

An Overview of Medieval Court Literature in Vietnam

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Abstract: *Court literature is a form of literary arts composed by kings and members of the court within court spaces. Such works convey profound reflection of courts' philosophy and worldview in those days. While its main idea was to praise the kings and their dynasties, court literature proves an interesting cultural and literary phenomenon encompassing political culture, court's literary and arts policies, instructive literature and propagandist literature, etc... This paper provides a definition of court literature as well as a brief analysis on some main characteristics of medieval Vietnamese court literature.*

Keywords: Literature, Court Literature, Medieval Literature, Vietnam

1. Conception of court literature

a. In Vietnam, some courses in literary history have had brief review of literary text and contents of many authors having lived in the court such as Tran Thai Tong, Tran Nhan Tong, Le Thanh Tong, Trinh Can, Trinh Cuong, Trinh Doanh, Trinh Sam, Tu Duc, Thieu Tri, Minh Mang, etc... but yet they have not defined the “court literature” as a central literary current with its own attributes, despite the fact that here and there they revealed more or less the silhouette of court literature in every particular case.

According to our documents, there now is no author yet who studied deeply court

literature, except one study of Tran Nho Thin that considered “court literature” in relation with “urban literature”: “... If we see the Thang Long literature in its existence and development space that was a sort of Oriental medieval city, where there were citadel and market, we naturally have the right to speak of two sorts of literature or two currents of literature that were court literature and urban literature” (Tran Nho Thin, 2010: 55-70).

b. Abroad there are some researchers like Li Yuling, Gerlini Edoardo, Sally Mapstone... who used the concept of “court literature” when they studied the court literature in

Italia, Scotland, Japan, China and India,... Li Yuling (2011) mentioned the concept of “court literature” (in Chinese 宫廷文学, in Japanese “kyūtei bungaku”;...), defined as “literary works created on the stage of the court” and “literary works that were enjoyed at court”. This concept was used to differentiate with the concept of “vernacular literature”, that is the literature written by local language instead of official languages such as Han, Latin or Sanskrit,...). According to these authors, the court literature has savant, intellectual, official, ritual and mannered characters,... written in an official language. Court literature also has an obvious regional character when it was produced according to the model of a certain “region-building literature” (such as Chinese, Indian, Greco-Roman literatures,...),...

According to Gerlini Edoardo (2014), “court literature”, or “official literature of the court”, is just the “literature that was composed by and for the nearly exclusive use of court members”). This literature was often created in capital city, in the court of emperors. It is defined as court literature according to such criteria as to its role, functions and existence. These are hard to be explained outside the social-historical framework of the court. As for its role, court literature is the official voice of viewpoint, thought, policy and administrative affairs of the court, being paid importance and given prominence; as for its functions, court literature has administrative, official affair and religious ritual functions, moreover it has the function of entertainment and aesthetic pleasure with high court criteria;

and thence the court literature must be put in socio-historical context to be rightly and deeply understood, etc...

Sally Mapstone (1991) has provided many evidences on Scottish court poets before and after 1490s, showing that the Scottish royal literary activities were fairly rich. According to the author, Scottish court literature of 15th century was a literature for royal family that was protected by the king.

Every literary phenomenon has its own formation and development. So was the Vietnamese court literature of the period from 10th to 19th century. In the medieval age, like in some East-Asian countries, Confucianism in Vietnam was a dominating ideology, so the kings used the Confucianism as an instrument to enhance the ideology and consolidate the power, producing a literary current rich in morality, thoughts and ideals. This literary current is a court literature, because it is connected closely with the kings and feudal aristocracy, praising and expressing their ideal.

In the beginning study of court literature, considering previous conceptions and based on Vietnamese medieval literary creations, we preliminarily conceive *court literature as the literary creation by the kings, aristocracy, princes, royal members, mandarins, royal maids... appeared in court space, bearing the life and world viewpoints of contemporary dynasty.*

2. Some features of the court literature

a. Inspiration to praise the clearsighted king and the prosperous peaceful society
Praising clearsighted king and royal cause

was main inspiration of court literature. For example, most of poems engraved on architectures of Thang Long (Hanoi) and Hue courts left to us described and praised the court landscapes: from the winds, clouds, climates, lakes, trees, flowers... to precious objects of royal palace. Contents of poems were essentially to praise the merits of the kings and lords: building kingdom, founding dynasty, broadening territory and other glorious exploits...

The kings, when composed literary works, they suggested to dignify, praise and affirm the dynasty, also encouraging inspiration to court men of letters to praise the merits of the kings. For example, the exchange of poetry of the king Le Thanh Tong with many famous men of letters in Tao Đan literary coterie was mainly to praise one another with their faith in political ideal and prosperous peaceful society.

In the time of Restoration Le dynasty, the Trinh Lords and Confucian mandarins in the courts of king and lord also passionately continued this orientation. The book *Past Dynasty Records* (*Lịch triều tạp kỷ*)*(*) showed that, in 1721, Lord Trinh Cuong went for a row on the West Lake, the mandarins Trinh Quán, Dang Dinh Tuong, Nguyen Cong Hang and Lê Anh Tuấn also

accompanied as royal escorts. Lord Trinh himself composed two poems in national language to offer them. These two poems praised and compared the Lord and his subjects to fish and water, being in concord with each other. All the subjects composed poems to praise and show their gratitude towards the Lord. *Past Dynasty Records* also recorded literary events of Lord Trinh and his subjects: "In May, Lord Trinh ordered the courtiers to compose the admonition poem 'Knowing men' for testing the talent of every one (...). Then Dang Dinh Tuong and Nguyen Quy Duc composed this admonishing poem in offering the Lord" (Ngo Cao Lang, Xien Trai, 1995). Principal contents of admonition are applause and praise to merits of Trinh Lords and royal dynasty.

The history recorded many cases in which the Lord Trinh offered mandarins the poems, both in Han language and Nom writing. In 1718, Lord Trinh Cuong composed two poems in Nom writing with offering words, one to ambassador Nguyen Cong Hang (1680-1730) and governor of capital city Nguyen Ba Tong (?) who returned from the mission in Qing dynasty, another to Dang Dinh Tuong (1649-1736) when this mandarin asked retirement. Or when high ranking mandarin Nguyen Huy Nhuan retired, Lord Trinh Doanh offered 12 silk embroidered banners, parallel sentences and a poem *Governor returning home*, and ordered people of six districts of Gia Lâm to take him in procession to his village. Nguyen Huy Nhuan in turn composed poem to offer his colleague mandarins.

(*) *Past Dynasty Records* 歷朝雜紀 (the historical records compiled by Ngo Cao Lang, complemented by Xien Trai at the beginning of 19th century) comprised many poems, odes, petitions, royal edicts and decrees,... among which there were many Nom poems of Trinh Lords.

And his colleagues composed poem to see him off. It can be said that there was a literary climate very close to Le Thanh Tong time and to Tao Đan, a famous literary coterie in history. Trinh Lords offered mandarins poems, mandarins composed poems in response, mandarins also exchanged poems between them, and there were also the poetry competition and test in poetry... All this created a harmonious and intimate climate among the lords and their subjects in literary activities. According to Tran Thi Bang Thanh (2010), even in harem there also were some royal concubines who were competent in poetry and Nom narrative creation, moreover there were literary activities in harem too, and this was a rare phenomenon.

Typical for court praising poetry is the anthology *A royal hundred poems of peaceful time* by Trinh Can. Imitating Le Thanh Tong, Trinh Can composed poem to praise royal dynasty, heighten the merits of saint personalities, commemorate the merits of ancestors. and in the same time to praise the merits of himself. He had many poems describing the nature, climate, famous landscapes, persons and sceneries in royal and lord courts, all implying to compliment peaceful society, prosperous dynasty and the merits of ancestors who founded the dynasty.

In general, court poetry often had inspiration to praise. The kings and lords complimented their court officials, encouraging their devotion, and the court officials praised and heightened the king and lords. This poetry was full of praising inspiration and preaching the Confucian

thoughts, so there were not less the poems which had the stereotyped, formulistic and somewhat forced motifs.

b. Thoughts of court literature influenced deeply by three religions

Court literature has a value in building the ideal personality models. These were the models of clear-sighted kings, of loyal subjects, of talented and virtuous honorable men (having benevolence, righteousness, intellect and faithfulness), of virtuous women,... Most of these personality models were built according to conception of Confucianism. As “guide of society”, the authors of Vietnamese medieval court literature wanted to make the three religions (Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism), especially the Confucianism, a solid spiritual basis, an ideal model for religious practice, and they used literature as useful and efficient means to propagate this thought. Especially, Confucianism considered literature as a tool to educate society and people according to the moral standards of saints. A series of phrases on relation between “literature” and “morality” have showed this: “literature is to carry morality”, “literature is to understand thoroughly morality”, “literature is to clarify morality”, “literature is to propagate morality”, etc... The court authors seemed to make effort to choose the positive elements of Confucian ideology in order to organize, manage society and create literature. Thus, the philosophic and educative thoughts according to categories of Confucian aesthetics and morality appeared densely in court literature.

c. Spiritual cultural nuance of court literature

In ancient and medieval ages, under influence of the doctrines such as *correspondence between nature and men, integration of nature and men*,... the Vietnamese feudal dynasties often conceived that whenever heaven has a strange omen, then on the earth there will sooner or later happen a correspondent thing. The omen of *Heaven* (the Supreme Being who has the will, personality and power determining the nature, society and men) is the way that *Heaven* uses to teach the kings, making them to act conforming to the rules of Heaven and Earth. Omen of heaven is also a sign showing if the kings or lords have “morality” or not. In studying the ancient books we can see that, the Vietnamese kings and their mandarins paid much attention to “omens of heaven”, which are the symbols of sun, moon, and stars,... and attached special importance to the good clouds and good climate or charming stars and charming climate,... in order to guess the thoughts of heaven, the good and the bad, as well as the ups and downs of dynasties. The ancient books such as: *Dai Viet Encyclopedic History*, *Dai Viet Continued History*, *Dai Viet Early History*, *Past Dynasty Records*,... have confirmed this. Many court literary creations also expressed this phenomenon. According to *Dai Viet Encyclopedic History*, in November 1495, when seeing two continuous years of good crop, King Le Thanh Tong composed the odes to memorize the good omen. There were the poems about the way of being king, about the uprightness of their subjects, about

the excellent kings and good subjects, remembering the great talents and writing for fun, calling them as *Anthology of Ruby Cup Poems and Odes*. Or there were many poems of Trinh Lords such as: *Feeling the Blessing of Heaven*, *Praying for Rain* telling the response of Heaven to rain praying, *Cự ngư dâng tâu* saying about the peaceful and prosperous society, *Thụy vật triều chủ hòa* speaking of good climate coming from the East, expressing the prosperity and peace, *Tiên cầm hiến thụy* telling the fairy bird bearing the good omen, etc... Such conception obviously contained mysterious colour, but it was a solid spiritual point d'appui for the king and lord to do the governance of country and population. On the other hand, the fact that king and lord or mandarins in the court composed poems on heaven omens, on heaven blessing with sceneries of peace and prosperity, of favourable weather, of good crops... was a mediate way of affirmation of political position of their dynasty. The fact that kings composed literary works expressing heaven omens and blessing was also to express their authority and virtue, affirming their right of governance (in reality affirming their throne). They conceived that because the king and lord have good “virtue”, so the Heaven offers them the peace and prosperity to the country. In receiving the peace and prosperity, they composed literary works impromptu in order to acknowledge the heaven omen and expressing that their “rule of virtue” is suitable to natural law. This was a type of political culture characteristic of medieval age that was expressed by court literature.

d. The style of conventional symbolism

The court literary current of Le dynasty often used the style of conventional symbolism. The classic conventional images of medieval literature such as: *pine, chrysanthemum, bamboo, apricot, dragon, unicorn, tortoise, phoenix, sun, moon, flower, cloud, lotus, brocade, castle, imperial room, decorated wall, ruby cup, phoenix citadel*, etc... appeared variously under diverse variants as subject of poem (in the odes to objects) and images and details (in the odes to landscapes or poems of various subjects such as poems for scholars and poems for palace maids,...). However, these poems were not oriented to describe the real objects or phenomena, but they symbolized the categories of thought and ethics (pine, chrysanthemum, bamboo, apricot symbolized the dignity of honorable men; dragon and phoenix symbolized the venerable high rank; sun and moon symbolized the providence; castle, imperial room, decorated wall... symbolized the aristocratic precious life). The combination of words (noun and attribute) describing social and moral ideal was also often used as follows: *Humane ground, blessing of family, longevity, spring, humanity, intellect, blessing of heaven, morality, blessing ground, tree of morality, morality of Thuan King, humanity of Nghiêu King, country of intellect, charitable cloud, human mountain, Thuần ground, garden of literature, Han stream, Garden of Chu King, Confucian school*, etc... They were used for abstract cases when it was said about the ground and dignity of the subjects of the king (the poems for subjects from

high ranking mandarins to palace maids), the compliment on historical personages; sometimes they were also used to describe the historical monuments. This showed that conventional thought was deeply imprinted in linguistic and poetic thoughts of court literary authors, forming the characteristic style of court literature. On the other hand, the symbolic and conventional images were also used to poeticise the objects, especially the natural landscapes. Court poetry used much cliché and familiar images (being metaphorical) to describe various place-names: *terrace under aurora, cinnamon, gemmy gate, castle, dragon carriage, emerald cave, benign wind, rabbit, flavour of young lion, white gemmy flask, heaven flute, precious fort, evil, searching the whale, alley of happiness, decorated wall, gemmy flask, world flask, brocade, gemmy brooch, silvery stream, pearl palace, precious tower, fairy castle, gemmy court, amber, tortoise-shell, sun, moon palace, bell-stick*, etc... These were the clichés that were allotted arbitrarily to any place-names and landscapes (despite these place-names and landscapes being mentioned specifically and densely in court poetry), making the specific signification and identity of place-names and landscapes be vague, remaining only as abstract and ideal pictures in the eyes of Confucianists. The odes to landscapes and place-names in court poetry (despite being “spectacles in the eyes”) were not specific but similar with each other, that is they had the same sparkling, snobbish and elegant beauty (whether they were temples, shrines, pagodas or citadels,

ways, rivers or streams,... through which the “poetic” soul of kings and lords was expressed) and expressed the same common idea of reconstitution of peaceful and prosperous society under the dynasty of kings and lords who had talent for literature.

Reading court literature, one does not easily discriminate the style of each author, and sometimes can not at all. So symbol and convention effaced the personal hallmark and character. It would be that they were the codes for the authors to “speak” to each other with their proudness of “ful membership” of the erudite elite in medieval age. Using symbolic conventions and symbols as a principle of systematic description became prominent characteristic of court literature. Here, symbolic convention was used radically, rigorously and universally. This poetic characteristic was born from feudal socio-historical context and aesthetic conception of Han-educated artists descended from the court.

e. Language of court literature

Using the classic and historical references from Han culture was a common phenomenon in Vietnamese medieval literature. As for the court literature in special, there were also the specific causes related to artists and recipient public of literature. The artist creators were kings and lords who were educated methodically in Han culture and literature from the childhood; they were assisted by their artist-subjects even in composing the poem (such as in choosing the rhyme, teaching the phraseology, historical references and materials for poetry,...).

The recipients of literature mainly were educated intellectuals (being Confucians, officials of letter, generals, palace maids and monks,...), so the authors used rather much historical references and materials for poetry from Han culture with various contents on politics, society, people, nature, philosophy, literature and arts, etc... These Han classic, historical references and materials for poetry were used for the purposes of: manifesting the erudition and elegance of the authors; expressing the messages condensedly, concisely, elegantly and normatively. Han classic, historical references and materials for poetry were used much in the cases as follows: i) Praising the society, the peaceful and prosperous dynasty like “*Nghiêu Thuần*” one; ii) Showing clearly the dignity of clearsighted king in governance and entertainment; iii) Educating the categories of human morality and ethics as well as the duty of mandarins and people in royal dynasty; iv) Manifesting the soul of artists in free time and for intimacy; v) Placating and teaching the subjects, royal concubines, generals and officers,... Because of these purposes, the Han classic, historical references and materials for poetry in court literature had origin in Confucian classics such as: the Four Books and Five Classics (especially the *Book of Poetry*), the books of scholars, Chinese historiographical books, Tang poetry, Song poetry, etc...

In surveying the court literature, we can see that the Han literary language still played the main role, because it was associated with official administrative

literature, also with court literary creative and enjoying behaviour, demanding the normativity, elegance, preciousness, rituality... in court literary activities. However, the Nom literary language had also a certain role. In the time of first Le dynasty and Restoration Le, the authors such as Le Thanh Tong, Trinh Can, Trinh Cuong, Trinh Doanh, Trinh Sam... also left to posterior generations the immortal creations in Nom writing. This showed that Vietnamese feudal sovereigns also paid attention to create and diffuse literature in Nom writing, and the Nom writing itself also proved to have a position in the court, formally participating in official cultural-artistic activities in the Dai Viet feudal dynasty.

3. Conclusion

By preliminarily studying, we can see that court literature is a literary phenomenon, but it contains many cultural problems very interesting and rich in scientific significations, such as the problems of political culture, of literary-artistic policy of feudal dynasties, of linguistic, ideological and official belief policies, manifested in literature, in educative, propagandic and entertaining literature, etc... Exploited rightly, "Vietnamese medieval court literature" actually will be a typical "case" to deploy a new research orientation, promising important

achievements in social sciences information, in the same time affirming itself as a specific and valuable cultural phenomenon □

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