context of Vietnamese literary studies, such as Đoàn Ánh Dương's "Nghiên cứu hậu thực dân ở Việt Nam" (Postcolonial Studies in Vietnam), *Không gian văn học đương đại* (Contemporary Literary Spaces) and *Sáng tạo trong tình thế chuyển đổi* (Creativity in a Transitional Situation); Lê Thị Vân Anh's "Tính chất nước đôi của chủ thể hậu thuộc địa trong Vu khống của Linda Lê" (The Ambivalence of the Post-colonial Subject in Linda Le's *Slander*) and "Tính chất nước đôi và mầm mống phá hủy nhân quan về Việt Nam tính trong bộ phim Đông Dương" (The Ambivalence and Seeds of Destroying the Vision of Vietnamese-ness in the movie 'Indochine'). However, postcolonial theory in Vietnam encountered a lot of criticism from other researchers, who were more accustomed to Marxist literary criticism. As a result, it has not formed a major trend as in the West but remained scattered.

Instead of being associated with imperialism and racial construction, modern detective novels and new studies have turned this literary genre into a framework for exploring the complexities of identity, citizenship, and justice in a postcolonial world (Dony 2009). Cultural alterity is expressed vividly not only through literary works and literary research learned by and about racial and ethnic groups but also works that deal with post-colonial and transnational (A. Gosselin's *Multicultural Detective Fiction: Murder from the Other Side*, C. Matzke' and S. Muehleisen's *The Post-colonial Detective and Postmortems: Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective*, N. Pearson's *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational Worlds*). No matter the geographical or chronological settings, these fields of scholars are built within colonial/postcolonial framework to reflect how the languages of crime have been used to overthrow the imperial project and European domination.

In Vietnam, detective literature is a literary genre that has

developed vibrantly from the late twentieth century until now, associated with modernization and integration between Vietnamese literature and world literature, especially Western literature. Although there are some masterpieces or great authors, Vietnamese detective literature has been gradually establishing an important position in contemporary Vietnamese literature, demonstrated by the emergence of a new writing force of the generations of 8X, 9X, and 2K (people born during the 1800s, 1900s and 2000s respectively). However, the study of detective stories, both in terms of theory and practice, has not received adequate attention. The gap in theoretical research and practice of detective novels mainly comes from the consideration of detective novels as a popular literary genre, that is, the peripheralization of detective novels. However, the rise of detective literature in the early twenty-first century suggests many new issues concerning the essence of literature such as the awareness of peripheral literature, the concept of petit narratives in postmodern times, and the re-awareness of the entertainment function of literature. It also shows new social problems, such as crime and corruption, and the breakdown of social relationships. Therefore, researching Vietnamese detective novels in the early twenty-first century is an effort to provide knowledge about contemporary Vietnamese culture and society, and at the same time reinterpret the value of detective novels as a post-colonial discourse that helps open up cultural conflicts in the era of globalization.

Recognizing Vietnamese detective novels in the flow of Southeast Asian detective novels as a manifestation of the internal resistance of a former colonial culture, the second part of this paper briefly introduces detective novels in some Southeast Asian countries before presenting the history of Vietnamese detective novels. Focusing on transnational characters and contexts in sections III and IV, we exemplify the novelists' sense of globalization in recreating transcultural contexts. These two sections simultaneously show duality and cultural resistance, which is manifested through how writers construct opposing discourses about brotherhood relationships and former colonizers-colonized. The fifth section demonstrates that the unexpected twists in detective plots and the

exchange of perpetrator-victim positions can be explained as a consequence of colliding colonial and post-colonial legacies, acculturation, and interaction in the postmodern context. The concept of postcolonialism is deployed in both aspects, a historical period and a theoretical framework. As a historical period, we focus on detective novels in the twenty-first century when Vietnam ended its colonial period and gained independence. As a theoretical framework, we argue that Vietnamese detective stories are post-colonial texts, manifested in narratological aspects.

II. Vietnamese Detective Novels in the Context of Southeast Asian Detective Novels

Detective literature in Southeast Asia reflects how colonial legacies have shaped national histories and the importance of revisiting national discourses through a post-colonial lens. The dark side of modern Phnom Penh, which is mired in poverty, the collapse of the French Empire in Indochina, and the terror of the Khmer Rouge, makes this city the setting for several dark noir detective novels. P. French (2018) notes that Cambodian representations in crime novels are offered by expat foreign writers, which can cause Cambodia's internal political and social problems to be exposed twice by Others. Notable works include Lawrence Osborne's *Hunters in the Dark* (2015) and Nick Seeley's *Cambodia Noir* (2017). It can be predicted that a lawless, trippy, and drug-soaked Cambodia will appear in these two works. But besides a portrait of Cambodia tinged with Orientalism, the drifting journeys of the expat-protagonists in both novels, Robert Grieve in *Hunters in the Dark*, and Will Keller in *Cambodia Noir*, suggest the drifters from Europe and America are the croppers in contemporary Phnom Penh. Other Phnom Penh noirs, including Andrew Nette's *Ghost Money* (2012), Steven Palmer's *Angkor Away* (2015), and *Angkor Tears* (2016), delve into the conflicts between rising nations versus decaying ones to expose the identity and ethnic crises of the immigrants.

Likewise, the *Dr. Siri Paiboun Series* by Colin Cotterill, set in Laos in the mids-1970s, navigates the complexities of justice,

identity, and postcolonial life in Laos. In the aftermath of French colonialism, Dr. Siri Paiboun, the French-educated Lao, embodies cultural hybridity. On the one hand, Cotterill's building up the character of Dr Siri as a Laos allows us to witness Laos' wry humor and skepticism, providing a counter-narrative to dominant colonial voices. On the other hand, Dr. Siri's combination of Western medical knowledge and traditional Eastern treatment methods, especially the application of supernatural elements, questions the notion of dual heritage or the broader struggle for a distinct Lao identity in post-colonial times. Additionally, while Dr. Siri's role as a state functionary helps us explore how institutions evolve, Dr. Siri's independence and freedom in investigating cases serve as a form of resistance against oppressive regimes. In summary, by engaging with Laos's post-colonial journey of mystery, humor, and cultural exploration, the *Dr. Siri Paiboun Series* reflects both the impact of colonialism on Southeast Asia nations and the resilience of a nation finding its voice amid historical complexities.

Some examples of Malaysian detective novels that build detective characters and their transnational crime-solving journeys, which are somewhat similar to the Vietnamese case, show the need to revisit concepts of identity and hybridity in a multicultural context. For example, the character Inspector Singh in *Inspector Singh Investigates* (2009-2016) by Shamini Flint undertakes investigative journeys outside of Singapore, often to neighboring countries. Examining racial and religious tensions between countries (Singapore-Malaysia), the novel revisits the issues of law, ethics, and truth in postcolonial and transnational communities. *The Gift of Rain* (2007) by Tan Twan Eng, which records the journey of a half-Chinese, half-English double agent during World War II, underscores the themes of loyalty, betrayal, and identity. *The Woman Who Breathed Two Worlds* (2016) by Selina Siak Chin Yoke describes the struggles of a protagonist in British-occupied Malaya to cultural classes and political intrigues.

With a special literary genre seemingly associated with European literature such as detective and crime fiction, studies of Indonesian detective novels under a post-colonial lens show endogenous factors. For example, E. Chandra (2016) discovered the

dynamics of translation, the privatization of publishers, and colonial narratives as evidence of the dynamism and autonomy of indigenous Indonesian literature in general and detective novels in particular. Independent publishing houses owned by the Chinese community in Indonesia also contribute significantly to the translation and dissemination of Chinese literary works. Finally, post-colonial narratives themselves, which shifted from anti-colonial sentiments directed towards the Netherlands to toward the EU, reveal how complex dynamics between former colonizers and colonized could shape present-day interactions.

The development of Vietnamese detective stories spans nearly a century, extending from the early twentieth century to the early twenty-first century. That was also the period of modernization/Westernization of indigenous literature, with direct contact and profound influence of Western bourgeois literature on the Eastern feudal literary body in Vietnam. Although Vietnamese detective stories have few achievements compared to romantic prose or critical realist literature, they still reflect the ups and downs of the times, with constant exchanges and interactions with European and American cultures. Offering more than the usual sensational narratives on mysterious perpetrators and thrilling crimes, detective stories also directly reflect Vietnamese political discourse, foreign policy trends, and its position in the international arena.

The process of Vietnamese detective stories can be divided into two golden periods: the first half of the twentieth century, and the first half of the twenty-first century. The early twentieth century was the period of formation and confirmation of modern Western-style detective stories in Vietnamese literature, which went beyond the orbit of Eastern medieval stories usually centering on the stories of legends, trials, and thrilling cases. The early twentieth-first century can be considered the Renaissance period of Vietnamese detective stories which are illuminated under new trends and aesthetic perspectives. After a long time, this genre was almost absent and eliminated under the influence of Marxist aesthetics, and for nearly 45 years (1930 - 1975), the national literature was forced to follow the inertia of resistance literature. Literature during the war period in Vietnam was inherently

suspicious of its entertainment function, ignoring the needs and tastes of the literary market.

The early twentieth-century period of Vietnamese detective stories can be considered the period of colonial detective literature, while the early twenty-first period can be considered the period of post-colonial detective work. The reason for this divergence is that the colonial regime in Vietnam, specifically the French colonial period, lasted from the nineteenth century (after the Protectorate Treaty in 1884) until the mid-twentieth century, with the milestone of the Battle of Dien Bien Phu Battle in 1954 and the complete withdrawal of the French colonialists).

The beginnings of Vietnamese detective stories may be traced from the following: Biền Ngũ Nhy with *Kim thời dị sử- Ba Lôu rông nghề đạo tặc* (An Unusual History of the Golden Age – Ba Lôu as a Thief, 1921); *Mật thám truyện* (A Secret Agent's Tale, 1921), *Chủ nợ bất nhơn* (Unmerciful Creditor, 1921), Nguyễn Chánh Sắt with *Gái trả thù cha* (Girl's Revenge on Her Father, 1925), Phú Đức with *Châu về hiệp phố* (The Pearl has been Returned to its Owner, 1926); *Lửa lòng* (Fire in the Heart, 1929), *Căn nhà bí mật* (A Secret House, 1931), Bửu Đình with *Mảnh trăng thu* (Autumn Moon, 1929), Lê Hoàng Mưu with *Lá huyết thư* (A Bloody Letter, 1931) and *Người bán ngọc* (The Pearl Seller, 1931); Nam Đình Nguyễn Thế Phương with *Bó hoa lài* (A Bouquet of Jasmine Flowers, 1930) and *Khép cửa phòng thu* (Closing the Studio Door, 1933).

There were two leading authors in Northern Vietnam: Phạm Cao Củng with *Vết tay trên trần* (Handprints on the Ceiling, 1936), *Kho tàng họ Đặng* (Fortune of the Đặng Family, 1937), *Một cái Tết rừng rợn của Kỳ Phát* (Kỳ Phát's Creepy Tết, 1937), *Máu đỏ lòng son* (Red Blood Scarlet Heart, 1937), *Chiếc tất nhuộm bùn* (The Mud-stained Sock, 1938), *Người một mắt* (The One-eyed Man, 1940), *Nhà sư thọt* (The Crippled Monk, 1941), *Kỳ Phát giết người* (Kỳ Phát A Murder, 1941), *Đám cưới Kỳ Phát* (Kỳ Phát's Wedding, 1942), *Bóng người áo tím* (The Purple-Clothed Figure, 1942), *Hàm răng mài nhọn* (Sharpened Teeth, 1942), *Chiếc gối đẫm máu* (The Bloody Pillow, 1942); *Ba viên ngọc bích* (Three Jades, 1938); *Đôi hoa tai của bà Chúa* (Lady's Earrings, 1942); and Thế Lữ with *Vàng và máu*

(Gold and Blood, 1934), *Một chuyện ghê gớm* (A Terrible Story), *Ba hồi kinh dị* (Three Horror Acts, 1936), *Lê Phong làm thơ* (Lê Phong Wrote Poetry, 1936), *Lê Phong phóng viên* (Lê Phong The reporter, 1937); *Những nét chữ* (Handwriting, 1939), *Lê Phong-Mai Hương* (Lê Phong - Mai Hương, 1939), *50 Đòn hẹn* (50 Dates, 1939), *Gói thuốc lá* (Cigarette Pack, 1940). Vietnamese detective stories in the period of formation and development in the early twentieth century were published in the national language press—one of the cultural products that only appeared after the French colonialists established domination and domination in Indochina. First being published in South Vietnam (Biển Ngũ Nhy), detective stories were made to flourish by writers in the North, particularly by Thế Lữ and Phạm Cao Cung (Võ 2011).

In the early twentieth century, Vietnam was a French colonial country. Since Vietnam's first detective story writer Biển Ngũ Nhy (1886-1973) and his *An Unusual History of the Golden Age -Ba Lâu as a Thief* in 1921, Vietnamese detective stories in the early twentieth century quickly reached their peak with the works of Phạm Cao Cung (1913-2012), who created the famous detective Kỳ Phát around the 1940s. It can be said that during the period of formation and development, Vietnamese detective stories were completely influenced by Western detective stories (Võ 2011; Nguyễn 2004). Vietnamese literature during this period had a movement in artistic thinking, from pre-modernity to modernity; from the model, genre, and aesthetic perspective of Eastern literature to Western literature. But no matter what, the imprint of colonial literature was still imprinted in the first half of the twentieth century.

In the first half of the twenty-first century, Vietnamese detective stories reflect many elements of post-colonial literature, with typical authors such as Đức Anh Kostroma, Kim Tam Long, Phong Điệp, Nguyễn Xuân Thủy, Nguyễn Dương Quỳnh, Lại Văn Long, Vũ Khúc, Thục Linh, Võ Chí Nhất, Nhất Duy, Trần Thị Minh Thư, Di Li, and Giản Tư Hải. During this period, Vietnam became an independent country, with an increasing political position in the international arena. With its open and broad foreign relations, Vietnam gradually restored foreign relations, even collaborating extensively to become comprehensive, unlimited strategic partners.

Today, the particularly strong and understanding relationship between Vietnam, Japan and the United States has shown the possibility of rapprochement between countries based on national profits and interests rather than the hauntings of past hatred, or ideological differences.

Among the notable Vietnamese detective stories in the early twenty-first century are Giản Tư Hải's *Minh Mạng mật chi* (Minh Mạng Secret Decree), *Thiên Địa hội An Nam* (The Tiandihui in An Nam), *Mật mã Champa* (Champa Code), *Âm mưu thay não* (Brain Altering Conspiracy), Di Li's *Câu lạc bộ số 7* (Club No. 7) and *Trại hoa đỏ* (Red Flower Camp). These works have post-colonial imprints. They not only absorb the influence of contemporary/postmodern detective stories in the world but also reflect post-colonial issues in Vietnam. The post-colonial imprint expressed in Vietnamese detective prose works of the early twenty-first century is quite clear, typical from three angles: immigrants, post-colonial cultural space, and new moral perspectives in post-colonial times.

Generally, Southeast Asian detective stories and their scholarship contribute to new understandings of justice and identity in a region at the crossroads of both colonial cultural legacies and local socio-political upheavals in the post-colonial period. The case study of Vietnamese detective stories in the early twenty-first century in this article contributes to post-colonial discourses to show how colonial structures were formed in the past and how colonial legacies were reconstructed in the context of globalization. Emphasizing the intersection between post-colonial and multicultural life, Vietnamese detective novelists adjust the conventions of detective stories to address these issues of law, ethics, and truth that arise in the post-colonial context. The roles of detective-perpetrator-victim are constantly swapped to reflect the multidimensionality of the world in the context of globalization, where policies and notions of justice are constantly challenging and shifting. By pointing out transnational characters and contexts, we demonstrate the subversive nature revealed in the way the perpetrator-victim are transposed as well as their motivations for the crimes. On the one hand, we explore the complex interactions between Vietnam and its Southeast Asian neighboring countries. On

the other hand, the analyses of both indigenous cultural heritage and colonial legacies of the French colonial period contribute to showing the complexity and importance of post-colonial nation-building projects, which need to consider the multidimensional, in progress, and ever-changing research subject. Vietnamese detective novels could provide a rich tapestry for the exploration of a blended history, culture, and identity in post-colonial times.

III. Characters Associated with Migration and Globalization in Vietnamese Detective Stories in the Early Twenty-first Century

Many characters (including main characters and supporting ones, protagonists and antagonists, the perpetrator and the detective characters, or the victim characters) are migrants in Vietnamese detective prose works published over the past twenty years. These characters move back and forth between cultures, constantly crossing the geographical boundaries of Vietnam and foreign countries. The presence of characters as global citizens in Vietnamese detective novels not only marks Vietnam's integration in the context of globalization and international integration. Furthermore, it recognizes the efforts of detective novelists in reconstructing multidimensional discourses about the consequences of colonization in Vietnam. Specifically, while the insidious destruction of Vietnamese national cultural heritage continues to be emphasized through the presence of the French in Vietnam, the relationship between Vietnam and America is exposed as complex: either idealized to express the normalization process in the bilateral relationship between colonizers-colonized. Meanwhile, the representation of China and Cambodia as a metaphor for a new type of post-colonial reality shows a new political development in the relationship between Asian countries, and at the same time shows the echoes of the colonization process in the Vietnamese context, which has not easily faded.

The political schemes of the French are shown through the

character Luis in *The Tiandihui in An Nam* by Giản Tư Hải. As a French scientist, Luis is one of the five core members who are responsible for seeking the priceless treasure of the Trần Dynasty, by decoding the painting “The Mahasattva of Truc Lam Coming out of the Mountain” (painted by Trần Phồn in 1301, and re-painted by Trần Giám Như in 1304). These five core members include Dr. Trần Phiệt (Leader and General Manager of Thăng Long Imperial Citadel), Professor Huy Phan, Luis (French scientist), Deputy Director of the Imperial Citadel, and Huy Long’s father. Luis is French, but he has extensive involvement in contemporary archaeological activities in Vietnam. It was he who burned all the ancient books and precious scriptures of the feudal period, after stealing the gold and silver. It was also Luis who shot and killed Huy Long’s father. Luis’ presence cannot help but remind us of the role of French colonialism in the political, cultural, and religious foundation of Vietnam in the early modern period. Luis represents the French colonial empire which quelled Vietnamese culture. The legacy of colonialism still haunts the post-colonial period, that is a fact.

The Vietnamese characters’ expatriation and repatriation in Trần Thái Minh Thu’s *Lời cầu cứu của kẻ sát nhân* (A Murderer’s Call for Help) and Di Li’s *Câu lạc bộ số 7* (Club No. 7) show the writers’ open ideology towards former enemies. The male characters in the two novels both had educational backgrounds in America and chose to return to Vietnam. In *A Murderer’s Call for Help*, the character William immigrates to America to become a forensic pathologist and a psychologist in US law enforcement, then returns to Vietnam for work. That is why the Vietnamese forensic force welcomes him: “William is a famous Vietnamese in a foreign land, so university lecturers often use him as an example for young people preparing to enter this profession...” (Trần 2021:109). The character’s repatriation reflects a new fact in foreign relations between the two former enemies of the United States and Vietnam. The United States has been involved in the Vietnam War from 1954 to 1975. Many historical researchers consider the United States to be a neo-colonialist. But only 30 years after peace was restored, a young female writer of the generation born in the era of globalization, fictionalized a forensic pathologist named William who

studied abroad in the United States, working in the United States judicial force, then transferred to work at the Vietnamese judicial force. Those who understand politics and the organization of the police force in Vietnam find it fictionalized. Most of Vietnam's police and forensic forces are trained domestically, or from former allies who share the same ideologies such as Eastern European countries, the former Soviet Union, and China. The fact that William, who studies abroad in the US and works in US forensics, is invited to work in Vietnam's crime-solving force is a remarkable new perspective. It represents a very different political attitude, overcoming inertia and the clear, harsh division that dates back to the Cold War. Similarly, in the detective novel *Club No. 7* by Di Li, there is also an immigrant, an overseas Vietnamese who has lived in the US for many years, Kevin Quang, cousin of police officer Phan Đăng Bách. This shows the important influence and frequent interaction between the Vietnamese community both overseas and at home. Amid a new world, globalized order, there will be more and more immigrants around the world with Vietnamese roots. But no matter how far and long they go, their ethnic roots, family relationships, and Vietnamese lineage are still not lost. At some stage in their lives, they will return to their hometown of Vietnam, creating multi-dimensional interactions and influences.

Memories of hatred, loss of identity, and a place called home that arose during the colonization process are demonstrated in Lại Văn Long's *Kẻ sát nhân lương thiện* (The Honest Killer). The suffers caused by the loss are shown not to be easily compensated for an internship abroad in a used-to-be former colony. Interestingly, the writer recreates the cross-cultural space where France is the protagonist's exile space, but the cause of exile is shaped in the context of the Cold War, which is concerned with the Americans in South Vietnam. This detective-crime short story once caused a stir in Vietnamese literature during the Doi Moi period. It also brought fame to author Lai Van Long, with many important literary awards along with special attention from literary critics. The story tells about the tragic fate of the Villa Pensée of Major, District Chief Lâm Quang Sang of the South Vietnamese regime. From 1954 to 1975, Vietnam was divided into two regions, which are essentially two

separate countries that confront each other ideologically. In South Vietnam, the Republic of Vietnam follows the regime and ideology of bourgeois democracy. In Northern Vietnam, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam follows socialist ideology. The Villa Pensée before the historic milestone of 1975 is the house used by Major Lâm Quang Sang, while the first-person narrator and his father are just hired workers, mowing grass for the boss's horses. After 1975, the father becomes a communist colonel (Trương Văn Sửu) and returns to take over the Villa Pensée. Lâm Quang Sang and his son Lâm Quang Vinh from the position of boss become defeated. They have to flee Vietnam and leave behind all their assets to settle in France, after 13 years of being punished in reeducation camps. Lâm Quang Sang and Lâm Quang Vinh became typical immigrants in Vietnam in the 20th century, those who left their home country because of dissent and political and military conflicts. Many of them are not officially allowed to leave, so they are forced to flee at sea illegally and uncertainly, which makes them named boat people.

Lâm Quang Sang, after more than a decade of wandering in France, has the opportunity to return to Vietnam and reclaim his old assets because of Vietnam's new open foreign policy in the Renovation period. On November 3, 1988, Lâm Quang Sang wrote a letter to Trương Văn Sửu to reclaim the Villa Pensée, and six months later he succeeded. Trương Văn Sửu went from using the Villa Pensée villa as the official owner, whose ownership he gained through a clear military victory in the long war with the US, to suddenly being turned into a servant before the war broke out. Lâm Quang Sang went from the original position of boss to a loser and then was restored to ownership of the Villa Pensée. This twist and turn in contemporary Vietnamese history led to a tragedy when the first-person character, the son of communist colonel Trương Văn Sửu, shot and killed the family of Lâm Quang Vinh, the son of Lâm Quang Sang. Finally, in the trial with consideration of mitigating conditions, the character "I" was sentenced to life in prison.

The conflict between two sides, post-colonial immigrants and local people, shows the complexity of Vietnam's contemporary political foundation, where the past becomes an ominous inertia. The conflict between the Lâm and Trương's families is both a

conflict and a struggle over land ownership, a prominent issue in Vietnam today but also seems to reflect deeper conflicts. It raises questions about the nature of the Vietnam War from 1954 to 1975, dealing with the conflict between the United States and Vietnam in the past and present as well as Vietnam's current foreign political choices. The short story *Bodhi Leaf* (part 2 of *The Honest Murderer*) clearly states these concerns of author Lại Văn Long in the post-colonial era: "Domestic media simultaneously called him 'The honest murderer' while the Vietnamese-language media overseas cursed him as an "ideological enemy." A foreign news agency raised a harsh question:

You announced an innovation, calling for peace and national reconciliation, why do you defend the perpetrator who shot at overseas Vietnamese? [...] The father and son both did class struggle, but his father returned in glory, and the son was considered a terrible criminal in the legal system of a state formed from class struggle [...] The mother struggled and complained: 'Why are you so impatient and naive? In life, there is no justice in holding a gun to demand, my child!' (Lại 2020: 33-34).

In just a short excerpt, we can see the dialogue of different streams of thought and political voices in the post-colonial period in Vietnam.

The presence of Vietnam's neighbors, China and Cambodia, shows the obsession of smaller countries with the risk of usurping power from neighboring countries and reminds us of a type of post-colonial reality in a modern time. The obsession with a violation of sovereignty is fantasized in the detective novel Thục Linh's *Khế ước bán dâu* (The Bride-Selling Contract), or reinterpreted in a series of fictional stories by Giản Tư Hải, including *Thiên Địa hội An Nam* (The Tiandihui in An Nam), *Âm mưu thay não* (Brain Altering Conspiracy) and *Ổ buôn người* (Human Trafficking Station).

In *The Bride-Selling Contract*, the character Vũ Văn Tri is a wood merchant. Since he was young, he dreamed of being rich, but due to being dominated by his wife and having an abandoned child, he is forced to venture into dangerous deep forests to find precious

wood in the hope of changing his life. During an adventure into the Black Forest, a primeval jungle close to the border with Cambodia, he loses his way and is about to die. He is saved by a “forest spirit,” a dangerous Wood Demon. The contract with the devil is made, and the cruel, powerful demon brings Vu Van Tri money, wood, and wealth. He lets it afflict the bodies of his wife and daughter-in-law to survive. Every month when the moon is full, the Wood Demon needs to drink fresh blood to live and Vũ Văn Tri needs to sacrifice servants and poor people for it. The body of a woman in a family chosen for the demon to afflict is offered every three years, and the demon needs to find a new body. The fact that Vũ Văn Tri dreamed of being rich, and then brought back from Cambodia a dangerous evil demon that massacred his family members is a metaphor worth thinking about.

In the massive novel *The Tiandihui in An Nam*, Giản Tư Hải tells about a Chinese political and military organization that once operated strongly in Vietnam. Born in China, The Tiandihui was once a secret society to fight militarily and politically with the Manchu government:

The Tiandihui was born during the Qing dynasty’s Kangxi period in the second half of the 17th century from a group of Shaolin martial artists who once cut blood and swore to destroy the invaded Manchu people to restore the Great Ming. The association takes heaven as father and earth as mother and establishes a symbol of a circle nested within a square. The triangle symbolizing the three forces of heaven-earth-humans is also considered a symbol of this association (Giản 2021: 28).

In 1679, following two Ming Dynasty generals who sailed to Vietnam, The Tiandihui was considered to have expanded into the lives of the Cochinchina people of Vietnam. As a secret society, it is difficult to fully predict the potential, organizational structure, and actual involvement of this organization in Vietnamese cultural, religious, political, and military in the early modern period. According to some researchers, Giản Tư Hải believes that the Tiandihui established a branch in Vietnam, called the Tiandihui in An Nam, to serve as “the rear for the mainland front” (Giản 2021:

88]). The civil war between political organizations and feudal forces in modern China caused a large number of remnant members of the Tiandihui to follow the Minh Hương people to migrate to the South and settle in Vietnam. By relying on Buddha's teachings and following the footsteps of Northern Buddhist monks, the Tiandihui soon built a network of activities in Vietnam. The fact that this organization arose in the post-modern era, right in the middle of Thang Long Imperial Citadel, continuously killing people and holding the secret of a priceless ancient painting of the Trần Dynasty, a map leading to the greatest treasure in a feudal period, is considered an event that shocked public opinion. It shows that, although history has passed a long time ago, memories, sequelae, and even political organizations of the feudal colonial period remain. The fact that the leader, archaeologist Trần Phiệt, also the director of the Thang Long Imperial Citadel conservation area, and his great disciple Bảo Phước are two members of the Tiandihui shows that the past still resonates in the post-colonial era. At the end of the work, it turns out that Trần Phiệt only uses the name of the Tiandihui to take revenge on those who looted Tran Dynasty treasures and burned countless precious scriptures during the feudal period. But no matter what, the images of the Tiandihui and China's colonial past still become the memories and cultural space in this detective novel.

In *Brain Altering Conspiracy* and *Human Trafficking Station*, Giàn Tư Hải builds up characters who frequently cross the borders between Vietnam, Cambodia, and China. Vietnam's involvement in the political and military life of Cambodia in the modern period is important. Two talented Vietnamese police officers, Trần Phách and Nguyễn Hà Phan, directly fight in Cambodia in the campaign against the Khmer Rouge's genocide. Trần Phách used to be a member of Special Forces 429 stationed in Battambang. Hà Phan also fought in Cambodia more than 15 years ago. Peace has been restored after nearly two decades, the Khmer Rouge genocidal regime was only a painful past, but in this story, veterans once again have to fight on the old battlefield against Son Sen, one of the surviving Khmer Rouge bosses. He intends to replace his brain with Nguyễn Khoa Học body to achieve immortality. Trần Phách and Nguyễn Hà Phan

use their old experiences and memories of fighting in Cambodia to fight against the remnants of the Khmer Rouge in modern Cambodia. Nguyễn Khoa Học is a Ph.D., holding the position of Director of the Central Brain Institute of Vietnam. But he has brain cancer and has to have his entire brain replaced to be able to maintain his body's life. Ironically, the compatible and donated brain belonged to Son Sen, the Khmer Rouge boss second only to Pol Pot. At the end of the work, the brain of Son Sen's son is also transplanted into the body of Hà Phan, after Hà Phan's severe traumatic brain injury. The two dual figures of former enemies, one side's brain and the other's body, are perhaps a metaphor for a new post-colonial reality between the two countries of the former Indochina.

In *Human Trafficking Station*, Gián Tư Hải writes about a group of gangsters in China who regularly move across the Vietnamese border to traffic women, especially targeting beautiful young girls to turn them into sex slaves. The group of gangsters are Jack of Poshan; Ken, the illegal restaurant owner; Hulk, Ma's ruthless butcher; Mãnh, the ringleader specializing in transporting girls across the border; and Han Rắn (Snake), a young, brave man who has spent his entire life searching for the whereabouts of his sister who was sold to China. Due to the illegal trafficking of Vietnamese women across the border, Chinese criminals are often migrants crossing the border. They also established the "Ô Phú Association," a club consisting of 30 members specializing in collecting mainly young and beautiful Vietnamese girls who were tricked into being sold across the border. Vietnam and China have a history of close but complicated relations. In the twentieth century and twenty-first century, border wars and island conflicts in the East Sea cast a shadow on the relationship between two neighbors sharing the same communist ideology. Therefore, although *Human Trafficking Station* is written in the contemporary period, it can be seen as an allusion, a metaphor in the post-colonial period about the old crimes of the Northern neighbor.

In short, immigrant characters in Vietnamese detective stories in the early twenty-first century have suggested an overview of the problems of Vietnam in the post-colonial period. Immigrants have

brought knowledge, economic power, a wave of democracy, and promoted innovation and integration to Vietnam with many war wounds and the inertia of being closed off from the world since the feudal period of the Nguyễn Dynasty. On the other hand, immigrants also bring potential consequences and sequelae to contemporary Vietnam such as social evils, class conflicts, destruction of social moral foundations, and cross-border crimes.

IV. Post-colonial Cultural Space in Vietnamese Detective Stories in the Early Twenty-first Century

The imprint of postcolonial cultural space is expressed through the way the setting and artistic space in detective novels are characterized by hybridity as a product of the postmodern period. Let's start with one of the most excellent, interesting, and voluminous detective novels of Vietnamese literature in the early twenty-first century, *Club No. 7*. Female author Di Li is also one of professional and dedicated detective writers in Vietnam. *Club No. 7* is about a series of murders, with beautiful young girls constantly being mysteriously killed in a short period. Each victim, after being murdered, had a part of their body cut off by the perpetrator. Mỹ Anh's toe was cut off; Cẩm Tú's hair was cut; Hoàng Mai had her little finger cut off; Linh Đan's ear was cut off; Mai Thủy Lê had her tooth extracted; Mỹ Lâm had her heart ripped out; Trần Hoa Liên's eyes were gouged out. The culprit behind this chain of horrifying crimes is a secret society worshipping the god of drugs (Pantanal), bribed and controlled by a powerful new drug called "Blue Eye." This closed criminal club is linked, contacted and shares ideas with each other via the social network Facebook and the internet platform in general. This secret society is directed by a character nicknamed Durga (birth name Nguyễn Trí Hữu, with two different male and female personalities, with two separate nicknames: Lê Hà (female) and Johnny Huỳnh (male). This secret society includes 455 members, residing all over the world, communicating with each other only through Facebook. They all take the nicknames of "asexual" celebrities (neither male nor female, not showing clear sexual attitudes) in human history such as Jesus, Durga, Kant,

Buddha, Newton, and Chopin.

Post-colonial culture in Vietnam can be said to be created from internet culture:

The technological era has created a double-edged sword. It can make people feel less lonely, connecting and spreading information in record time, making anonymous people famous, but at the same time, it is the ultimate tool to spread and attract people from all over the world to follow their goals as quickly as possible... international criminal gangs and terrorists also regularly use social networks (Di 2022: 157).

The nicknames on the social networks that members of the closed club headed by Durga themselves also reflect a globalized world in which Vietnam is now an inevitable and active member. These nicknames come from great people from all over the world, regardless of historical background, religion, ethnicity, or activity, such as physicist Nikola Tesla, mathematician Paul Erdos, director Malik Bendjelloal, singer Morrissey of the band The Smiths, goddess Athena in Greek mythology. Among them, Nguyễn Trí Hữu's nickname Durga (Lê Hà/Johnny Huynh) is the name of a supreme goddess in Hinduism. Nguyễn Trí Hữu, a gentle, quiet orphan boy, has become a dangerous psychopath with the nickname Durga, with a split gender identity (Lê Hà/Johnny Huynh) and very discriminatory towards sexuality. The reason is that he was sexually abused by Vũ Phương Vinh, a bank director, for a long time since he was a 10-year-old child. Vũ Phương Vinh is a pedophile: "Every day he exploited the ten-year-old child with sick, lustful, and brutal sexual acts. The son of the person who saved his life became a pet imprisoned within four walls, unable to go to school or communicate [...] A pedophilia patient who had lost all humanity. And it was from his inhuman sickness that a monster was born, you" (Di 2022: 477).

The playboy life full of debauchery and amorous enjoyment of the character Vũ Phương Đăng- Vũ Phương Vinh's son- also reflects a new lifestyle of contemporary Vietnamese youth. Vũ Phương Đăng was born in peace when his parents were successful tycoons in politics and business with many large enterprises. He owns many

supercars and has a collection of beautiful young lovers in many complicated love relationships. He often frequents notorious nightspots, with a habit of using strong alcohol and drugs. It can be said that the detective novel *Club No. 7* is a direct blow to the ruling elite in Vietnam, because the real culprit, the devils at work is not Chopin or Durga (Nguyễn Trí Hữu), but father and his son Vũ Phương Đăng and Vũ Phương Vinh. Vũ Phương Vinh is the director of a large bank, who participated in the Vietnam War as a young soldier but soon developed a hobby of a male boy. Vũ Phương Vinh's older brother is Vũ Hồng Quang, a deputy minister in government. The older brother controls politics, the younger brother controls the economy and money, the wife is the owner of many private businesses, and the son is a debauched, spoiled playboy. That can be seen as the dark side of a post-colonial Vietnamese society. It can be seen that drugs, prostitution, and countless new evils of contemporary life such as pedophilia, human trafficking, and international crimes... are raging in Vietnam today more than during the French colonial period.

Red Flower Camp, also by Di Li, mentions another problem in contemporary Vietnamese society: people losing their living and agricultural land to tourism projects and urban construction of the new bourgeois class. One of the fierce and common class conflicts in Vietnamese society today is the conflict over people's land ownership rights and economic development and urban construction and capital concentration. The couple Trần Hoàng Lưu-Mai Diên Vỹ built a tourist area based on purchasing land from highland ethnic minorities. Ethnic minorities (Muong people) such as the characters Ráy, Di, A Cách, the crazy man, and the old shaman are impoverished and enslaved on the very land their ancestors exploited and once owned after the Red Flower Camp eco-tourism project was born.

It is also necessary to pay attention to the architectural and cultural traces and historical relics of the colonial past, which are still quite popular in the post-colonial period in Vietnam. *Red Flower Camp* is a villa on the street where the character Huy used to live, which was originally a property once owned by the Nationalist Party, an important bourgeois political party in Vietnam. It was a

“beautiful house with a white painted fence and a very high narrow staircase leading up to the main door [...] Right below the house, there was a huge cellar. The Nationalists had hundreds of torture instruments. Those unfortunate enough to be sent there will be tortured to death. Finally, their bodies will be carried out the back door to the lake” (Di 2018: 111). In Giản Tư Hải’s *The Tiandihui in An Nam*, architectural systems throughout Vietnam still bear traces of the colonial period. For example, Bến Thành market in Ho Chi Minh City is fictionalized as having the shape of the Tiandihui:

Does the Tiandihui ever display its symbol in publications or architecture? The answer is yes. Their guild halls are also designed to simulate the image of round sky and square earth, arrogantly in the middle of the streets. In the early twentieth century, the Tiandihui and the Chinese sponsored the construction of the Ben Thanh market and did not hesitate to display the symbol of two nested squares and circles on the main clock tower, which is still intact today (Giản 2021: 72).

The imprint of architecture is even more clearly shown and popular throughout major cities in Vietnam, especially the capital Hanoi, the ancient capitals of Hue and Saigon: “She believes there are French-era villas on the ground. After hundreds of years of domination, the French left Hanoi with a solid infrastructure and aristocratic architectural appearance. Post-modern establishment models, stately Gothic churches, and charming villas copied from many regions of France are springing up more and more. In addition to building magnificent neighborhoods, the French enhanced war service with weapons storage and hidden bunkers” (Giản 2021: 218). In addition, we must also mention the Luis Finot Museum, built in the early twentieth century, now renamed the Historical Museum, which the Tiandihui in *An Nam* mentioned on page 137.

In Giản Tư Hải’s *Brain Altering Conspiracy*, Trần Phách and Hà Phan still use the map of Indochina previously drawn by the US during the war, thanks to its detail, accuracy, and the user’s habits of using them. Thus, although the colonial regime has passed more than half a century, the cultural imprints of this period are still

deeply imprinted in the daily life of contemporary Vietnam. In addition, new forms of colonialism, a consequence of post-modern global culture, with the rise of the internet and new forms of entertainment and multimedia also contribute to creating today's cultural appearance in Vietnam.

V. The Oppression of Power and the Relativity of Good and Evil

In classic Western detective stories, such as the works of Edgar Poe (Detective C. Auguste Dupin), Sir Conan Doyle (Detective Sherlock Holmes), Agatha Christie (Detective Hercule Poirot and female detective Marple), the two sides of good and evil are very clear. The private detective is responsible for solving the crime, finding the perpetrator, decoding the case, sometimes enforcing justice, and making the villains pay for their crimes. The detective in classic detective stories not only represents intelligence, and outstanding ability to reason, imagine, and think logically but is also a symbol of humanistic values and justice in civil society. There is no opposite case, that is, the detective commits the crime, while the perpetrators represent justice. Vietnamese detective stories in the early twentieth century also followed the same general pattern, good and evil were distinguished and there was no case of changing roles. Detective Kỳ Phát by Phạm Cao Củng and the reporter Lê Phong by Thế Lữ are typical examples of the first half of the twentieth century.

But in the early twenty-first century, under the influence of the relativity of postmodern philosophy, common moral concepts have been revisited, and multivalence and dichotomy have been promoted. Postmodern techniques appear more and more in world literature, influencing writers' methods of writing and readers' reception. Unreliable narrators, genre-blending, moral ambiguity, or plot twists and red herrings seem to become a fashionable writing method for detective novelists (Bradford 2015). These characteristics are maximally utilized through popular detective novels in recent times, such as *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson, *The Girl on the Train* by Paula Hawkins or

The Silence of the Lambs by Thomas Harris. Unlike earlier crime fiction, psychological depth is also focused, where characters' motives, traumas and human psyche are detailed explored. The characters grapple with ethical dilemmas and the line between right and wrong becomes blurred. Moreover, global settings not only transport readers to diverse locations but also reflect universal issues, such as corruption, inequality and political unrest. Generally, authors use crime plots to comment on real-world problems, making the genre relevant and thought-provoking.

Strongly influenced by the postmodern creative trend of the twenty-first century, only a few Vietnamese detective works still follow the path that was outlined nearly a century earlier. Typical examples of the old trajectory include the detective short story collection *Muội tro* (The Ashes) by Võ Chí Nhất, with a character full of personality and courage, a female police investigator nicknamed Hà "Ốt" (Chili); detective novels by Di Li with criminal police officer Phan Đăng Bách, or two loyal, brave and talented police officers, Nguyễn Hà Phan and Trần Phách in *Giãn Tư Hải's* novels. However, in the case of Di Li and *Giãn Tư Hải*, the common moral concepts of good and evil have begun to blur, which we will analyze later.

Under the oppression of various forms of power, crime solvers and high-status people do not always represent justice and goodness. On the contrary, perpetrators, murderers, and criminals do not always represent evil, ugliness, and decadence in society. The uncertainty of the so-called social status and the on-going essence of identity makes the line between good and bad fragile. Kim Tam Long's *Án úc trắng* (The White Disturbance) and Trần Thái Minh Thu's *A Murderer's Call for Help* could be examples. *The White Disturbance* has a thrilling and complex plot, with many overlapping storylines. There is a series of murders that take place one after another with young girls. From Diệu Hương to Hải Yến and before that, the young actress Tuyết Nhung. They are believed to have been murdered by a serial killer, a dangerously insane man who had just escaped from a mental hospital named Lê Đình Trung. The murdered girls were confirmed to be more or less related to Lê Đình Trung's emotional life. Directly treating this dangerous 32-year-old

patient/murderer are three dedicated and brave doctors named Lâm, Minh and Thủy. But at the end of the work, people learn that Lê Đình Trung only killed Tuyết Nhung before Lê Đình Trung was forced to be treated in a mental hospital. The two other female victims were murdered by Dr. Minh. Dr. Minh borrowed the hand of patient Lê Đình Trung to carry out his despicable act. The psychiatrist turned out to be the murderer, an evil person, not a mental patient. Similarly, the serial killer in Trần Thái Minh Thu's *A Murderer's Call for Help* ended up being a young female forensic pathologist named Thiên Ái. Thiên Ái had a tragic childhood: her father died early, she lacked the love of her mother and was abused by her stepfather. Childhood psychological trauma is known to be the reason for the character's brutal actions as a way of carrying out justice. Readers' sympathy for the female protagonist does not only come from the character's harsh circumstances. "Chickens come home to roost" might be the logic that is come up with for the readers, although Thiên Ái's authority to judge others' crimes needs to be reconsidered.

The concept of man as a product of historical and social context is the main poetic feature in Vietnamese detective novels of the early twenty-first century. The twists between the perpetrator and the victim, accompanied by the exploration of the hidden psychological memories of the characters, show the influences of post-colonial trends, where the boundaries of class and ethnicity will be proven to be fallacious and prejudiced. The murderer-perpetrator sometimes serves justice, and the victims are the perpetrators of heinous crimes. The plot and unexpected twists in Phong Điệp's *Cuốn sổ máu* (Bloody Book), Di Li's *Club No. 7* and *Đóa hồng đắm sương* (A Rose Drenched in Dewy Rose), Nguyễn Dương Quỳnh's *Thăm thăm mùa hè* (Into the Depth of Summer), Giản Tư Hải's *The Tiandihui in An Nam* and Nhật Duy's *Bên trong tổ kén* (Inside the Cocoon) are all framed against the backdrop of colonial and post-colonial history as an attempt to rationalize the victim's criminal behavior. These novels share the motif of trauma-violence-crime. To some extent, violence, corruption, corruption and moral decline in Vietnamese detective narratives are fictionalized as products of an era of mistrust and distrust.

In *Bloody Book* by Phong Điệp, the boss of the drug business group with the nickname “Lâm The Patriarch” turns out to have his real name Hoàng Văn Hận. Hận is a cruel character, but he loves his wife and child very much, especially his disabled son who is in a wheelchair. The life of Lâm is full of personal tragedies. At the age of 17, his mother Hoàng Thị Sa was deceived by a strong carpenter and made her pregnant. After that, his father offered the pregnant woman to his two friends to rape, then left her. His mother hated his father, so she named her son Hận. His mother married a stepfather who worked as a car repairman. To increase the inspiration for lovemaking, his stepfather often beat him to death before having sex, under the encouragement of his mother: “Beat him to death. Let him die with his father” (Phong 2023: 156). His mother gave birth to another daughter, then gave it to Han to take care of, and then calmly went to work as a prostitute. Hận brought his sister everywhere begging and being a pickpocket for a living. He had a tragic life, a childhood of abandonment and violence. When he grew up and became a rich and powerful tycoon, he was still surrounded by disasters. The first wife gave birth to a disabled child, the second wife had an affair with a doctor with a mole on his face. The gentle third wife was about to give birth to Hận’s healthy son when suddenly both mother and child died during childbirth. Later, Hận learned that those two deaths were caused by the second wife’s lover. Hận directed his juniors, Tắc Hổ Mang (Cobra) and Sảng Bò Diên (Mad Cow), to take revenge and kill the doctor’s entire family, with 11 lives being massacred in the dark of night.

In Di Li’s *Club No. 7*, the perpetrator Durga, and a group of accomplices in a secret society sacrificing women to the god Pantanal did not cause much outrage. Nor do they purely represent evil. Durga is also a victim of the real perpetrator, which is father and son, brothers of the family of political and economic giant Vũ, including Vũ Phương Quang (deputy minister), Vũ Phương Vinh (bank director) and Vũ Phương Đăng. It was continuous sexual abuse of Trí Hữu when he was only 10 years old and an orphan that turned Durga into a splitter, psychopath, serial killer, and asexual in sexual orientation. At the end of the novel, the culprit turns out to be the boss, husband, and father of this farm: Trần Hoàng Lưu,

instead of ghosts or demons with a terrible smell like the old witch doctor, the crazy guy. Likewise, *A Rose Drenched in Dew* (printed in the story collection *Muôi tro* (The Ashes) by Võ Chí Nhất finally exposes the husband named Hùng who poisoned his wife with roses drenched in potassium cyanide, on her birthday. *The Tiandihui in An Nam* by Giản Tư Hải finally showed that the group of murderers, robbers of gold treasures, and burning of precious feudal-era scriptures turned out to be the country's leading scientists, including Professor Huy Phan, Deputy Director of the Imperial Citadel, Luis. Two brutal murderers, considered members of the Tiandihui in An Nam are Dr. Trần Phiệt (Leader and General Administrator of Thăng Long Imperial Citadel) and Venerable Monk Bảo Phước are the representatives of justice, the protectors of the treasures and knowledge of their ancestors.

In the detective novel *Into the Depth of Summer* by Nguyễn Dương Quỳnh, the murderer named Thụy, a journalist, is publicly declared guilty from the beginning and is written by the author with a very calm tone and attitude. There is no moral criticism of Thụy, the narrator even shows sympathy and defends him, even though Thụy himself killed his father (by creating an accident while his father was performing a circus). Thụy has a tragic personal life. His parents divorced early, creating a distorted personality in him. After his father died, Thụy returned to live with his mother and stepfather, where he was repeatedly abused and injured, locked in a closet, and starved for a long time. The mother openly had absolutely no feelings for Thụy, “when he was hurt and didn’t feel anything—with dry eyes, the mother said that. Only when the court deprived her of the right to crib her other children did she burst into tears” (Nguyễn 2018: 67). *Into the Depth of Summer* is written as a sympathetic discourse towards the perpetrators rather than as a criticism. The series of detective works mentioned above show that most perpetrators have tragic personal lives, lack parental love, and have been abused, sexually abused, and abandoned by their own relatives. That is the profound reason that pushes them to commit crimes, carrying mental trauma that never heals. Crime in these cases is a rebellion, a protest against the oppressive power order of the time.

The most excellent and complex Vietnamese detective novel of the early twenty-first century must include *Inside the Cocoon* by Nhất Duyệt. Its detective motif is quite old, similar to the works of Agatha Christie, that is, multiple murders occur in a closed space (specifically, an island isolated from the outside world). The investigation must show who is the murderer among those present in that space. Even though everyone is suspicious, everyone has an alibi. A group of friends goes to the island, then a series of tragedies occurs: Hải Âu is hanged and stabbed through the heart; Hồng Nhạn is pushed down into the abyss and dies, his left hand is slashed; Quang Bằng also disintegrated in the deep abyss reaching out to the sea; Đông Quân and Thiện Nhân were in a coma and seriously injured from being stabbed by a knife. When they woke up, they both agreed that Quang Bằng was the murderer. The final perpetrator was Thiện Nhân, but he acted so cruelly because of old grudges and murder victims who had committed unforgivable crimes. Quang Bằng once raped Khánh Vy, causing her to commit suicide; Đông Quân had an affair with Hồng Nhạn while she was Hiếu's lover. The two then murdered Hiếu and put his body in a red suitcase. Thiện Nhân was the one who knew about this entire chain of cause-and-effect crimes and was determined to kill Bằng, Quân and Nhạn to revenge for old friends who died tragically (especially Vy and Hiếu). Particularly, Hải Âu's death was against Thiện Nhân's will. Thus, the series of murders in *Inside the Cocoon* is intended to enforce a kind of extra-legal justice. Thiện Nhân, the name of the character itself, evokes a clear message about the moral views of author Nhất Duyệt.

VI. Conclusion

In short, detective stories in the early twenty-first century, although still on the journey of development and confirmation, have had remarkable achievements in the history of Vietnamese literature. One of the outstanding values of this field of literature is that it successfully portrays the fate of immigrants, the post-colonial cultural structure that exists today, thereby pointing out new moral perspectives in evaluating people in general and crimes and

criminals in particular. These polyvalent moral perspectives have tried to resist the oppression of the old centers of power, the familiar grand narratives that have dominated the lives of Vietnamese people for centuries. The story of detective literature is therefore the important contemporary issue of a new and strong Vietnam that is in its infancy.

Detective literature is a platform that contributes to creating discourse about race, gender, nationalism and imperialism. In contrast to the world detective scene, Vietnamese detective novels are marginalized, even stereotyped as a sub-literary genre. Focusing on Vietnamese detective novels in the early twenty-first century, we attempt to consider detective novels as a powerful tapestry for exploring crime, justice and identities through the lens of postcolonial studies. Brief introductions to Southeast Asian detective novels show similarities in the way Southeast Asian countries, the former colonized, apply detective novels to respond to Western conventional discourses by reflecting their socio-culture realities. By focusing on Vietnamese detective novels as a case study, we show the interactions between Southeast Asian countries in reinterpreting national history. The presence of migrant characters and the post-colonial context in Vietnamese detective novels exposes complex social reality, where the reception of colonial cultural heritage is not a one-way path. Alienation, degeneration, corruption, and violence are argued as the consequences of the collision process between colonial heritage, indigenous knowledge, and foreign cultural waves in the era of globalization. In general, by proposing to approach the object of research, which is detective fiction, with a new theoretical tool, which is post-colonial studies, we contribute to scholarship on Southeast Asian detective novels, which emphasizes the intrinsic creativity of former colonial culture in reconstructing the discourse of the nation and creating an antithesis to colonial culture.

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