

# Assessment of Nguyen Huy Thiep's Works on Historical Topics

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**Abstract:** As a challenge and a “trial” in the sphere of thoughts and art, it is not easy to make a general assessment of Nguyen Huy Thiep’s works on historical issues due to many different viewpoints and explanations. However, we cannot omit his works, when discussing the “literary and artistic creations on historical topics” in the *đổi mới*, or renovation, period. Basically, Nguyen Huy Thiep’s works on historical topics share many similarities with the general artistic conception in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, his outlook was improved, renovated, and modernised. His literary works focus on exploring and reflecting the people’s life, the nation’s destiny, and burning issues of the day. They have been highly appreciated by readers, republished many times, and translated into many languages.

**Keywords:** Nguyen Huy Thiep, historical topic, literature in the renovation period.

**Subject classification:** Literature

## 1. Introduction

Carrying out an in-depth survey of the works on historical topics, we can realise remarkable transitional stages, cultural exchange, and literary development. First of all, the works written in the context of the wars (1945-1975) are often subtitled “stories of famous people”, “historical celebrities”, “historical stories”, “historical memoirs”, “eternal exemplars”, “homeland celebrities”, or “national stars”, etc. Those works mainly narrate famous figures as central characters, describing their lives and achievements together with historical

events as the story plot without wild fiction or exaggeration. The authors of those works were mainly cultural and historical researchers or teachers, who had thorough knowledge of famous people (for instance, Ha An, Quynh Cu, Nguyen Duc Hien, Nguyen Hong, Vu Ngoc Khanh, Nguyen Loc, Bui Van Nguyen, Chu Thien, Nguyen Huy Tuong, and Thai Vu, who wrote about historic figures such as Le Hoan, Ly Anh Tong, Tran Hung Dao, Tran Khanh Du, Tran Quoc Toan, Lieu Hanh, Nguyen Trai, Nguyen Chich, Nguyen Binh Khiem, Quang Trung, Nguyen Du, Nguyen Cong Tru,

Nguyen Huu Cau, Phan Dinh Phung, and Hoang Hoa Tham). The central part of the literary works on historical topics is imbued with the creative role played by the authors as shown in the literary works published during the renovation period, which began in 1986 and consists of a large number of novels and short stories (written by authors such as Nguyen Huy Thiep, Nguyen Xuan Khanh, Hoang Quoc Hai, Ngo Van Phu, Nguyen Khac Phuc, Hoai Anh, Nguyen Quang Than, and Luu Son Minh) as well as historical dramas (composed by Nguyen Dinh Thi, Le Duy Hanh, and others). For example, of all 19 dramas performed during the national festival of *Chèo*, a form of generally satirical musical theatre, often encompassing dance, held in Ha Long city in 2009, 13 were focused on historical events, historical figures, and heroes in battles. In Vietnam, and the world as well, it is not rare that literary works on historical topics may result in debates and different attitudes towards the reception of those works. Queen mother Duong Van Nga (10<sup>th</sup> century) is one cited example. Should we consider her a woman, who had “illicit love”, “humane spirit”, or “high national duty”? Another example is Jeanne d'Arc in the history of France (the 15<sup>th</sup> century). Should she be recognised as “a heretic”, “a female devil”, “a saint”, or “a national heroine”? Obviously, it is necessary to review seriously “the historical fate” of such type of historical creation from all aspects, including creative psychology, imaginary limits, reception attitudes, and the potentials for further development of the topics and genres, aiming at helping to provide more comprehensive and profound awareness of the history and the nation [15, pp.42-49].

This paper focuses on some main points, including Nguyen Huy Thiep’s works in the literary movements in the renovation period; Nguyen Huy Thiep’s works on historical topics from the perspective of literature in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and, Nguyen Huy Thiep’s works on historical topics from the perspective of national historical reality.

## **2. Nguyen Huy Thiep’s works in the literary movements in the renovation period**

Discussing historical topics, subjects or genres, firstly we need to isolate the works, in which the authors use historical events and characters as a pretext for imagining completely different fictional plots. Instead of describing the reality, they focus on the supposed artistic reality. And, instead of realising the historical experience, they deliberately create a new image of historical situations and characters. As a part of those works, Nguyen Huy Thiep’s short stories, created on the basis of the plot related to historical famous people such as Nguyen Trai, Nguyen Thi Lo, Nguyen Hue, Nguyen Du, Nguyen Anh, Ho Xuan Huong, Hoang Hoa Tham, Tu Xuong, and Nguyen Thai Hoc, once aroused a lot of controversy.

As a challenge and a “trial” in the sphere of thoughts and art, it is not easy to make a general assessment of Nguyen Huy Thiep’s works on historical issues due to many different viewpoints and explanations. However, we cannot omit his works, when discussing the “literary and artistic creations on historical topics” in the renovation period.

It is possible to conclude that most of Nguyen Huy Thiep’s works related to the above-mentioned figures can be recognised

as “historical imitation”, “historical simulation”, or “historical parody”. To various extents, historical realities are reflected sometimes boldly and sometimes slightly. In general, he just used the historical realities as a pretext for creating new plots, new situations, and new personalities. The writer directed readers to new fates, circumstances, events, details, locations, and periods, which never existed in the official documents of history. As a result, the readers feel confused by the fictitious stories created by him, which are different from the realities. Many readers, particularly the critics, therefore, had to raise their opinions and attitudes, which are divided into debating groups that have different ways of receiving his works depending on their own professional knowledge and cultural inertia. In 1988, when Nguyen Huy Thiep released his short stories titled “Sharp Sword” (Vietnamese: *Kiếm sắc*), “Fired Gold” (Vietnamese: *Vàng lửa*), and “Chastity” (Vietnamese: *Phẩm tiết*) in the newspaper “Literature and Art” (Vietnamese: *Văn nghệ*) published by the Vietnam Writers’ Association, they immediately encountered many strong objections. There were two reasons for those objections, which were recognised unconsciously by the critics. Firstly, some critics supposed that “Fired Gold” was a memoir of historical events and well-known figures (this shows a mistake in recognising the genres), which led to an old way of receiving the story pragmatically and required the author to answer questions in an illustrative and explicit way. “What readers are interested in is mainly shown by images and literary language. They want to know: what the author has written about,

whether the nature of history has been reflected truly, and whether the work brings them deep emotions?” [6, p.10]. Secondly, some critics persisted in conforming to the old viewpoint and thinking. They closely followed the previous postulates; for example, they often said: “according to our ever-present conception,...”. This makes these very critics unable to “untie themselves” so as to approach the new. It also prevents the development of artistic creative thinking” [7, p.4]. Within the general correlation, the critics have not kept pace with the orientation towards the renovation in literature and art. During the warm-up of the guideline on the development of literature and art, Nguyen Van Linh, the general secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, spent two days attending a conference on literature and art (on 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> October 1987) so as to understand the reality of literature and art in Vietnam. He also gave an important speech to the writers, artists, and cultural practitioners at the conference. Although the participants were mainly those who were holding management positions, and Mr. Nguyen Van Linh's speech focused on writing activities, in a general sense, it also caused a profound impact on literary researchers and critics as well. “You have talked a lot about the untying. It surely will help you to promote your ability in your fields greatly. How should we untie? Regarding the untying, I think the Communist Party has to carry out it first. It must be performed in all the organisational activities, policies, and regulations”. At the same time, he emphasised the necessity of changes in the conception, mechanism, and policies as well as the sense of self-control,

which was seen as the nature, the quality, and the skill of the practitioners in the field of literature and art. “On the other hand, I think no one else, but you have to do it in your own fields” [8, pp.11-16].

Nguyen Huy Thiep’s works on historical topics are considered very new in comparison with the works classified as “memoirs of historical figures” or “historical stories”, which were more inclined to disseminate propaganda in the particular wartime context, when the whole nation gathered up every effort for the duty of national liberation (1945-1975). However, they are not new at all, compared to some of the earlier works. More precisely, they can be seen as the return or the follow-up of the literary style of expressing historical topics in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the French colonial period, certainly, the censorship was also carried out publicly. Thus, some books were confiscated; parts of some articles were removed; and, whole pages were sometimes left empty. There were specific individuals undertaking the censorship responsibility, and the censorship was guaranteed by the legal procedures. At that time, no one was tied by others, so “being untied” and “untying” was not considered to be a matter of concern. The writers freely described various feelings, experiences, and experiments, and reproduced history in accordance with artistic creativity. This is shown clearly by the fact that many historical novels from France and other Western countries were translated and introduced widely in Vietnam. The recognition of the genres, types, and purposes in artistic consumption was seen as basic knowledge at that time. In the paper titled “Do Not Mistake Narrative Stories for

Historical Records; Do Not Be Foolish to Call Me a Historian” (Vietnamese: *Đừng làm lẫn truyện ký là sử ký, đừng lẫn thân gọi tôi là sử gia*) published 80 years ago, Truc Khe, a writer and researcher (1901-1947), suggested differentiating between writers and historians as well as between historical tales and historical records. Acknowledging the changes in the literary trend, he said: “many people have started to use the novel style to write historical stories” and affirmed: “In those historical novels, some details were written with the authors’ imagination, but they are not harmful at all. On the other hand, the effect is that they make more people enjoy reading and being aware of historical stories. It is, therefore, necessary to have such books in our literature” [5, p.1]. As a result, a larger number of historical novels was published. Some of typical authors and novels can be enumerated below:

Nguyen Tu Sieu (1898-1965) with “Mountain Top and Branch of Ochna Integerrima” (Vietnamese: *Đỉnh núi cành mai*), “Thunder at the Winter Night” (Vietnamese: *Tiếng sấm đêm đông*), “Dinh Tien Hoang” (Vietnamese: *Đinh Tiên Hoàng*), “Le Dai Hanh” (Vietnamese: *Lê Đại Hành*), “Tran Hung Dao’s Fighting against Mongol Invasion” (Vietnamese: *Trần Nguyên chiến kỷ*), and “History of Viet - Qing War” (Vietnamese: *Việt Thanh chiến sử*).

Ngo Dinh Chien (?) with “The Person Confronting King Gia Long Who Founded the Nguyen Dynasty: Nguyen Hue” (Vietnamese: *Người đương đầu với vua Gia Long khai sáng nhà Nguyễn: Nguyễn Huệ*) published in 26 issues of “Hanoi Midday Newspapers” (Vietnamese: *Hà thành Ngọ báo*) in 1935.

Hoa Bang (Hoang Thuc Tram, 1902-1977) with “Quang Trung” published in the newspaper “*Nước Nam*” (Vietnam) in 1939-1940 and in the form of a book in 1944.

TchyA Dai Duc Tuan (1908-1969) with “Wreck of Gold in Sam Son” (Vietnamese: *Kho vàng Sâm Sơn*).

Nguyen Huy Tuong (1912-1960) with “Night of Long Tri Festival” (Vietnamese: *Đêm hội Long Trì*), “Vu Nhu To” (Vietnamese: *Vũ Như Tô*), “Copper Columns of Ma Yuan” (Vietnamese: *Cột đồng Mã Viện*), and “Princess An Tu” (Vietnamese: *An Tư công chúa*).

And, Truong Tuu (1913-1999) with “Men of Vigour in Bo De” (Vietnamese: *Tráng sĩ Bồ Đề*), and “Five Knights” (Vietnamese: *Năm chàng hiệp sĩ*) etc...

All of those novels were written with a vivid imagination, thrilling plots, and lively characters, which were very different from the historical records. It is possible to state that the patriotism, the sense of national rehabilitation, the social liberation, and the democracy in the press and publishing activities together resulted in the bumper crop of literary works on historical topics during the semi-feudal colonial period.

### **3. Nguyen Huy Thiep’s works on historical topics from the perspective of literary experience in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

In my opinion, Nguyen Huy Thiep’s works on historical topics are not new in comparison with the literary works of the same genre in the period from 1932 to 1945. Nguyen Huy Thiep usually started or concluded his stories with the same way,

which demonstrated that “the stories were made up, but very similar to the reality”. He told, for example, he heard about or saw with his own eyes the facts, or there were witnesses and evidence for his stories. As a result, many readers misconsidered those stories to be historical records. Meanwhile, in “Wreck of Gold in Sam Son” (1940), TchyA Dai Duc Tuan provided a very vague introduction, which was stuck in the middle between the reality and the fiction by the voice of a narrator and the skills of a novelist:

“By 1934, the Government found a wreck containing gold in the seabed off the coast of Sam Son beach in Thanh Hoa province located in North Central Vietnam.

When the wreck was moved to the land, people saw hundreds of bars of gold and silver in the shape of a cuboid. Each bar was as long as a hand span. All the bars were engraved with the [Chinese] character meaning “Virtue”. There were abundant coins made in the Canh Hung era and various Chinese coins made from the era of emperor Wanli (Ming Shenzong) to the era of emperor Qianlong (Qing Gaozong)... Based on our available historical facts, the gold and silver surely belonged to the period of decline of the Later Le dynasty. If they belonged to the period of Le Quy, they must have been owned by the Tay Son brothers or Nguyen Huu Chinh, who was one of two admirals of the army.

... Chinh was left alone in Bac Ha (North Vietnam) by Nguyen Nham due to the slander made by Vo Van Nham, who was Nguyen Nham’s son in law. Being too scared of staying alone there, Chinh quickly embarked all the havings and left by boat for Nghe An the next day. As an ingenious

person, he never took the gold with himself. On the one hand, he was afraid that it would prevent his boat from going fast. On the other hand, it might lead to the fact that his boat would be robbed and his life could be lost. Consequently, Chinh surely left the havings to his son, while taking a boat to follow Nhạc quickly to home.

As explained, the wreck of gold must have belonged to Nguyen Huu Chinh. Based on the surmise, which is very probably true, I am writing this sensational story so as to commemorate the past glorious period and provide you with a new genre of historical stories”.

It is completely a story of historical fiction but closely related to the national historical records. Some parts were copied almost exactly from what Tran Trong Kim, a staunch and sage historian, wrote in his work titled “Outline History of Vietnam” (Vietnamese: *Việt Nam sử lược*).

“The information I have collected to create this story about the wreck of gold is not completely similar to what is mentioned in the historical records. However, I am not worried about whether it is true or false since I just want to create a history-based novel without intending using the novel to bring back the historical period.

When reading this story, you should forgive me for the above-mentioned point. My expectation is to provide you with a story with an interesting plot and an exciting narrative style. I will feel very happy if you think the expectation is fulfilled. A writer cannot be presumptuous of assuming himself to be a wise historian”. At the end of the story, additional information was also added as follows: “The second day of the fourth lunar month

in the year of Binh Dan (or Bingyin)-TCHYA (Vietnamese: *Ngày mùng hai tháng tư năm Bình Dân - TCHYA*) (i.e. NHS emphasis) [17, pp.5-7].

In the story, the character named Nguyen Hue, “King of Northern Pacification”, was created by TchyA as a merciless, narrow-minded, and envious person:

... “As soon as the powerful company of the army came, the king ordered his troops to go straight to the headquarters of Vo Van Nham to arrest and bring Nham to the market for decapitation.

Nham was both surprised and terrified, as he did not understand why his uncle in law mistreated him. Prostrating, he cried, told his grievances, and asked for tolerance from Nguyen Hue. The King of Northern Pacification chuckled and shook his head without saying anything. He directed his soldier to give Nham a small piece of paper, on which the following 12 [Chinese] characters were written clearly: “Bất tu đa ngôn; nhữ tài quá ngã, phi sở ngã dụng” (i.e. Do not be garrulous; you are more talented than me; thus, I cannot keep you alive).

After reading those words, Nham did not know what to say but to complain to God about his tragic destiny. He realised that all entreaties would be in vain, once Hue gave the order. In reality, Hue was not less talented than Nham. What Hue wrote in the piece of paper was just a pretext to kill Nham. One is intentional, while the other is unmindful; thus, it was impossible to avoid the misfortune planned irrationally by the other” [17, pp.135-136].

Later on, the way to name historical figures coarsely such as “Nham” or “Hue” was no longer used in the novels by writers,

including Nguyen Huy Thiep. This is certainly reasonable. During the period of the Nguyen dynasty, Nguyen Hue (Quang Trung) and the Tay Son dynasty were called “the usurper” and “the dynasty of usurpers” respectively. Meanwhile, the Tay Son brothers were highly respected by the people, and Quang Trung was adored as a national hero. Particularly, the two tendencies existed concurrently in the context of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: the image of Quang Trung was fictionalised variously in stories, while the anniversaries related to him were also held solemnly in the whole country. Both of the tendencies complemented each other without mutual exclusion, leading to new explanations and respect for Quang Trung.

As regards the stories on historical topics alone, Nguyen Huy Tuong with his works titled “The Night of Long Tri Festival” and “Vu Nhu To” was considered to have created an entire world of characters and a new picture of history, which was not only far different from the historical records but also acknowledged widely and profoundly by various social strata in all periods.

Meanwhile, the literary works of Truong Tuu were often called “historical fictions”, “historical novels”, or “historical imitations”. In essence, his two novels, including “Man of Vigour in Bo De” [20, pp.597-751], and “Five Knights” [21, pp.753-885] under the pen-name of Mai Vien, are considered historical novels with specific periods, contexts, and events related to some figures mentioned in the historical records. “Man of Vigour in Bo De” (consisting of 2 volumes and 14 chapters) was based on the historical event, in which Le Hoan, Commander of Ten Armies, seized power from the Dinh dynasty in the late 10<sup>th</sup>

century. The activities carried out by the men of vigour named Bo De and Bach Hac as well as Ms Minh Tam and Ms Minh Chi, members of the Tu Bi party, which was the opposition to the Ten Armies, also show the colour of modernisation and the influence of the contemporary society. In “Five Knights”, which consisted of 2 volumes and 14 chapters and used the social and historical context under the reign of Ly Anh Tong (1138-1175), many characters were created as loyal members of the Quan Anh party mixed with a large number of activities of romantic love, espionage, assassination attempts, and overthrow. This makes the novel more similar to a detective story with forest paths and thrilling cases. In general, both of the historical stories were “novelised” to a great extent with many fictitious characters, details, and events. This is seen as the strength of Truong Tuu’s historical fictitious works among the general current of historical stories.

The above-described comparison demonstrates that before the August revolution in 1945, when creating literary works on historical topics, writers were inclined to develop the novel thinking, instead of outlining portraits of “homeland celebrities” and “national stars” or narrating historical events and figures. Thus, they tended to create a world of new characters with new viewpoints on historical events and figures. This artistic conception was also mentioned by Nguyen Huy Thiep in a fictitious section of the short story titled “Chastity”: “Quach Thi Trinh, a daughter of Quach Ngoc Minh, asked me whether I knew anything about the dead person in the grave. I felt too nervous. To understand whether you know or don’t know, although

they are just historical and limited ambiguous estimations, you must be a really strict dreamer” [18, pp.242]... With three short stories titled “Sharp Sword”, “Fired Gold”, and “Chastity”, Nguyen Huy Thiep deluded readers, providing them with a new feeling, taste, and conception of literature and the relation between the literary discourse and historical experiences. Nguyen Huy Thiep did make a contribution towards the renovation and improvement of national literature, aiming at integrating it with the modern kinds of literature in the region and the world as well. His works on historical topics alone have been highly appreciated and recognised by many scholars who are specialised in Vietnamese studies. Greg Lockhart, an Australian researcher, emphasised the creativity made by Nguyen Huy Thiep in his pressing concern about the progression and humanity; he was “a Vietnamese author of the same talent as excellent international writers [9, p.115]. Evelipe Pieller, a French journalist, recognised the way Nguyen Huy Thiep reflected the “strange life of ordinary people” [12, p.152]. Sean Tamis Rose, a French critic, stated: “For him, it is a reminder of the humankind’s responsibility by the contrast” [14, p.497]. T.N. Filimonova, a Russian researcher, acknowledged: “The writer has provided three views on Vietnamese history, three different approaches and assessments” [2, p.353]. Meanwhile, Vietnamese researchers have also enhanced the capacity for adopting the new and strange literary phenomenon and whereby scientific explanations and approaches have been made, as shown in the following papers: “Reading Literary Works Should Be Different from Reading Historical

Records (Lai Nguyen An) [1, pp.179-187]; “Fired Gold”: “Historical Philosophy” or “Artistic Prose” (Truong Hong Quang - Nguyen Mai Xuan) [13, pp.207-230]; “Thinking of Novels and Modern Folklore” (Hoang Ngoc Hien) [3, pp.355-366]; “Is Baroque Art Found in Nguyen Huy Thiep’s Short Stories?” (Thai Hoa) [4, p.91], in which it is strongly confirmed: “Historical phenomena, events, and figures are seen from various perspectives of common and popular relations without being isolated or one-sided, helping to escape from the dogmatic and voluntarist views. Historical “stars” are lowered by the thinking and behaviour in everyday life. As a result, the gap between those idols, masters of the past, and present-day people have been shortened for contemplation. History cannot consist of only abstract things kept faraway from real life” (Vuong Anh Tuan) [19, p.337]. This is entirely appropriate for the creative thinking in arts and the space in the writers’ attitude towards historical figures, as shown in Nguyen Huy Thiep’s works and the written literature on historical topics during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### **4. Nguyen Huy Thiep’s works on historical topics from the perspective of actual national history**

As regards history, writers (as well as historians) can know just a part of the realities of historical figures such as Le Hoan, Le Van Thinh, Ho Quy Ly, Tran Thu Do, Tran Hung Dao, Huyen Quang, Le Loi, Nguyen Trai, Nguyen Du, Ho Xuan Huong, Hoang Hoa Tham. How are writers allowed to imagine the portraits, talents, and personalities of

those figures? It is more important that writers have to choose specific points to explore and create their own characters more appropriate to the real life and national history, aiming at recognising the values of “the true, the good, and the beautiful” and paving the way for creative artistic activities.

The following part in “Complete Annals of Dai Viet” (Vietnamese: *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*) is written about Le Van Thinh:

- “Year of Hinoe-neor Fire Rat (Vietnamese: *Bính Tý*), [Hoi Phong] the fifth year [1096], (the third year under the reign of Emperor Zhezong of Song). In spring, in the third month of the lunar year, Le Van Thinh conspired against the king, but he was spared and exiled in Thao Giang. The king was once sitting in a small boat in Dam Dam (Vietnamese: *Dâm Đàm*) lake, watching people catching fish. Suddenly, the sky was shrouded in fog and cloud. As he heard rowing sounds and thought a boat was coming from the fog, he took a lance and threw it into the fog. When the fog and cloud disappeared in a little while, everyone became too afraid as they saw a tiger on the boat. They shouted: “It’s dangerous!”. The fisherman named Muc Than cast a net to cover the tiger, which then turned out to be Grand Preceptor Le Van Thinh. The king thought Thinh was a high-ranking mandarin; whoever provided the king with help, so he did not have the heart to kill Thinh. Instead, Thinh was sent into exile in Thao Giang. Meanwhile, Muc Than was rewarded with the title as a mandarin together with money and land in Tay Ho for his landholding. Earlier, Van Thinh had a servant, who came from the Dali Kingdom and knew how to practise witchcraft; thus, Thinh intended to use the

witchcraft to carry out an act of treachery [10, p.283].”

The part talking about Tran Thu Do in “Complete Annals of Dai Viet” is as follows:

- “Year of Fire Dog (Vietnamese: *Bính Tuất*) - the second year of Kien Trung dynastic title [1226], (the second year under the reign of Baoqing Emperor of Song). In autumn, on the 19<sup>th</sup> day of the eighth month of the lunar year, Tran Thu Do killed Ly Hue Tong in Chan Giao pagoda.

The father of the Ly king said: “I will commit suicide, after reciting the Buddhist scriptures”. Afterwards, he came into the bedroom and prayed: “The country of our family has already fallen into your hands, but you are still determined to kill me. I am dying today, but your children will have the same destiny in future”. Then, he garrotted himself in the backyard of the pagoda.

Thu Do ordered royal mandarins to come and cry for the father of the king. A part of the southern wall of the citadel was broken to make a hole (called “borne gate” at that time), through which the coffin containing the dead body of the king’s father was moved to Yen Hoa ward for cremation. The ash and bones were then kept in Bao Quang stupa with the posthumous title of “Hue Tong”. The queen of Hue Tong was demoted to the title of “Princess Thien Cuc” and married to Tran Thu Do; she was provided with the Lang prefecture as her landholding...”

- “Year of Water Dragon (Vietnamese: *Nhâm Thìn*), [Kien Trung] the eighth year [1232], (From the seventh month of the lunar year, it was the first year under the reign of Thien Ung Chinh Binh; i.e. the fifth year under the reign of Shaoding emperor of Song)...

Tran Thu Do killed all the Ly family members. After Thu Do kept the dictatorship for a long time, he killed Hue Tong, making the Ly family members feel melancholic and disappointed. In winter of the same year, the Ly family members carried out worship of the Ly kings in Thai Duong, Hoa Lam. They then had a meal on the floor, under which a deep hole was dug beforehand according to the order of Thu Do. When the Ly family members got drunk, Thu Do made the floor collapse, and they all were, consequently, buried alive.

(Seeing that under the reign of Tran Anh Tong, a military general was a member of the Ly family; moreover, it was not mentioned by [Phan] Phu Tien, this story might not be true. It was just temporarily written here) [11, p.8]...”

Herein, the following is a part talking about Tran Quoc Tuan in “Complete Annals of Dai Viet”:

- “Year of Metal Pig (Vietnamese: *Tân Hợi*), [Thien Ung Chinh Binh] the 20<sup>th</sup> year [1251], (From the second month of the lunar year, it was the first year of the Nguyen Phong dynastic title; i.e. the 11<sup>th</sup> year under the reign of Chunyou emperor of Song or the first year under the reign of Mongke Khan)...

The eldest princess Thien Thanh was arranged to get married to the Prince Trung Thanh (his real name still remains unknown). However, Quoc Tuan as a son of Prince Yen Sinh abducted her, and she then got married to Quoc Tuan. On the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the month, the king held a 7-day ceremony, where marriage-related pictures were displayed, and many games were organised so that members of the royal court and other people could come to see. The

king showed his intention of marrying Princess Thien Thanh to the prince Trung Thanh. Earlier, the king sent the princess to the palace of Prince Nhan Dao, who was the father of Trung Thanh. Quoc Tuan wanted to get married to Princess Thien Thanh, but he was not allowed by the king. Thus, at night, he sneaked into the sleeping place of the princess and committed fornication.

Princess Thuy Ba (the older sister of Thai Tong and the aunt of Quoc Tuan), who adopted Quoc Tuan, immediately came to the palace of the king. The doorkeeper quickly rushed and reported it to the king. When the king asked her what happened, she replied: “Unexpectedly, Quoc Tuan was so extravagant and wicked that he sneaked into the sleeping place of Thien Thanh at night. He was arrested and is now kept by Nhan Dao. I am afraid he will be harmed. Your Majesty, please condescend to send people to rescue him”. The king, in a hurry, ordered his old woman to come to the palace of Prince Nhan Dao. When she came there, it was completely quiet. Thus, she came into the sleeping place of Thien Thanh and saw Quoc Tuan staying there. Only by that time did Nhan Dao realise the fact. Next day, Thuy Ba offered 10 trays of gold to the king, submitted a proposal for Quoc Tuan’s marriage with the princess, and said: “As being in an awful hurry, we have not prepared all betrothal gifts”. The king reluctantly agreed to marry Princess Thien Thanh to Quoc Tuan, while giving 2,000 plots of land in Ung Thien prefecture to Prince Trung Thanh as a compensation for his betrothal gifts [11, p.14]”.

Based on the above-mentioned historical data, the writers who want to create literary works on historical topics can further

explore the personalities, skills, and capacities as well as the psychology of their own characters in the context and specific situations under the feudal regimes, avoiding the modernised writing style and a biased exaggeration. This is, certainly, neither “adesacralisation” nor “an idol dethronement”, but it aims at creating lively historical characters, while ensuring the values of the true, the good, and the beautiful as well as dealing with the relationships between the lofty and the common, the mighty and the tragic, the heroes and the artists, the extraordinary and the ordinary, the community and individuals... Based on the life of historical figures such as Nguyen Trai, Nguyen Thi Lo, Nguyen Hue, Nguyen Du, Nguyen Anh, Ho Xuan Huong, Hoang Hoa Tham, Tu Xuong, and Nguyen Thai Hoc, short stories were created by Nguyen Huy Thiep with impressive and profound artistic figures, which attract readers to the historical portraits and realities in the past.

## 5. Conclusion

Reviewing Nguyen Huy Thiep’s literary works on historical topics from the perspectives of theories, historical nature, and experience, I would like to emphasise the three following points:

*Firstly*, it is necessary to put our trust in the writers as well as the readers of literary works on historical topics. It is nonsensical to accuse literary talents and readers of making mistakes and scheming to carry out “idol dethronement”. The goodwill will make those, who work in the same field, not exaggerate the viewpoint or put a label on the works. They, therefore, can have

discussions for the purpose of finding out the most appropriate explanations.

*Secondly*, it is necessary to place the literary works on historical topics created by Nguyen Huy Thiep and other contemporary writers in the general current of the artistic and literary works on historical topics, at least from the perspective of the modern literary achievements and the literature written in the Vietnamese alphabet from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to now.

*Thirdly*, for ongoing controversial issues, it is necessary to have real democratic and just discussions without concealing or subsidising the truth deliberately. With a long-term vision, we need to organise many seminars, workshops, conferences, and in-depth surveys on the literary works on historical topics for specific periods, genres, authors and works. To have a progressive mechanism for administering artistic and literary activities (including also the orientations for literary and artistic creations on historical topics), it is always essential to rely on knowledge, paving the way for creation and development.

## Notes

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