

# The Integration of Vietnamese Literature with French Literature in the Early 20th century: The Case of Writer Hồ Biểu Chánh

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## Abstract

To demonstrate some manifestations of the integration of Vietnamese literature (in the case of Hồ Biểu Chánh), specifically with French literature, this paper will highlight the intersection of global and national characteristics in Vietnamese literature at that time, particularly in Hồ Biểu Chánh's adaptation of French literary works. Additionally, the paper employs analytical and synthetic methods to break down the research problems, thereby providing a clearer understanding of Hồ Biểu Chánh's unique features. This approach emphasizes the inheritance, development, and originality in certain aspects of Hồ Biểu Chánh's integration with world literature in the early 20th century.

**Keywords:** Integration; Literature; Hồ Biểu Chánh; Vietnam.

Since the invasion and colonization of Vietnam, French colonialism not only implemented policies of economic and political assimilation but also propagated French culture and literature into Vietnam. From that point on, Vietnam was influenced and impacted by French culture and literature. China's culture and literature no longer had the same strong influence over Vietnamese culture and literature after thousands of years. In this context, history presented the entire Vietnamese nation with an immense challenge: how to "integrate" in a way that preserves the country's beautiful culture while still absorbing and promoting the essence of human culture. It is also because of the intersection between French and Vietnamese culture and literature that this period saw the

emergence of many writers and poets creating new trends and genres, both in content and artistic form.

From this point on, not only literature in the South but also literature throughout the country underwent significant changes from the 20th century onwards. The cultural and artistic movement, journalism, and translation flourished rapidly, and foreign novels were increasingly adapted, with many being published in the 20th century. In the Southern region, Hồ Biểu Chánh was one of the leading novelists of Vietnamese literature in the first half of the 20th century, with a series of creative works, adaptations, and translated novels that he presented to readers. Although there have been many articles and research works on the author

Hồ Biểu Chánh, with admiration and love for literature, this paper will use content analysis to delve into some aspects of the author Hồ Biểu Chánh to see the absorption of the valuable essence of human culture, in this case, French culture and literature. Alongside that is the preservation and promotion of traditional Vietnamese values. At the same time, it aims to understand how French novels influenced Vietnamese novels at that time.

### SOCIAL CONTEXT OF VIETNAM IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

After more than a thousand years of nation-building, by the first half of the 20th century, Vietnam remained an agricultural country. Meanwhile, Western nations had developed advanced machinery and technology. In 1897, French colonialists had essentially invaded and ruled Vietnam after the Cần Vương movement failed with Phan Đình Phùng's sacrifice in 1895. Having established control, the French imposed their rule over the three Indochinese countries (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia) and exploited the colonies to fuel their world wars and enrich themselves with resources.

Economically, the French aggressively exploited natural resources like coal and gold, levied unreasonable taxes, and monopolized the salt and alcohol markets. They also confiscated land and ruthlessly exploited the people. While industrial production served human needs, the French restricted heavy industry development. They built extensive railway lines crucial for colonial exploitation. Consequently, Vietnam's economy changed, with capitalist production relations emerging. A new class, the working class, was born.

Aiming for long-term control, the French sought support from the established feudal class and traitors willing to collaborate. To protect their interests, some feudal lords surrendered, becoming puppets for the French to oppress the people, slander patriotic revolutionaries, and defend the colonialists. Recognizing the decay and backwardness of the feudal ideology and political system, patriotic intellectuals turned to

revolution, following the democratic bourgeois trends of Phan Bội Châu and Phan Châu Trinh.

The French's relentless exploitation impoverished Vietnam's economy and worsened people's lives. They poisoned the population with alcohol and opium, aiming to keep them poor and ignorant for easier control. The French implemented a "divide and rule" policy, dividing Vietnam into regions (Tonkin, Annam, Cochinchina) with different political regimes, headed by the Governor-General of Indochina. Each region had French Residents-Superior or Governors, further divided into provinces, districts, and communes, each headed by French officials or local collaborators.

Culturally, the French sought to replace Confucianism with Western culture by limiting education and promoting decadent culture, superstition, gambling, and alcoholism. However, progressive cultural elements entered Vietnam, challenging conservative Confucian values in areas like love, marriage, and family. Westernized lifestyles emerged, impacting fashion and dining habits, with some adopting Western clothing and cuisine. The traditional examination system based on Confucianism was abolished, diminishing its dominance in Vietnamese cultural life. The French also established schools teaching French to serve their interests.

At the same time, literature began to undergo a "transformation": foreign novels were increasingly translated, and Vietnamese writers began to create literature in the novel genre - a genre not highly regarded in medieval literature. Besides, journalism also emerged and started to develop strongly, contributing significantly to expanding knowledge, teaching the national language, and propagating literary and artistic works to improve people's intellect, with some typical newspapers such as *Đại Việt tạp chí*, *Nam Kỳ tuần báo*, *Đông Dương tạp chí* (1913-1916), *Phụ nữ tân văn* (1929-1934). This shows that during this period, the cultural ideology of Vietnamese people gradually underwent profound changes on the path of exchange and

integration. From 1932 to 1945, the trend of romanticism, escaping from real life, was sought by most writers, and they fled into the dream world to forget the dark life in the old society, such as the writers Thế Lữ, Xuân Diệu, Hàn Mặc Tử, Chế Lan Viên, Nhất Linh, Thạch Lam...

For a long time in Vietnamese literature, since the appearance of written literature, imitating stories or basing on foreign literary works to create is something we often see and is common. For example, the work *Đoạn trường tân thanh* by Nguyễn Du was also imitated by *Kim Vân Kiều truyện* by Thanh Tâm Tài Nhân in China.

Entering the 20th century, Hồ Biểu Chánh pioneered in "borrowing" part or all of the plot to create. But when reading those "borrowed" works, we do not see any foreign elements, on the contrary, they are the cultural features, identities, and personalities of the characters that are *đậm chất* of Vietnamese people.

#### INTRODUCING THE AUTHOR HỒ BIỂU CHÁNH

Hồ Biểu Chánh is considered a great writer of the Southern region of Vietnam. According to a family record, he was born on October 1, 1885, in Bình Thành village, Kiến Hòa district, Định Tường province, now Gò Công Đông district, Tiền Giang province (in the Mekong Delta today). When writing, Hồ Văn Trung took the name Biểu Chánh combined with the surname Hồ, hence the pen name Hồ Biểu Chánh. Hồ Văn Trung was born into a poor farming family, but he was a very good student. After studying Chinese characters, he switched to studying Vietnamese in Mỹ Tho, then went to Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) to study at Chasseloup-Laubat School. At the end of 1905, Hồ Văn Trung passed the Thành Chung exam (The phrase "bằng Thành Chung" refers to a type of diploma awarded during the French colonial period in Vietnam, equivalent to a high school diploma today).

After passing the Thành Chung exam (The phrase "bằng Thành Chung" refers to a type of diploma awarded during the French colonial

period in Vietnam, equivalent to a high school diploma today), Hồ Văn Trung held many different jobs, ranks, and positions. In 1906, he started working as an interpreter and secretary. From then on, he traveled to many places such as Bạc Liêu, Cà Mau, Long Xuyên, and Gia Định. In 1927, Hồ Văn Trung was promoted to district chief of Càng Long (Trà Vinh). By 1936, Hồ Văn Trung was promoted to *Đốc Phủ Sứ* (Provincial Governor). Hồ Văn Trung's civil service career (working as an official for the French) was a long and progressive journey. On August 4, 1941, Hồ Văn Trung was promoted to Councilor of the Indochina Federal Council, and at the same time served as Director of *Nam Kỳ Tuần báo* (Nam Ky Weekly News) 1942. When the "Nam Kỳ Quốc" puppet government was established by the French with Nguyễn Văn Thinh as Prime Minister, Hồ Văn Trung was invited to be an advisor to this government, after which he retired. However, after a few months as an advisor, the "Nam Kỳ Quốc" government collapsed, and Hồ Văn Trung returned to his hometown of Gò Công to live in seclusion. On November 4, 1958, he passed away at the age of 73 in Phú Nhuận, Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City. In his career, Hồ Biểu Chánh left behind a vast literary legacy, rich in content and diverse in genres, with 64 novels, 12 collections of short stories and translations, plays, folk operas, reformed theater, translations, research, essays, memoirs, and speeches.

Some of his famous works include:

In 1922, Hồ Biểu Chánh published the works *Chúa tàu Kim Quy* (novel), *Lửa ngưng thành linh* (French), *Tình anh em*, *Toại chí bình sanh* (comedy). From 1923 to 1941 was the period of development and flourishing of Hồ Biểu Chánh's novels. In 1923, he wrote many novels such as *Tình mộng*, *Một chữ tình*, *Cây đắng mùi đời* (inspired by *The Count of Monte Cristo* by A. Dumas), *Nam cực tình huy* (1924). In 1925, he also published a series of novels such as *Nợ tình âm lạnh*, *Tiền bạc*, *Bạc tiền*. The novels *Thầy thông ngôn*, *Ngon cỏ gió đùa* (inspired by *Les Misérables* by V. Hugo) were published in 1926.

In 1928, Hồ Biểu Chánh published the works *Ngon cỏ gió đùa* (A blade of grass swaying in the wind), *Chút phận linh đình* (A fragile fate), *Kẻ làm người chịu* (The burden falls on those who are human). In 1929, *Vì nghĩa vì tình* (For righteousness and love), *Cha con nghĩa nặng* (The bond between father and child is heavy), *Khóc thầm* (Silent tears), *Vì nghĩa vì tình, Nặng gánh cang thường*, *Con nhà nghèo* (A child of poverty) in 1930. In 1935, he wrote works such as *Cười gượng* (Forced Smile), *Thiệt giả giả thiệt* (Truth and Falsehood), *Ông Cừ... Ai tình Miếu* (Love Temple), *Cư Kinh* (novel 1941), *Ký ức cuộc đi Bắc kỳ* (Memories of a Trip to the North.), (memoir 1941).

In 1942, Hồ Biểu Chánh published *Pétain cách ngôn*, *Á Đông triết lý hiệp giải* (research). Next, in 1943, he wrote the works *Mẹ ghê con ghê* (novel), *Hai khối tình*, *Nguyệt Nga công Hồ* (reformed theater), and in 1944, Hồ Biểu Chánh published the works *Gia Long khai quốc võ tướng*, *Gia Định tổng trấn*, *Chân hưng văn học Việt Nam...* (research), *Mấy ngày ở Bến Súc* (Memoir), *Cái chết của người xưa* (speech), *Chị hai tôi*, *Một đóa hoa rừng* (short stories).

In 1945, Hồ Biểu Chánh had the works *Đại nghĩa diệt thân* - Great righteousness destroys the body (comedy), *Trương Công Định quy thần* (Trương Công Định returns to the gods), *Công chúa kén chồng* - The princess chooses a husband (folk opera), *Tu dưỡng chi nam...* (research).

In 1948, Hồ Biểu Chánh published the speeches *Nho giáo*, *Giáo lý của đạo Phật...* on essays, there were *Chánh trị giáo dục* (politics and education), *Tùy bút thời đàm* (Essays of the Time)... and on research, there were *Việt ngữ bốn nguyên* (Vietnamese Etymology), *Thành ngữ tạp lục* (Idioms and Proverbs)... In 1949, he researched and published two works: *Thiền môn chư Phật*, *Địa dư đại cương...*, *Tâm hồn tôi* (memoir). In 1950, Hồ Biểu Chánh continued to research and published two works: *Phật giáo cảm hóa Trung Hoa* and *Phật giáo vào Việt Nam*.

In the last years of his life, despite his declining health, Hồ Biểu Chánh still diligently produced immortal works, showing that he was

a person who dedicated his whole life to the country's literature and art. In 1953, Hồ Biểu Chánh wrote the works *Trọn nghĩa vẹn tình*, *Bức thư hồi hận* (novel). *Nặng bầu ân oán*, *Đỗ nương nương báo oán* (1954)... In 1955, in terms of novels, he published *Tơ hồng vương vấn*, *Đại nghĩa diệt thân...* In 1957, Hồ Biểu Chánh wrote many novels such as *Old wife, young husband*, *Live and die with love*,

*Debt of love*, *Which way to happiness*, *Through death to a new life*, *Sacrifice* (1958).

From the works that Hồ Biểu Chánh left behind, we can see a literary career that is extremely meaningful in terms of content, rich in genres, and worthy of our research and study.

#### Manifestation of Integration

Due to his extensive travels and exposure to various places, Hồ Biểu Chánh possessed an incredibly rich life experience. This life experience and broad understanding served as a powerful asset, contributing to the success of his literary works, particularly his novels. In Hồ Biểu Chánh's writings, two fundamental and prominent content trends emerge the reflection of the real-life experiences of the people in the Southern region and the tendency to impart moral lessons in his novels.

When we read any literary work, we encounter one or more "objects" that are mentioned within the work. These objects can be "people, animals, plants, natural phenomena, or social phenomena, life experiences whose boundaries are somewhat blurred" (Chim Văn Bé, 2007) this is the theme. Additionally, themes can exist in two forms: "in the real world or in the world perceived as real."

From the past to the present, the topic of love has remained a timeless theme that writers and poets have explored in their creations. In this context, the theme refers to the object being reflected in the works of writers in general. Therefore, in novels about the love lives of characters, Hồ Biểu Chánh has touched the hearts of many generations of readers, such as the love stories of characters like Miss Lê, Khải

Quang, Thiên Hương, Xuân Sơn, and Thu Thủy, which the author has explored and utilized.

Regarding the main theme, the main theme is the topic that the writer explores and develops with deeper content. "The fundamental and comprehensive development of the entire theme is the main theme of the text." Through the love story, the author allows readers to perceive intense, passionate, and faithful love, and the story concludes that those in love, whether alive or dead, will always be together. "They placed Paul next to Virginie, both under the shade of bamboo trees; and surrounding the two young individuals were their kind mothers and loyal servants" (Đỗ Đức Hiểu, 2007). This is because, from the past to the present, most people in love have suffered due to prejudices about wealth and poverty, and betrayal in love for someone richer or more beautiful.

Perhaps when we love, we must overcome many trials and tribulations; then, feelings will deepen and become unbreakable, even in death, like Paul, Virginie, or Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, who transformed into butterflies to freely soar together in the sky, not bound by any force. Although the novel "Sống thác với tình" (adapted from "Paul et Virginie") shares similarities in the theme of love and the fate of love being influenced by the social environment, each writer has a new approach to exploration that aligns with the cultural characteristics, society, and personality of each country and people. Therefore, when adapting "Sống thác với tình" from "Paul et Virginie," Hồ Biểu Chánh applied his deep understanding of the culture and personality of the people in the Southern region, so despite the similarities in theme and main theme, there are still unique aspects. Hence, when reading "Live and die with love" it's difficult to recognize it as an adaptation.

In "Paul et Virginie" by Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, the author depicts the simple life of small individuals living in a wild, sparsely populated natural setting on the island of Île de France. This island, located far from the mainland in the middle of the sea, became a refuge and haven for

those ostracized by their families and abandoned by society due to harsh prejudices. Due to the prejudice of class discrimination, the young couple, Mr. and Mrs. de la Tour, had to leave to seek their happiness and oppose the feudal rituals that had restricted human freedom in matters of love, marriage, and family for thousands of years. To oppose the rigid prejudices of feudal society, Mr. and Mrs. de la Tour had to pay a price. It's not the compatibility of family backgrounds in terms of social status and wealth that brings happiness, but true love that brings joy and happiness to people. Society is still filled with temptations and deceit. Marguerite was seduced by a nobleman, became pregnant, and was then abandoned. The old grandmother of Virginie deceived her with promises of inheritance but mistreated her and used schemes to deprive her of the inheritance. Perhaps for these reasons, the author liberated his characters from society's oppression by allowing them to be "freed" to be together, not separated by anyone.

Like Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Hồ Biểu Chánh also created a realistic setting for the characters in "Live and die with love" with a peaceful and serene natural landscape. Similar to Phú Quốc Island, this is a refuge for small individuals like Hai Cường, Miss Lê, Thiên Hương, Xuân Sơn, Thu Thủy, and others who are despised and rejected by society and their families. These individuals also endure much suffering and hardship, facing class discrimination and religious divisions that lead to unfulfilled

In the realist trend, Hồ Biểu Chánh painted a vivid picture of the lives of rural and urban people in Southern Vietnam in the first half of the 20th century, with many classes and social statuses. Among them, the poor in the countryside were always oppressed and trampled upon by the rich and heartless, as in the novels "Con nhà nghèo" (The Poor Child), "Ngọn cỏ gió đùa" (The Grass in the Wind)... Besides, Hồ Biểu Chánh also exposed the evil nature of exploitation, fraud, and lowly desires, sometimes even forcing injustice and harming innocent

people... as in the novels "Khóc thầm" (Crying Silently), "Con nhà nghèo" (The Poor Child), "Chúa tàu kim quý" (The Golden Turtle Boat Owner), "Ngọn cỏ gió đùa" (The Grass in the Wind)... However, life is not absolute, besides the evil people, there are also kind people who help others, such as the council of Chanh and Thu Ha in "Khóc thầm" (Crying Silently)... people who work as servants are also reflected in works like "Ngựa người người ngựa" (Horse and Man), "Thầy Chung trúng số" (Teacher Chung Wins the Lottery)... In Hồ Biểu Chánh's works, the relationships in love and marriage are also mentioned and reflected. In the first decades of the 20th century, the integration of new cultural elements from the West flooded into Vietnam, requiring us to make a choice: to follow the old or to pursue the new? Hồ Biểu Chánh absorbed, selected, and combined to express in his works the issues of love, marriage, family, and the negatives in marriage, such as "Sống thác với tình" (Living and Dying with Love), "Cười gượng" (Forced Smile), "Nhân tình âm lạnh" (Warm and Cold Affair), "Lời thề trước miếu" (Vow Before the Temple)...

In the moral trend, Hồ Biểu Chánh's works emphasize the issue of ethics and traditional morality. He values and actively preserves the positive feudal moral values and embraces the progressive, liberal, and free-spirited moral values of foreign countries. The good always triumphs over evil, and the evil is portrayed in the works to warn and educate people.

Hồ Biểu Chánh selectively absorbed the essence of foreign cultures, thereby contributing to the development and expansion of the national culture, enriching and broadening the knowledge of Vietnamese people at that time. Hồ Biểu Chánh is considered a great writer of Southern Vietnam, the leading novelist in Southern Vietnam in particular and the whole country in general in the early 20th century. He made significant contributions to the completion and development of the Quoc Ngu vernacular in our country during that time. And his literary career has left countless moral and cultural values that

we need to pay attention to, understand, preserve, and promote.

## CONCLUSION

Hồ Biểu Chánh absorbed and was influenced by French literature, but the distinct features are his creativity and inheritance of the traditional cultural and literary values of the nation. Whether European or Asian, whether influenced by romanticism or Confucian morality, they all stand on the viewpoint of respecting and praising true love. At the same time, they condemn the backward, conservative, and narrow-minded forces that have pushed people to tragedies. Typical examples are the mothers in the two novels mentioned above and the painful tragedies that their children have to bear in the works "Sống thác với tình" (Living and Dying with Love) and "Paul et Virginie"...

Integrating the inspiration of love, but the living space and cultural characteristics have created different flavors of romantic love stories. At the same time, the cultural differences also show the author's intention to localize foreign works and replace Catholic ideology with Taoist and Confucian ideology.

The country and people of Vietnam in the early 20th century and the country and people of France in the 18th century were very different in terms of climate conditions, cultural activities, and religious beliefs. Specifically, the French placed their faith in Catholicism, while the Vietnamese people's faith was in Taoism and Buddhism. This shows that Hồ Biểu Chánh was very conscious of preserving the national cultural identity in absorbing foreign ideologies and cultures. Besides, he still did not lose the characteristics of Vietnamese national literature, although he was influenced by Western culture and literature. Hồ Biểu Chánh's absorption of Western literature contributed to enriching Vietnamese literature. He also played a significant role in modernizing Vietnamese literature in the early 20th century, especially the Quoc Ngu vernacular in Southern Vietnam during that time. Therefore, when the country

entered a period of integration with nations and peoples worldwide, the issue of absorbing culture and literature required careful selection to

find the essence of humanity and to inherit and promote the good cultural and literary values of the Vietnamese people.

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