

THE CONSTRUCTION OF IMAGES OF "VIETNAM" IN  
CONTEMPORARY THAI WRITINGS



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การประกอบสร้างภาพลักษณ์ของ "เวียดนาม" ในงานเขียนร่วมสมัยของไทย



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ของไทย . (

THE CONSTRUCTION OF IMAGES OF "VIETNAM  
" IN CONTEMPORARY THAI WRITINGS) อ.ที่ปรึกษา

หลัก : รศ. ดร.มนธิรา ราโท

วิทยานิพนธ์ฉบับนี้มุ่งศึกษาการนำเสนอภาพของเวียดนามในงานเขียนร่วมสมัยของไทยระหว่าง ค.ศ.1990 ถึง ค.ศ.2015 และวิเคราะห์การประกอบสร้างภาพเหล่านี้ จากการศึกษาเอกสาร การวิเคราะห์ด้วยทฤษฎีและการสัมภาษณ์ พบการนำเสนอภาพเวียดนามมีลักษณะดังนี้ (1) ภาพเวียดนามที่เกี่ยวข้องกับสงคราม แม้ถูกประกอบสร้างขึ้นจากความทรงจำเก่าของนักเขียนเกี่ยวกับสงครามเวียดนาม แต่ถูกแทนที่ด้วยสิ่งที่นักเขียนประสบพบเห็นในเวียดนาม เช่น ผลร้ายของสงครามและภาพชีวิตผู้คนหลังสงครามยุคหลัง (2) ภาพเวียดนามที่กำลังเปลี่ยนแปลงหลังเปิดประเทศ ได้รับการนำเสนอผ่านภาพวัฒนธรรม วิถีชีวิตที่ต้องต่อสู้เพื่อดำรงอยู่ในกระแสโลกาภิวัตน์ และอีกด้านหนึ่งคือภาพการพัฒนาเศรษฐกิจและการเปลี่ยนแปลงทางสังคม วัฒนธรรมที่เกิดขึ้นอย่างรวดเร็ว ความเปลี่ยนแปลงเหล่านี้เป็นผลมาจากการปรับเปลี่ยนนโยบายและมุมมองของเวียดนาม (3) สุดท้ายคือภาพคนเวียดนามที่มีความเป็นนักรู้ทั้งในยุคสงครามและยุคการสร้างชาติสร้างชีวิตใหม่ในปัจจุบัน

ภาพของเวียดนามในงานเขียนร่วมสมัยของไทยได้เปลี่ยนไปจากภาพเดิมในสมัยรัตนโกสินทร์ตอนต้นและในยุคสงครามเย็น ซึ่งล้วนอยู่ภายใต้อิทธิพลของกรอบความคิดแบบชาตินิยม ภาพเวียดนามในงานเขียนร่วมสมัยมีความเป็นพลวัต และถูกประกอบสร้างจากปัจจัยต่าง ๆ หลายปัจจัยเช่น จากบริบทของโลกและภูมิภาค รวมทั้งความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศที่ดำเนินไปในทิศทางที่ดี และจากผู้มีส่วนร่วมในกระบวนการประกอบสร้างภาพของประเทศเพื่อนบ้านมีความหลากหลายมากขึ้น อีกทั้งนักเขียนเองต่างได้เดินทางไปหาข้อมูลและประสบการณ์ตรงในประเทศเวียดนามก่อนผลิตงานเขียน ปัจจัยต่าง ๆ ดังกล่าวทำให้เกิดความเข้าใจที่ลึกซึ้งและการรับรู้ใหม่ของไทยที่ต่อประเทศเวียดนามและชาวเวียดนาม ในขณะที่เดียวกันงานเขียนร่วมสมัยของไทยเกี่ยวกับเวียดนามยังแสดงให้เห็นถึงมุมมองของคนไทยที่มีต่อประเทศเวียดนามและประเทศของตนเองด้วย

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This dissertation aims to examine the images of Vietnam portrayed in contemporary Thai writings (1990s-2015) and to analyse the construction of such images. Document research, textual analysis and interview reveal three outstanding images of Vietnam: (1) “Vietnam is a country of wars”, which is initially constructed from old impressions about the Vietnam War of the Thai writers then are soon replaced by their first-hand experience in Vietnam with new aspects of the serious consequences of the wars as well as post-war struggles. (2) Next, Vietnam is in transition to modernity and integration, which is represented by the romanticised traditionality that has difficulty finding a stance in a globalised world, and on the other hand, the active, rapid process of economic development, socio-cultural changes, adjustment of views and policies. (3) Last, Vietnamese people are fighters that can keep their spirit strong both in the wartime and in the present.

Compared with previous periods of time, the contemporary images of Vietnam are no longer affected by the nationalist mindset of the Early Rattanakosin Era and the Cold War Era. Within the contemporary period, the images also have dynamics as a result of a number of factors including the new context of eased atmosphere and warm relations since the early 1990s, the participation of more varied stakeholders in the image construction, and the first-hand experience and the sources of data the Thai writers get during their travels. In general, contemporary Thai writings bring a better understanding of Vietnam and Vietnamese people, as well as reveal Thai perspectives on Vietnam and their own country.

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Field of Study: Thai Studies

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1. Rationale of the study

Thai academics recently have been questioning the rationality of Thais' limited awareness and understanding of their neighbouring countries. Charnvit Kasetsiri (1998), Sunait Chutintaranond et al. (2006) point out many limitations in the way Thai people have studied and viewed nearby countries: The Thai worldview is often biased and their attitude toward regional neighbours often negative, due to the influence of Western-originated Southeast Asian Studies and the sense of Thai nationalism. According to Sunait Chutintharon (2012), the relationship between Thailand and other countries in the region has developed along five different lines: the relationship between state and vassal, between state and colony, among nation-states, between states of opposite liberal democracy and socialist sides, and lastly, among states in regionalization. Consequently, the Thai perspective of its neighbours is decided by historical eras, levels of the relationship (mainland versus maritime Southeast Asia, Myanmar versus other countries), and the stakeholders (state government, private sector, and common people). No matter which angle it uses, the Thai lens on its neighbors seems to be outdated, lacks adjustment to get more updated, and needs strategies to systemize its knowledge of its neighbouring countries.

It seems that a revision of Thai understanding of countries in this region is taking place with the lead of scholars in area studies. For instance, Yukti Mukdawichit (2012) suggests Southeast Asian Studies should be reformed into

“neighbor studies” because of the need to get rid of Orientalism, and for the rise of regional studies by local researchers. Firstly, Orientalism represented the East as “Other”, which is inferior to “Us” or the West, thus, Southeast Asian Studies in the Orientalist way was to emphasize the superiority of the West. Secondly, the studies on Southeast Asia which are conducted by the local researchers with self-awareness will create a new Southeast Asia Studies. Yukti lists out three types of “neighbor studies” which have been carried out by local Southeast Asian academics so far. The first and major stream is nationalist studies, that is, studies within the researchers’ own country. Second is the studies of other ethnic groups in the researchers’ society; it is neighborized as separate from the first type because there would be a differentiation of outsiders from insiders regarding the ethnic groups, and the researcher would play the role of “other” in his own land. The last but most promising types have been more recently developed, including border studies and trans-border studies.

Theera Nuchpiam (2012) observes that although Thai understanding of neighbouring countries in the past was full of distorted images which were set by the feudal and colonial states and reproduced by textbooks and the media, the attitude is improving considerably now. At present, exchanges are not limited at bilateral state relations but are broadened through a variety of regional cooperation frames and especially are extending to common people’s level. Such varied stakeholders increase the dimensions to the relations between Thailand and neighbouring countries.

After 2007 when ASEAN nations collectively agreed to shorten the timeline to establish ASEAN Community (AC) from 2020 to 2015, the interest of Thai people in neighbouring countries including Vietnam surged. However, the study by Benny

(2016) on university students in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam finds that the young generation have certain level of identification with ASEAN, but the extent is weak. It shows that, while regional identity positively influences the supports for the three pillars of the AC<sup>1</sup>, nationalist sentiments negatively influence the supports for them. The public consider national identity a more important issue than regional identity and keep moderate to strong nationalist sentiments – politically, culturally, and economically. Between the three pillars, the economic one receives more support than the other two, which means governments need to work harder to socialize their concepts. Rato (2014) observes a similar situation in Thailand. Mainstream voices including the state and the media have so far paid most attention to AEC or the economic community while ignoring the socio-cultural aspects. Socio-cultural issues should be given more interest since cultural exchanges and contacts at common people level are essential in shaping the true understanding between the member countries and the awareness of citizens in the community.

As a neighbouring country of Thailand, is Vietnam perceived by Thailand from the old nationalist mindset or the new perspective between ASEAN community members, or a combination of both? What are the factors and who are the stakeholders having an impact on the portrayal of Vietnam from the Thai perspective? This study will attempt to discover how the Thais view Vietnam, and to explain the process of constructing the images of Vietnam in the scope of contemporary Thai writings.

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<sup>1</sup> The ASEAN Community (AC) consists of three following pillars: the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC)

The relationship and mutual exchanges between Thailand and Vietnam throughout history are rather complicated and multi-dimensional. This long process might date back to early trading routes among territories in the Southeast Asia region including those in Siam and Vietnam. Vietnamese people also headed to Ayuthaya as a land for immigration in the 17<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, due to political unrest and lack of religious freedom in their home country. Despite being small in scale, such trading activities and immigration patterns show the long-lasting course of mutual relations between Thailand and Vietnam.

After these early exchanges, documents recorded Thai-Vietnamese relations both at government- and people- levels. One period of active relations is the Early Rattanakosin Era between the two royal courts – the Chakri Dynasty of Siam and the Nguyen Dynasty of Vietnam. The positive relationship between the two territories under the rule of King Rama I and King Gia Long worsened during the reign of King Rama II. In the reign of King Rama III, the relations turned into open hostility as because both Siam and Vietnam vied for control over Cambodian territory and politics. Despite conflict between the two sides' courts and militaries, Vietnamese migrants, both Catholic and Buddhist, were welcome to settle down in Siam as they met the personnel needs of the Siamese monarchies for human power in conducting war and public duties.

The era of modernization and Western colonialism ceased the official contact between Thailand and Vietnam for a time. The former became a nation-state and headed for capitalistic, pro-western modernization; whereas, the later shifted from feudalism to socialist nationalism before fighting against the French for revolution

and independence. The northeast region of Siam was considered a safe shelter for Indochinese Vietnamese to escape hardship under the colonial rule. It also served as a base for nationalist activists to recover and nurture their secret movements. They also received protection and help from the Pridi government, the people and the local authorities of the Northeast. The situation changed since the Phibun government. The confluence of many factors such as the Vietnam War, the involvement of the U.S. in Southeast Asia, anti-communist policies, Thai military regimes, leftist movements in Thailand, suppressive measures on refugees, etc. fomented hatred and rivalry between the two countries. Understanding, sympathy and friendship between local Thais in the community and the Vietnamese refugees existed but were dimmed by the mainstream propaganda.

Thai-Vietnamese relations began to improve as the result of the end of the Vietnam War, especially after the settlement of the Kampuchean dispute as well as the adaptation of two governments on foreign policies in the early 1990s to meet the needs of economic development. The thirty years since then have witnessed steady developments of the relations in both bilateral and multilateral frames. The establishment of Thai-Vietnamese strategic partnership in 2013 and of the ASEAN Community at the end of 2015 accelerated collaborations between the two countries in all aspects.

With a long and dynamic duration of contacts, there comes a body of writings in Thai literature that portray Vietnam and the Vietnamese. “*Phongsawadan*” or Thai chronicles of the Early Rattanakosin tell many stories about Yuan, the Vietnamese that migrated to Siam, and about the relations between the royal courts. During the

Cold War era, some books show serious Thai concerns about the impact of the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese refugees in Thailand on the regional and domestic security. When the two countries entered the period of relationship normalization and economic development, more have been written with softened tone and empathy.

The decade of 1990s marked a new page in regional atmosphere and Thai-Vietnamese relations. Regional connectivity among Mainland Southeast Asian countries has been improved a great deal by land and by air with the East-West corridor project and the development of low-cost airlines, enabling people to travel more among the countries. Several years before the establishment of the ASEAN Community at the end of 2015, there had been an active search for a better understanding of Vietnam other than the old perspectives of previous eras. Numerous publications in various genres about Vietnam have been printed. Almost all the books about Vietnam published in this time, no matter if they are travel writings, novels or short stories, are the result of their authors having travelled or spent considerable time in Vietnam. Thai literature has come to form a more realistic picture of and more comprehensive understanding of Vietnam and Vietnamese people.

This study *The Construction of the Images of “Vietnam” in Contemporary Thai Writings* attempts to discover how the Thai writers view Vietnam from the literary perspective. Studies of Thai perceptions of Vietnam are not many in quantity, scatter here and there and often narrowly revolve around certain subjects like history, security, politics and foreign relations. Yet, papers or works reviewing Thai writings for how Thai people see Vietnam is scarcely found, or focus on only a certain genre of writings. This research fills the gap by analyzing contemporary Thai writings about

Vietnam and explaining the process of constructing the images of Vietnam as is discernible in the books. Thai books that were published between 1990 and 2015 are examined in terms of the understanding, perspective, attitudes, and perception of the authors about the country they are visiting and writing about. The point here is how Vietnam is described from the writers' real exposure to the country, whether images of Vietnam are different from what they knew about it before their trips, and what conditions constructed such Thai images of Vietnam. By studying these works, this thesis provides readers with a good resource that explores Thailand's ongoing effort to develop an image of its neighbor and in turn, helps to grasp the operation of Thai self-perception.

## **1.2. Contributions of the study**

The research findings will be useful to Thai Studies discipline since firstly, they present an analysis of a body of materials that has not won much attention before. This study will help to process Thai writings about Vietnam that are written in the contemporary period.

Secondly, the study will provide a detailed description of Vietnam and the Vietnamese in Thai writings from 1990s to 2015. While there has been research conducted on the images of Vietnam, their scopes are limited to Thai textbooks or travel writings. This dissertation covers a larger corpus of works, hence, aims to create a more comprehensive picture.



In addition, this is an example study of how socio-historical factors have an impact on Thailand's construction of knowledge/ discourse of another country. This dissertation can serve as a practical source of literature and reference for those who are interested in doing bi-cultural research.

### 1.3.Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are:

1. To analyse the images of Vietnam portrayed in contemporary Thai writings
2. To examine the factors influencing the construction of images of Vietnam in contemporary Thai writings

### 1.4.Hypotheses

1. Contemporary Thai writings portray Vietnam and Vietnamese people through a system of images. There are major images that appear in a majority of the books: Vietnam is a country associated with wars; Vietnam is in transition from a traditional to modern society; and Vietnamese people have the trait of fighters. Apart from these are some minor images which scatter in groups of the works.

2. The construction of images of Vietnam in contemporary Thai writings is influenced by, on the one hand, the old discourse of previous historical periods, and on the other hand, the recent context of Thai-Vietnamese political, social and economic relations as well as regional atmosphere. The authors' first-hand experience and their writing motivation are also important factors.

### **1.5. Term definitions**

1. Contemporary Thai writings

“Contemporary Thai writings” generally refer to the literary works that are published in Thai language in Thailand in the present time. In this dissertation, the term “contemporary Thai writings” should be understood as all Thai fiction and non-fiction books published since the 1990s up to date that have Vietnam and/ or Vietnamese people as the main theme or as the main setting. The list of these works is provided in the following section.

2. Vietnamese people

The term “Vietnamese people” means the Vietnamese in Vietnam, whom the writers see, meet and have contact with during their journeys in the country. This is to differentiate them with Vietnamese refugees and the Vietnamese in Thailand, given that in many cases, the writers' impression from previous experiences with the

Vietnamese in Thailand has certain impact on their view of the Vietnamese in Vietnam.

#### 1.10. Scope of the study

The writings subjected to this study include 19 books published from the 1990s to 2015 listed hereby in chronological order. Among them there are 14 non-fictional travel writings and the other 5 are fiction books. In the following list, novels, short stories and poetry will be indicated in particular; those not noted are documentary-travel writings.

1. *Annam Siam Mit* [Annam-Siam Friendship] by Somdet Phra Thep Rattana Ratchasuda Sayam Boromratchakumari (1993)
2. *Xin chao Vietnam* [Hello Vietnam] by Teeraparb Lohitkun (1997)
3. *Chaliang Tawan Ook* [Eastern Passageway] by Phitsanu Sup (2000)
4. *Khoam Hanghoen thi yu Tit Rua Ban* [The Detachedness in Neighbourhood] by Khamsing Srinawk (2002)
5. *Khwam Lap thi Sapa* [Secret at Sapa] by Thatsanawadi (2003, *short stories*)
6. *Lao Rueang Mueang Viet* [Telling Stories about Vietnam] by Niphatphon Phengkaeo (2003)

7. *Vietnam Song Rot* [Two Tastes of Vietnam] by Surasawat Suksawat (2004)
8. *Sisan haeng Vietnam* [Colours of Vietnam] by Suphalak Kanchanakhundi & Suthida Malikaao (2006)
9. *Bon Dao Si Thong* [On the Golden Star] by Sirisak Aphisakmontri (2009)
10. *Vietnam tam Lamphang* [Alone in Vietnam] by Khajornrit Raksa (2010, *novel*)
11. *Vietnam Klang Pha-yu Fon* [Vietnam in the Middle of Storms] by Wanrawi Rungsaeng (2010)
12. *Mai mi Thoe... mai mi Tawan* [There is No Sunshine Without You] by Thatsanawadi (2011, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, *novel*)
13. *Yon Yuan* [Watching Vietnam] by Pitsanu Janvitan (2011)
14. *Vietnam Thiao Ao Rueang* [Travel in Vietnam, Get Knowledge] by Wut Loetsukprasoet and Sutthipong Wutthichat (2011)
15. *Rak nai Man Fon* [Love in the Rain] by Prapatsorn Sevikul (2012, *novel*)
16. *Liap Thin Phaendin Viet* [Along the Land of Vietnam] by Niphatphon Phengkaeo (2013)
17. *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam* [Writing about the Golden Land – Vietnam] by Naowarat Pongpaiboon (2013, *poetry*)

18. *Vietnam Phaendin Lang Songkhram nai Khwamngam lae Khwammai* [Vietnam after the Wars, a Land of Beauty and Meaning] by Prachakhom Lunachai (2014)
19. *Vietnam Chitklai Muan Klaihang* [Vietnam, so Close yet so Far] by Somlak Wongrat (2016)

The criterion in selecting this group of works is their having Vietnam and/ or Vietnamese people as the main theme or as the main setting. Guide books which often provide straightforward guidelines to tourists such as how to travel, where to stay, what food to try, etc. are not included in the scope of this study since they are, unlike travelogues or travel writings, more of fact than of reflection. A number of investment manual books are also left out of this account for the same reason. Lastly, quite a few books such as *Heha thi Hanoi* (“Having Fun in Hanoi”), *Klai Phaenfa thi Sapa* (“Near the Sky at Sapa”) or *Saigon Son Rak* (“Saigon, a Hidden Love”) focus on its specific trip of one particular region or city of Vietnam, thus help their readers to organize their travels rather than offer an opinion or reflection of Vietnam and Vietnamese people as a whole. That is why these books are not considered in this research.

As the above list shows, subjected to this study are 19 writings of different genres including 14 books of non-fiction prose (travelogues), 3 of fiction-prose (3 novels, 1 short-story collection) and 1 poem collection. Genre was assumed to be a factor that makes variant images among the books; however, there are reasons that they can be included together in this research. On the one hand, one should beware that there are certain distinguishing features between these genres; on the other, 19

books subjected to this particular study are all travel accounts in one way or another that, despite their different forms, contribute to a general narrative of Vietnam.

Travelogue or travel writing is “the first-person narrative of travel which claims to be a true record of the author’s own experiences”. Yet, the seemingly straightforward statement that the travel book is a non-fictional form contains in it many ambiguities and complexities. Travel writers often play two simultaneous roles: “that of reporter, as they seek to relay accurately the information acquired through travel, and that of story-teller, to present it in an enjoyable, or at least easily digestible way”. Besides, travel writings do have plots; a typical one is a journey to an unknown, exotic place that in the end, the travelers will gain familiarity, develop a bond with where they visit or realize some common relations with their homeland. As a result, one cannot distinguish in a clear-cut way that travel writing is strictly “non-fiction” and should acknowledge the fictional elements in it. (Thompson, 2011, p. 27).

Next, an examination of the novels and short stories in this research shows the blurring line between the fiction<sup>2</sup> and the travel writings. The two books *Khwam lap thi Sapa* and *Mai mi thoe... mai mi Tawan* are written straight from real experience of their author, Thatsanawadi during his post in Vietnam. They have similar plots and the main character, who, like the writer, is a Thai language teacher going to Hanoi to teach Vietnamese students. The other two novels *Vietnam tam Lamphang* by Khachonrit Raksa and *Rak nai Man Fon* by Praphatson Sevikul, each narrates a journey of a Thai girl in Vietnam, whose views and experience are obviously their

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<sup>2</sup> Originally, fiction means anything “made up” or “shaped” but today the word refers to “long or short prose stories”, the goal of which is to tell a story and reflect an opinion about life. (Roberts & Jacobs, 2003, p. 57).

authors'. The plot and characters of the four fiction books, therefore, are actually similar to travel narratives.

The only poem collection *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam* is of a Thai poetry tradition called *Nirat*, which had been composed in Ayuthaya Era and became very popular in the Rattanakosin Era. The essence of *Nirat* is the descriptions of places and people along a journey and expressions of love and longing to a separated loved one<sup>3</sup>. According to Manas Chitakasem (1974), journey to foreign places appeared in *Nirat* since 1781 (e.g. *Nirat Phraya Mahanuphap Pai Muang Chin*<sup>4</sup>, *Nirat London*, *Nirat Tangkia*, etc.) as one manifestation of the emergence of new elements in *Nirat* poetry. First, in terms of content, the conventional love-in-separation theme was replaced by description of foreign elements such as scenery, people and their daily activities. Second, in regard with method-technique, *nirat* poets use looser verse forms and real materials<sup>5</sup>, adopt a more personalized tone. In other words, “if the form has changed from poetry to prose and if the motive of love-longing has disappeared, the *Nirat* becomes a travel book” (ibid, p. 386). Accordingly, Naowarat’s *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam*, can be tackled as a travel account of a

<sup>3</sup> The word “nira” or “nirat” (from the Sanskrit “nir”) means “without” and “to be separated from” (Chitakasem, 1974, p. 6).

<sup>4</sup> *Nirat Phraya Mahanuphap Pai Muang Chin* (“The Travel Poem by Phraya Mahanuphap to China”) was composed in 1781 during the Thonburi Era. *Nirat London* was composed in 1859 during the reign of King Rama IV by M.R. Rachothei and was first published by Mo Bradley in 1861. *Nirat Tangkia* was composed by Nai Waeo or Luang Noraneti Banchakit in 1887 during the reign of King Rama V.

<sup>5</sup> Chitakasem (1974) explains a special technique in *Nirat* poems called “pun and transfer” (p.108). It is a play on words that are alike or nearly alike in sound but different in meaning; place names in the journey are used to suggest or emphasize the poet’s love, sorrow, and memories of his loved one. However, this technique is found only when the poets were still within the boundary of the Thai kingdom; it ceased to be useful when the journey reached foreign locales with names of another language. On the other hand, foreign elements aroused their curiosity and their wish to describe what they saw and experienced to their audience. Thus, the original conventions of Thai traditional *nirat* to display the expertise of language (rhymes, homonyms and synonyms) and the poet’s lamentation (often imaginative and exaggerating) weakens while modern *nirat* aims more to report the reality, serve public information, and express personality.

neighbouring country<sup>6</sup> as long as we are aware of nirat poetry's typical conventions and the poet's objective to promote regional friendship<sup>7</sup>.

The aforementioned analysis supports the argument that these 19 books all reflect, explicitly or implicitly, a journey to learn more about a neighbouring country. They differ in genre and detail of the construction process but agree in major images of Vietnam. In other words, fiction and non-fiction supplement rather than contradict one another in constructing a complete picture of Vietnam; and the construction of images of Vietnam is not strictly limited by genres.

#### 1.10. Theoretical framework

In the attempt to find out how contemporary Thai writings construct the images of Vietnam, the researcher used discourse analysis as the approach for this study. The discourse approach concentrates on how discourse and discursive practices produce knowledge.

Discourse is defined as “a cluster (or *formation*) of ideas, images and practices which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society” (Hall, Evans, & Nixon, 2013, p. xxii). Discourse is treated here not as a linguistic concept, but as a

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<sup>6</sup> This is in accordance with Mosel's remark (1961, p. 3) about “the emergence of new directions in content and style” in contemporary Thai poetry after the political shift in 1932. The “travel poem” called *nirat* shows personalized expression of the poet himself, a growing concern with social questions, and exclusively prefers the verse form *klon* which has developed to more generalized popular lyric rather than the traditionally fixed confines (ibid, p. 7). Whereas, Chongstitvatana (2000, 17) commented that *Khian Phaendin* can be “considered a turning-point in the creation of ‘Nirat’ in Thai convention” since the expression of love here is no longer personal lamentation or suffering, but Naowarat's hopeful love for nature and his homeland.

<sup>7</sup> The motivation of Naowarat Pongpaiboon in composing the book will be mentioned in page 144.



model of how people in a culture use systems of signs to make meanings. When people communicate, not only language but many other factors also matter, from body language to beliefs and values, from previous interactions to institutional and cultural settings, from other people and objects to other places and times (Gee, 2014). In sum, a discourse operates within a specific society in a certain historical context. Another aspect of discourse is that it often causes “difference” and “stereotypes”, as well as separates “self” from “other”. On the one hand, differentiation is necessary to create meanings; on the other hand, this simple and reductionist method fails to capture the great diversity of the world (Hall, Evans, & Nixon, 2013).

The concept and features of discourse make the approach applicable to this study *The Construction of Images of Vietnam in Contemporary Thai Writings*. The approach will be deployed to examine how Vietnam has been portrayed, thought about, and studied from the angle of Thai writers. On the other hand, discourse is not static but changes from period to period; it operates within a specific context. The historical and cultural conditions of the contemporary period in which these Thai writings are created will be examined to see what is the same or novel, and to what extent the continuity persists or changes occur. In addition, the books’ authors, their backgrounds as members of the society, and their motivations in creating the works are also taken into account.

## **1.8. Methodology**

This study was conducted using the following methods:

The first was document research of available secondary sources, such as previous research reports, journal articles and books related to the topic of my dissertation. They cover studies about images in literature, images of Vietnam in Thai documents, and the relationship between Thailand and Vietnam. The data was summarized, collated and synthesized according to their points and the extent of relation to this study. Results of the literature review are reported in the following section.

At the same time, contemporary books whose content or setting are about or in Vietnam, which are the subjects of this study, were collected to the extent that it was possible. Other than that, background information about the influences on the portrayal of Vietnam were gathered and considered, such as the writers who wrote the books, as well as the historical and literary context in which the works were created.

Second, recent Thai writings about Vietnam were examined through close reading and textual analysis. Close reading helps to generalize the images of the country and categories them while textual analysis helps to understand the Thai narratives in portraying such images of Vietnam, and to examine the construction of the images. The findings are presented in chapter 3, 4, and 5 in image-based layout.

Last but not least, interviews with some book writers were conducted to seek insight of their personal and work background, beliefs and values that might have influenced their works about Vietnam, as well as the particular intention with which the authors produce the works. The results of the interviews will add more substance to the analysis and discussions.

### 1.9. Translation and Transliteration

As a study on Thai writings, this thesis frequently mentions the names of the books and their authors. A number of Thai documents were consulted for reference. Writing this dissertation, as a result, involves much work on translation and transliteration, which are based on several rules as follows:

Translation of the book titles are often provided next to the transliterated Thai titles at their first appearance in a chapter or as necessary for clarification. Whenever the books appear in a group and providing their title translations will make the text too lengthy, they will be footnoted. For translations of poetry, sometimes the transliterations of Thai poems are added when literary features such as word choice, rhymes, meter need to be analyzed. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of the texts and titles are mine.

Concerning transliteration of Thai language, there is more than one system in use. With the exception of proper names and place names, this thesis follows the system in *Lakken Kan-thot Akson Thai pen Akson Roman baep Thai Siang* (“Rules of Transcriptions from Thai into Roman Scripts”) by the The Royal Institute (1999).

When the Thai writers have had their Romanized names published or they use their preferred transliteration, this dissertation will apply that transliteration. Otherwise, proper names are transliterated according to the Royal Institute’s system.

Thai people are usually addressed by their first names. In this dissertation, when an individual is mentioned for the first time in the text, both their first and last names are included. In the bibliography, sources in English and Thai are listed

together alphabetically by the last names of the authors with transliterations of the titles and an indication when the documents are in Thai.

### **1.10. Literature Review**

A broad scope of studies has been reviewed in order to understand the construction of images of Vietnam in contemporary Thai writings. First, studies of images in literature are investigated to understand the way these researchers examine literary works and the images shaped by the books. They provide good examples of methodology for the conduct and presentation of this research. The next two sections review the studies about images of Vietnam in the perception of the Thais. The works on Thai perspectives towards Southeast Asian countries give a general background of the Thai mindset towards its neighbouring countries, including Vietnam. Last but not most relevant to this study are articles about Thai understanding of and attitudes towards Vietnam, in general and in literature.

#### *1.10.1. Images and perception*

This part reviews several works of research about images and perception as they are reflected in literature.

The book *Through Western eyes – Images of Chinese women in Anglo-American literature* by Mimi Chan (2011) traces the evolutions of the West's literary images of Chinese women through more than four centuries, from the time of Marco Polo to the late twentieth century. Trying to cover such a long time span, Mimi Chan focuses on landmarks in the creation of images of Chinese women in a series of

essays, each with a different approach. She chooses to deal with three historical female figures in the first essay, then with the West's images of Chinese women that are drawn by two female American writers of different domestic and intellectual background, with Hong Kong novels written in English that bring Chinese heroines to international readership, and lastly, with the role of speech by Chinese female characters in English language fiction. The research approach provides us with an excellent example of how to deal with such volume of material.

Mimi Chan's essays commonly reflect one fact that images generated from hearsay, actual experience, and reading and watching, are bound to contain inherent fallacies, yet, the tendency of generalization and over-simplification persists. Each time the stereotypes are absorbed and reproduced, the new process of representation and interpretation will reinforce and perpetuate, or renew and alter such images. In order to prove so, the author records and analyses the influences and possible sources leading to the stereotypes of Chinese women, especially the ways and regularity of Western exposure to China as it varied in that span of time. She also carefully takes into consideration both the backgrounds of the writers and their closeness to China, and discusses how their literary depictions differ accordingly: from navigators, travelers and missionaries who came to China during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, to Anglo-American writers who studied China or wrote about Chinese immigrants in the United States, then Chinese Americans who found their own voice to narrate stories of their own people trying to find their places in American society, and lately, Hong Kong and Chinese writers who won international attention for their stories of modern Chinese women. The writers' background and the time during which they lived and wrote reinforce the prejudices and

misunderstandings they create and perpetuate, as well as inspire some attempts to present a fairer and more “human” view of Chinese women. Other factors to name include the broader reach of media and the movement of feminism, both of which allow Western readers and audiences to know, understand and sympathize more with Chinese women. I anticipate some of the factors that shape the images of Vietnam in contemporary Thai writings might bear some similarities to these.

Another study that can provide a guiding example to my dissertation, this time more directly related to Vietnam, is Ananthana Methanon’s *Vietnam in French perceptions: An analytical survey of French scholarly works on Vietnam, 1884-2000*. The book was written in Thai and published in 2004. The analysis shows that Vietnamese studies carried out by French academics in a span of more than a century are different from area studies in general, by which the West often create false discourses of prejudice and humiliation about Oriental countries. Although the studies of Vietnam were initiated by the French government in support of their colonialism, a number of French scholars and missionaries reflect different attitudes from the colonial authority toward Vietnam.

Their professionalism in doing research and their admiration for Vietnamese civilization had profound and long-lasting influence both politically and academically. First of all, these French works were the essential source for Vietnamese studies in the academic world even in the post-colonial era. Second, since Vietnam was described as a civilized nation, the research questioned the justice of the colonialism implemented by the French ruling authority in Vietnam. Third, they helped build or enhance the self-esteem and pride of Vietnamese intellectuals in their own rich culture.

Importantly, the study proves that the writers' background and perceptions have considerable impact on the tones and the attitudes of their works on Vietnam, which is in line with a part of this thesis.

For the particular case of Thailand and Vietnam, the article by Montira Rato (2013) gives an insight into the images of *Thailand in Vietnamese Perception and Understanding*. Rato collects evidence for her arguments from a variety of written works in Vietnamese including historical documents, academic journals, literary works, travel writings and even online forums, which cover long span of time back to when the name "Siam" was recorded in Vietnamese documents. Holding the view that historical situations have a direct impact on Vietnamese attitudes towards Thailand, she examines and classifies the data into three periods: feudal history (until the Nguyen dynasty of Vietnam), the Cold War era, and the present time of when the country was recovering from and developing after the Vietnam War.

Rato comes to many interesting conclusions. First, the relations between Vietnamese and Siamese courts were in bad terms in the period of nation-state building due to their mutual suspicion and ambitions to hegemony in the region. Second, many conflicts between Thailand and Vietnam in the modern time were not direct confrontations, but rather indirect conflicts resulting from external factors such as anti-communism or the Kampuchean dispute. Thailand in Vietnamese historical texts and its nationalist process is not described as a major enemy like China, France or the US. Consequently, such conflicts are easy to overcome to improve the understanding between the two countries. Third, Vietnamese perception of Thailand has experienced dynamic changes after the Cold War era, especially after Vietnam's

implementation of Doi moi policy: Vietnam is aware of the necessity of cooperation with other countries including Thailand in various fields. At the same time, Thailand is often mentioned as Vietnam's competitor or a subject of comparison in terms of economic development. Lastly, more frequent exchanges and communication at present will likely arc towards improved Thai-Vietnamese relations in the future.

While my thesis studies how Vietnam is perceived in Thai writing, the study by Montira Rato (2013) mirrors the other side of Thai-Vietnamese mutual understanding and provides a valuable example for me in tailoring my research methods.

This section has reviewed some studies about images: first, images of Chinese women in British and American literature; second, Vietnam in French intellectual perceptions from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and third, images of Thailand in Vietnamese documents. This series give interesting comparisons from far to near, from weak likeness to very close resemblance, from Western perspective of Asian subjects nearby Vietnam, to the Western view of Vietnam itself, and last, Vietnamese perception of Thailand.

Now let us move to images of the opposite mirror – how the Thai view Vietnam as part of the Southeast Asian region and as the country by itself, and Vietnam in Thai literature.



### 1.10.2. Images of Southeast Asian region in Thai perception

One can understand the Thai perception of Vietnam first by looking comprehensively at its attitude towards the region. At the same time, one should be aware of particular characteristics of area studies in Thailand.

Charnvit Kasetsiri is among the pioneers of Southeast Asian Studies in Thailand. In his article *Overview of Research and Studies on Southeast Asia in Thailand: Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?* (1998), he identifies the main problem with the Thai works on Southeast Asian countries as their being overly “Thai-centric” and limited to very few disciplines. Thai-centrism here means that Thai authors usually adopt Thai biased perspectives and consider only Thai national interests in judging other countries with little justness of historical sense.

Likewise, in the project *The Perception and Understanding of Southeast Asia in Contemporary Thai Society*, Sunait Chutintaranond et al. (2006) point out that Thai people’s awareness and understanding of their neighboring countries do not promote the development of better understanding or create harmony among different nationalities in the Southeast Asian region. The information Thai people know about their neighbours, on one hand, covers limited dimensions, and on the other hand, is hardly accurate nor up to date. More importantly, most of the knowledge is restricted to the creation of images and attitudes against or even to degrade the ethnic groups and cultures surrounding Thailand although they were not created intentionally to cause harm to those countries. The construction, socialization and development of attitudes of neighboring countries were initiated by the ruling class out of national

interests before being integrated into the lower levels of the society. This took place in the process of writing the Nation's Biography or *Phongsawadan*, intended to establish the concept of Thailand as a nation state and to promote a sense of nationalism by emphasizing hostile images and the cultural backwardness of other countries. Another factor is that the modern studies of Southeast Asia was established by Western intellectuals in the first place and thus has been dominated by academics not native to the region until recently. The underlying objective, therefore, is for the sake of their organizations rather than for the local peoples.

Thongchai Winichakul (2004, p. 120), however, disagrees with the above opinion that the body of Thai knowledge on Southeast Asia is unsatisfactory. He argues it may be true that Thai understanding of neighbouring countries does not meet the academic standards of the American-style area studies. On the other hand, Thai scholarship on Asia inherits the style of the Oriental tradition, whose strength lies in classical studies such as philosophy, language or archeology, hence, should have certain characteristics differing from the model of area studies we assume. "The imperial discourse of the Thai state" considers its neighbours not as "regional companions but rather the enemies or dependencies of Siam". Still, Thongchai remarks that there are other less recognized styles or traditions worth paying attention to, for example, the local knowledge produced on the peripheries of the Thai state.

To wrap up, these peculiar features of area studies in Thailand help us understand the mechanism under Thai attitude towards Southeast Asian countries in the era of nation-building and the fostering of a strong sense of nationalism.

Now we will see how neighbouring countries are portrayed in particular manifestations of Thai perception. To start with, Myanmar is apparently Thailand's main driver of nationalism as a result of being their historic archrival. This is clearly proven in the article *Representation of Burmese-ness in Thai Soap Operas* by Ajchara Rassameechot (2014). She uses four frameworks (nationalism, representation, narration, and direct experience versus mass-mediated experience) in conducting two major research methods which are textual analysis and in-depth interviews of the soap-opera audience. The results of textual analysis reveal different representations of the Burmese according to the genre of the television films: In historically-based soap operas, Burmese are portrayed as enemies in wars or in conflict among monarchies. In romantic films, Burmese characters are in a harmonious relationship (love or friendship) with Thai characters and are portrayed to have pleasant traits and Burmese traditional appearance. However, the last type reflects an oppressive relationship in which Burmese are the marginalized/ minority group. In all cases, Burmese-ness is constructed from Thai stereotypes of the Burmese with regard to names, clothes, accessories, hair style, building and ornaments, and the class of the characters.

On the other hand, the identity of neighbouring countries in Thai literature and media is not always reflected in the nationalist Thai discourses. In modern Thai short stories after 2007, for example, the image of the Burmese was not constructed as victims of Thai nationalism. The conclusion is made by Thanikan Jinapan in the article on *[The] Burmese in Thai Short Stories: from Border-crossing People to Migrant Workers* (2014). The author studies three short stories including *Fang Muang Tranom (Wan Khamen Phanom Pen Mao Det)* ("Across the Trannom Town (in the Day Khmer from Phnom Penh got Sunstroke)") by Chamlong Fangchonlachit,

*Myanmar Supermarket* by Binla Sankalakhiri, and *Khlay wa Roem chak Fon* (“As if it Began with the Rain”) by Jadej Kamjorndet. The study analysis demonstrates that the portrayal of Burmese migrant workers in Thailand is far from them being previously portrayed as war rivals. Instead, these labourers are portrayed as normal human beings who have their own selves, who have loves and sorrows, and who encounter oppression and marginalization. Through such images, Thai writers express sympathy towards the Burmese as people from a neighbouring country, and show their attempts to overcome nationalist sentiments and reduce ethnic biases.

Similar is Wittaya Wongchanta’s conclusion in his thesis - *Constructing Laoness in Contemporary Thai Literary Works and Films* (2012). By investigating four novels, one poem and two movies, the author comes up with three representations of Lao identity as a result of historical construct. In the two novels *Sap Phusa* and *Roi Mai* about the colonial period, the Thai writers refer to nostalgic images of life and culture of a glorious Lao past. After the Cold War period, Laoness is represented as friendship with neighbouring countries in the youth literature. And in recent films including *Sabai Dee Luang Phrabang*, *May Mi Khamtop chak Pakse* and *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Lao*, Lao is described as a land of ancient cultural heritage and abundant natural resources. Wongchanta spends a large part of his thesis on textual analysis with a brief conclusion that Thai people’s perception of Lao is determined by Thai-Lao political and social contexts.

Thianthai and Thompson’s recent research on *Thai Perceptions of the ASEAN Region: Southeast Asia as Prathet Phuean Ban* shows a move from the traditional Thai mindset. The research was carried out in 2007 with nearly 200 Thai students and

presents interesting findings about the way in which Thai people (non-academics and non-specialists) now understand and conceptualize the Southeast Asia region. Besides being perceived as individual countries or “prathet”, Southeast Asian nations are referred to as neighbouring countries or “prathet phuean ban”, which implies their close association metaphorically as one neighbourhood, hometown, or village (in Thai, “*mu ban*”). Regarding ASEAN’s salience – the fact of being connected to what is happening or being discussed, the member countries are highly salient, being mentioned by more than 60 per cent of the respondents. Also, they are clearly aware of the distinction between mainland and maritime ASEAN, and the affinities between Thailand and the mainland countries. Vietnam is highly associated with Myanmar, Lao, Cambodia and Thailand for their proximity despite the lack of a shared border between Thailand and Vietnam.

### *1.10.3. Images of Vietnam in Thai perception*

The last section of my literature review will focus on images of Vietnam in Thai perceptions. Studies of Thai perceptions of Vietnam are not many in quantity, scattered here and there and often narrowly revolve around certain subjects like security, politics and foreign relations. The number of papers or works reviewing Thai writings for how Thai people see Vietnam is even fewer.

The issue of Vietnamese migrants is an important theme in Thai studies about Vietnam. In 1998 Pussadee Chandavimol published a historical study about Vietnamese in Siam from the reign of King Rama III to the reign of King Rama V. The author explains the causes compelling the Vietnamese to migrate and settle down in Siam, and the views of Siamese authorities towards the immigrants. The book also

describes the living conditions of Vietnamese in Siam, and points out the strengths and weaknesses of the administrative system that the governments applied to manage Vietnamese communities inside Siamese borders. Lastly, it tells the problems arising from the Vietnamese group in the conflict between Siam and France in the reign of King Rama V. It concludes that the way Siamese governments administered the Vietnamese in their own communities, separate from Thai people, was effective in utilizing their labour resources, but at the same time, was too not strict enough to prevent them from conducting illegal businesses and promoting their nationalist activities. However, Siamese governments viewed that these problems happened due to external political factors; the Vietnamese were not the direct cause and were still treated with compromise and supportive measures.

The book *Viet Kieu in Thailand in Thai-Vietnamese Relationship* by Thanyathip Sriphana and Trinh Dieu Thin (2005) also deals with Vietnamese communities in Thailand but focuses on “New” Vietnamese refugees in a later scope of time, dating from the end of the Second World War to present. It covers many interesting points, such as policies on Vietnamese refugees from the government of Pridi to that of Chatichai, the repatriation of these Viet Kieu back to Vietnam, and the relations between those returning to their homeland and those remaining in Thailand as well as their contribution to the relationship of the two countries.

The study by Sarinya Sukaree (2015) limits its scope to the economic role of Vietnamese migrants in Nakhon Phanom from 1945 to 2010. It shows their ability in accumulating funds in accordance with the change in their political status in Thailand. When these migrants fled to Nakhon Phanom from the Laos bank of the Mekong

River, they could not bring any property along. They survived thanks to the kindness and support of Thai people in town and the Pridi government (1945-1946). During the Cold War era, their status from “Vietnamese refugees” was changed to be communists – a source of danger to the country, religion and monarchy. They suffered under laws and policies of successive Cold War-era governments which restricted not only their citizen rights but also their human rights. As a result, they faced multiple problems in earning in Thailand and even in surviving. Some resorted to illegal lines of work; most worked extremely hard, kept savings and grabbed any chance to improve their economic situation. Interestingly, they were able to accumulate large savings from 1957 to 1977 from doing businesses related to the U.S. military bases in the Northeast. But having no citizenship meant insecurity in life and property as well as more risk in investment. At last, Thai government decided to grant Thai citizenship to the descendant generation of the Vietnamese migrants. The decades between 1980 and 2000 were a time when they could invest their funds in medium and large scale and build up their new status as being “part of Nakhon Phanom”. At present, they can strengthen their status of being “New Thais” and gradually expand their influential role into the public sphere and local politics, even becoming “elites” in the border town.

Apart from the three works of research above, most of the literature describes government-to-government relations. One document is Dhavorn Sukhakanya’s report *Notable Points about Thai-Vietnamese Rivalry from a Historical Perspective in the Workshop on Future ASEAN-Vietnam Relations* (1983). It is analyzed therein that Thailand and Vietnam started to shape their modern national identities almost simultaneously – both occurring in the late 18th century. Later, their historical

experiences and national objectives were of two different paths. In the era of conflict over their joint vassal in Cambodia which involved an actual confrontation (1826-1848), Siam is seen as holding a more moderate policy, seeking a political and military alliance from Cambodia and leaving them to their own internal affairs. Therefore, Siam was more successful in retaining more power than Vietnam, which tried to eradicate Cambodian culture and political institutions. In the era of colonialism (1851-1945), the two countries underwent completely different experiences. Both Thailand and Vietnam had to face new challenges from the West; however, the former could maintain the confidence of its people and developed a nationalism that welcomed Western values rather than rejecting them, while the later was less fortunate falling under full French control.

Another notable study is the thesis by Chattriya Visutthiwat (2003) on *Thai Policy toward the Kampuchean Problems: a Study on Thai Leader's Perception of the Vietnamese Threat, 1979-1989*. She divides Thai policies toward the Kampuchean problem<sup>8</sup> into two phases and proves that such policies are heavily influenced by the perception of Vietnam in the eyes of Thai leaders. The first phase is in the era of Kriengsak Chamanund's and Prem Tinsulanonda's governments. Deriving from Thai leaders' view of Vietnam as a threat to Thai sovereignty and regional stability, Thai policies in this period were security-oriented, anti-Vietnamese and anti-Cambodian

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<sup>8</sup> In December 1978 the Kampuchean problem broke out when the Vietnamese army invaded into Kampuchea (Cambodia). They toppled the Pol Pot regime and installed a new Khmer government – the People's Republic of Kampuchea, led by Heng Samrin, backed up by Vietnam (Ka-hin, 1981). For Vietnam, this intervention was to stop the Khmer Rouge, who had caused inhumane mass executions during 1975-1978, to assist the Kampuchean people and to support the legitimate Heng Samrin government. However, other countries in general thus viewed their actions as a violation to Kampuchea's independence and sovereignty as well as a threat to regional security. Thailand, due to its geographical position, was the most vulnerable in Southeast Asia to this conflict and had strong opposition to Vietnam. (Taraga, 1988)



during the Heng Samrin governments. The factors that influenced the perception were the expanding political and military activities of the Vietnamese Communist Party and their government in the region and Thai leaders' anxiety over the situation. The second phase started in the era of Chatichai Choonhavan's government with the policy of "changing the battle field into the market place". As Prime Minister Chatichai then thought that economic and political issues should be separated, his government opened to commercial transaction with Vietnam and Cambodia, and carried out the policy of 'step-by-step' in solving the Kampuchean problem. Also, due to the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia, Vietnam was no longer perceived as a threat to Thailand's security. Chattriya Visutthiwat concludes that crucial factors shaping Thai leaders' perception of Vietnam regarding the Kampuchean problem are the leaders' background and the geopolitical environment at that time.

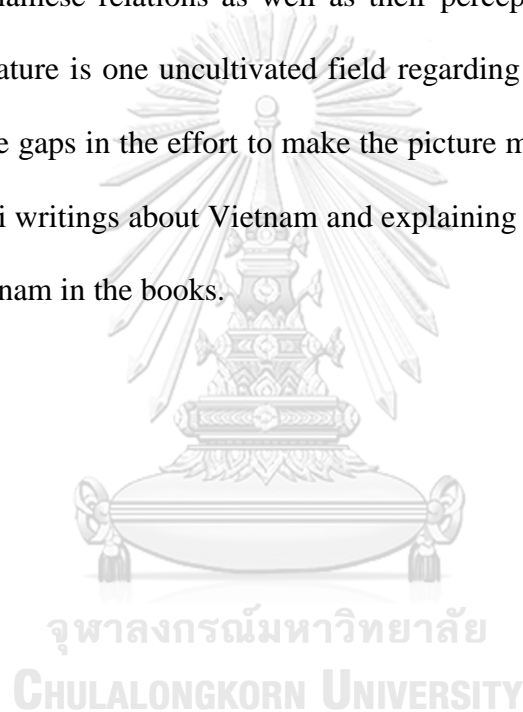
The study by Thianthai and Thompson (2007) has been mentioned previously for their survey on "Thai perceptions of the ASEAN region" on the whole. In addition, they also find out how each particular country in Southeast Asia is perceived by the Thai respondents. In general, the informants hold a friendly view that they are "prathet phuean ban" or neighbouring countries. Examined more closely, the perceptions of Vietnam are nevertheless, rather different from those of other mainland ASEAN countries. Vietnam is associated with a historical legacy of mid-20th century wars, particularly the American war in Vietnam, and a rich cultural heritage influenced by China and Buddhism. Thai students see Vietnam as an emergent nation rapidly overcoming its war-torn past, opening up to the world economy and becoming an economic competitor with Thailand. Despite the troubled past and a sense of

contemporary competition with Thailand, the feeling toward Vietnam seems on the whole positive if somewhat orientalist, exemplified by stereotypical images of women in *ao dai* and conical hats peddling bicycles. The survey respondents, as representatives of young Thai people in general, see Vietnam as being on the right track, and as a country capable of gaining worldwide respect for its preservation of independence and economic development.

More recently, Moeller's thesis (2011) *Thai Attitude towards Vietnam as shown in Contemporary Travel Writing* investigates a number of Thai travel books published after Vietnam implemented the "Doi moi" Policy in 1986, which opened the country to the outside world including Thai tourists. The thesis finds out that, broadly speaking, tourism does not contribute much to the improvement of the way Thai people view Vietnam and Vietnamese people as these tourist-writers are not keen on getting to know Vietnam and travelling does not allow them to have in-depth contact with Vietnamese people. Despite some positive impression of hardworking Vietnamese people, the authors' attitude of Vietnam, in general, remains negative. All they know most are its long history, the Vietnam War and hostilities in Thai-Vietnamese relations. Anyway, travel writings can be considered a manifestation of changing attitudes, and their writers – a new generation looking for a more accurate picture of Vietnam.

At the end of his thesis, Moeller (2011, p.81) remarks that the topic of Thai people's attitudes towards Vietnam is still an "almost entirely undiscovered area of studies". While Sukhakanya uses historical lens to compare the difference between Thailand and Vietnam during the 18th-early 20th centuries including the two

countries' conflict over the Khmer Court in mid-19th century, Visutthiwat inspects Thai policies over Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1979-1989 dispute from the perspective of politics and international relations. Thianthai and Thompson investigate Thai perception of ASEAN on the whole with a certain part for Vietnam, whereas Moeller focuses on the perception reflected in Thai travel writings. The literature review confirms the necessity of more research to help us better grasp the current Thai-Vietnamese relations as well as their perceptions and attitudes toward one another. Literature is one uncultivated field regarding this issue. My thesis aims to fill at least some gaps in the effort to make the picture more complete by analysing contemporary Thai writings about Vietnam and explaining the process of constructing the images of Vietnam in the books.



## Chapter 2

# THAI-VIETNAMESE RELATIONS and THAI WRITINGS ABOUT VIETNAM

Chapter 2 is divided into two main parts in respect of chronological order as well as themes. Those are the two big themes about Thai-Vietnamese relationship and Thai writings about Vietnam which are addressed in parallel time but are closely related. One discusses the political, economic and socio-cultural relations between the two countries as well as regional and global context which shape the Thai perceptions of Vietnam. The other describe the characteristics of the body of literature about or involving Vietnam written by Thai writers. The demarcation point for these context and content is the 1990s, for reasons that will be explored later.

### 2.1. Thai-Vietnamese relations and Thai writings about Vietnam before the 1990s

#### 2.1.1. *Thai-Vietnamese relations before the 1990s*

This part will narrate the relations between the two countries in different periods of time prior to the 1990s, with emphasis on issues that might form the discourse about Vietnam in Thai writings.

Despite the fact that Thailand and Vietnam do not share a common border, the two countries are in close proximity to one another both by land as well as by sea. As such, early trading routes were established among their predecessor civilisations

including Siam, and Dai Viet, Champa and Oc Eo (the last three are located in present-day Vietnam). According to Thai historical documents, there was no evidence of direct contact between Thailand and Vietnam before the Ayutthaya Era. But Vietnamese chronicles recorded trading exchanges with a prosperous land named Suwannaphum right from the 12th century, and Siam was mentioned with the name “Tiem” or “Tiem La” (Sripana and Trinh, 2005). Nguyen The Anh (2011, p.294) cited more specifically about the first formal mention in Vietnamese annals that trading ships from the countries of “La Hoc” and “Xiem” (the Vietnamese transliteration of Chinese terms for Lavo and Siam) arrived in Vietnam in 1149. Records of *Dai Viet su ky toan thu* (“Complete History Record of the Great Viet”) about Van Don, an important seaport of Dai Viet (now in Quang Ninh province, in the north of Vietnam), claim that it was established since the reign of King Ly Anh Tong (1137-1175) and had trading relations with Trao Oa (Java), Lo Lac (Lavo) and Xiem La (Siam) since the beginning (V. K. Nguyen, 2016). According to Kenneth Hall (1985), seaports in Southern China and Vietnam was part of the 14<sup>th</sup> century regional commercial networks which extended to the Gulf of Siam, Malay peninsula and some Java islands (V. K. Nguyen, 2016).

It is the Ayutthaya Era in which the contact between Siamese and Viet peoples are supported by official Thai evidence. It was recorded that Vietnamese people headed to Siam as a land for immigration, maybe as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, before and during the reign of King Narai (1656-1688). The Vietnamese left their homeland for Siam due to two reasons. First, Vietnam’s internal conflict between influential lord clans during the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries caused continuous political disorder and economic hardship to its people in the Central (Annam) and the South (Cochinchina). Second,

the teaching and practice of Christianity were forbidden in Vietnam by the feudal dynasties. Those caused small groups of Vietnamese Christians to follow their French clergymen and seek refuge in Ayutthaya and the eastern part of Siam. They resided in the Cochinchina community of Ayutthaya and enjoyed King Narai's policies of welcoming foreign subjects and granting religious freedom in the interest of promoting international relations and trade (Sripana and Trinh, 2005; Phetlertanant, 2015). Vestiges of the residence of Vietnamese Christians in Thailand can be found in the French-style Saint Joseph's Church in Ayutthaya, and the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Chantaburi. The number of those Vietnamese dropped, however, with the arrival of the 18<sup>th</sup> century because King Phetracha practiced anti-Western activities to limit foreign influence in Siam. Despite being small in scale, such trading activities and migrations show the long-lasting course of mutual relations between Thailand and Vietnam.

After that, documents reflect Thai-Vietnamese relations at both government-to-government and people-to-people levels. The Early Rattanakosin Era is one active period of relations between the two royal courts – the Chakri Dynasty in Siam and the Nguyen Dynasty in Vietnam. King Rama I allowed Prince Nguyen Anh (who would later become King Gia Long) to take refuge in Siam, and later provided him with weapons to regain his power in Vietnam. Vietnam under the reign of King Gia Long sent tribute and kept regular contact with Siam. After their respective reigns, however, their relations turned sour as Cambodia became a battleground to test who could be the greater power to hold sway in Cambodian territory and politics. For a long time, the Khmer Court had sent tributes to either or both the Siamese and the Vietnamese Courts, depending on whose military was more powerful at any given time. The

Siam-Vietnam rivalry broke out into a 15-year war during the reign of King Rama III without a decisive victory for either nation.

Nevertheless, groups of Vietnamese migrants increased during this time and had a certain role in Siamese society. Right from the Thonburi Era until King Rama V assumed the throne, Vietnamese came as the troops, officers and dependents of the Nguyen family members, or Catholic and Buddhist religious refugees, or were herded to Siam as war captives. According to Chandawimol (1998), the Vietnamese were allowed by the Siamese monarchs to settle down and build their communities in Phahurat, Samsen and Bang Pho areas of Bangkok, and in provinces of the North, Northeast and East. Siam at that time lacked human resources for labor and warfare, and needed the expertise of the Vietnamese in several fields like planting, fishing, craftsmanship, and operating big guns. Kings of Siam, therefore, implemented many measures to encourage Vietnamese to settle down and serve the country such as giving plots of land for residence, assigning them to jobs in departments, ordering the provincial officials to take care of them, creating an administrative system to manage the Vietnamese population in Siam, among others (Chandavimol, 1998). Prince Mongkut during his monkhood maintain a friendship with and learnt Mahayana Buddhism from a Vietnamese abbot. Later, King Rama IV and King Rama V provided aid to Vietnamese monks and temples. He even allowed them to perform some rituals in royal events, and in 1898 recognized the Annamnikai, a Vietnamese Buddhist sect, as one sect of Thai Buddhism (ibid, p. 107). In general, the Vietnamese enjoyed favorable living conditions in Siam.

The start of the modern era and the beginning of Western colonialism in the region led Thailand and Vietnam to take separate paths. While Siam was modernised to become a nation state and succeeded in protecting its independence, Vietnam became a colony and upheld nationalist movements against the French power. The Vietnamese in Siam also took part in anti-French activities by the banks of Mekong River, which became a source of friction between Siam and France. The French colonial authority in Indochina forced Vietnamese people to register with the French administration to prevent them from fleeing to Siam. In many cases, claiming extraterritorial rights over the Vietnamese in Siam as justification, the French would make excessive requests of Siam, which impinged upon Siam's internal affairs and sovereignty. With regard to this issue, the viewpoint of Thai governments towards the Vietnamese in Siam was that this group were not the direct cause of the Siam-French dispute; their nationalist activities and other problems were the consequence of external political forces. Siamese local authorities and communities even helped the Vietnamese and provided them with support that they felt indebted to. (Chandavimol, 1998)

About the nationalist movements aiming at Vietnamese independence as they existed in Thailand, Setthasart Watrasoke and others (2015) mentioned the Can Vuong movement and those by Dang Thuc Hua and by Ho Chi Minh in Udon Thani. The first flow (1880s-1890s) began in central Vietnam (Nghe An, Ha Tinh, Hue) as a resistance to the French colonization, then spread out into Laos and to some provinces in the northeastern Thailand. The Vietnamese leaders of the movement came to Udon Thani to escape French suppression and to seek assistance from the ethnic minority *Lao Phuan*. "At that time, Thai state had a secret policy to help these Vietnamese



escapees” (Watrasoke et al., 2015, p. 168). This was part of a resistance circuit for some other Vietnamese nationalist leaders such as Dang Thuc Hua, who later chose this area as one of their bases. Dang migrated to Siam in 1909 and travelled to many places before passing away in Udon Thani in 1932. In Ban Nong Bua and Ban Nong On, he and other leaders united Vietnamese refugees, bolstered their will to fight for independence, taught the Vietnamese language to the younger generation, and promoted the use of Vietnamese language in communication. Northeastern of Thailand, thus, was reinforced as a firm foundation for Vietnamese national salvation. Ho Chi Minh also spent nearly two years between 1928 and 1929 in the Northeast to avoid the enemy’s hunt and to strengthen Vietnamese underground movement (Palasthira, 2015; Watrasoke et al., 2015). Schools were built to inculcate patriotism into the young Vietnamese as well as to teach them not to forget their origin and traditional customs. Several monuments built by the Vietnamese refugees and two museums-cum-shrines dedicated to Ho Chi Minh in Nakhon Phanom and Udon Thani stand today as testimony to the friendship between the Thai and Vietnamese peoples.

During the Second World War, more waves of Vietnamese migrants came into Thailand; the most significant occurred in early 1946 when more than 40,000 Vietnamese from the Lao side of Mekong River fled French bombs to Northeastern Thai provinces (Poole, 1970; Trinh, 2003). Thailand, especially the Northeast, continued to play an important role in nurturing and protecting many Vietnamese secret national movements. The Pridi government was sympathetic to the Vietnamese fight against French colonizers and allowed free passage for the Vietnamese refugee revolutionaries (Poole, 1970). Furthermore, they “turn[ed] a blind eye” to the Vietnamese nationalist activities, allowed them to establish military training bases and

lent them weapons to practise. Ho Chi Minh named the arsenals given by the Pridi government “Battalion Siam 1 and Siam 2” (A. T. Nguyen, 2009, p. 94). In return, he taught Vietnamese people to respect Thai laws, customs and traditions, to adapt to the lifestyle of Thai people and win their hearts. This time marked the blossom of Thai-Vietnamese relations at both governmental and grassroots levels, however fleeting it was.

After that, the atmosphere in the Southeast Asian region as well as in Thai-Vietnamese relationship was overshadowed by the Cold War between Western and Soviet powers. North Vietnam followed the ideology of the Soviet Union and its allies in Eastern Europe while Thailand joined the alliance headed by the United States and NATO. During this time, Thailand allowed its internal affairs and international relations to be shaped its patron – the US (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2014).

Thailand stood in direct opposition to North Vietnam. “In March 1950, the Phibun government, under strong US urging, officially endorsed the French puppet, anti-communist emperor Bao Dai in Vietnam and was rewarded with US\$15 million” (ibid, p. 143). “Hanoi’s aid to Northeastern Thai dissidents and the Thai government’s support of US military operations brought Hanoi and Bangkok close to a ‘de facto’ state of war (Poole, 1970, p. 71)”. “Military air fields were expanded or newly built in various parts of Thailand (including U-Tapao Airbase for B-52s) to support American war efforts in Vietnam and other parts of Indochina. In addition, Thailand sent troops to South Vietnam in various batches with a total number of 13,000 men; 539 were killed in action” (Theeravit, 2003, p. 2-3) . Ruth (2012, p. 1) reported a much larger number: “From 1965 to 1972 Thailand sent 37,644 military personnel to South

Vietnam as part of the Free World Assistance Forces fighting there”, making Thailand the third-largest foreign troop in South Vietnam, after the U.S. and South Korea.

Second, the internal evolution of Thai society added to the negative feeling toward Vietnam and the Vietnamese. Social disruption occurred between those who called for a more liberal nation with constitutional system and democratic representation, and the other who still followed the ideal of a strong and paternal state with a hierarchic social order. By the early 1970s, the division enlarged with the spread of Marxist and communist ideology among intellectuals, students, peasants, workers and peripheral communities in opposition to capitalism, US imperialism and military dictatorship (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2014). The fear of the American Domino Theory turning into reality, in which communism takes over neighboring countries, loomed over Thai military governments and more conservative part of the society. Propaganda posters stirred strong panic and hatred among Thai people of communists. Anti-communist campaigns and suppressive measures were carried out against liberal activists, including the Vietnamese refugees. The implementation was most vigorous under the governments of Sarit Thanarat and Thanom Kittikhachon, with their view that the refugees’ nationalism was extreme and dangerous to Thai security (Sukaree, 2015). In 1970s, when the Indochina War was obvious to end with victory on the communist side, hatred and fear of communism became more fervent in Thai society. Thai student movements and leftist activities were violently repressed. Propaganda and other media were used as cultural tools to stir the hatred and suspicion of Thai people toward communists, including North Vietnam and the Vietnamese in Thailand (ibid, p. 3). Poole (1970) added that the Vietnamese in Thailand were restricted to some (13 then 5) provinces along the northern and eastern

borders. Many were relocated to southern provinces to prevent the spread of Communist influence to major population centers such as Bangkok. They suffered from discrimination in daily life and were not awarded citizenship. The Vietnamese activities promoting revolution in their home country were suspected as linking with the Communist Party of Thailand, with guerrilla forces in the northeast and student protests in the capital, which reached their crescendo with the student massacre on 6 October 1976 though there was no clear evidence for the claim of the two communist organizations having coordinated.

Nevertheless, the rivalry in terms of ideology and politics did not extinguish humans' sympathy and friendship at local levels. While the Thai-Vietnamese relationship at government level was full of tension, communal ties between local Thais and Vietnamese, though limited, had some positive channels. Montira Rato (2011) supports this using Vietnamese documents, especially notes and memoirs by Vietnamese refugees. Thailand, especially northeastern provinces, was portrayed to be a shelter for Vietnamese immigrants a safe base for Vietnamese nationalist activists including Ho Chi Minh. Although Thai governments after Pridi Bhanomyong did not continue the supportive policies toward the Vietnamese refugees and movements, the generous help and protection of Thai people, sometimes against the authority, did not cease. Despite prejudices and suspicions here and there due to the effects of propaganda during the Cold War era, Vietnamese communities received generous help and protection from local Thai officers and commoners, which reflected the bond between Vietnamese and Thai people. Phan Thi Hong Xuan (2006, quoted in Rato, 2011, p. 75) proposed in a seminar celebrating the 30th anniversary of Thai-Vietnamese relations that the knowledge and understanding of many Thai people

about Vietnam started from their relations with the Vietnamese refugees. In other words, these Viet Kieu played an essential part in building Thai-Vietnamese community-level friendship.

After the dark era full of tension, Thai-Vietnamese relationship improved when the Vietnam War came to an end with the withdrawal of the US army and the unification of the two halves of Vietnam. Vietnam and Thailand officially established diplomatic relations in 1976, followed by the Paris Agreement in 1991, which settled the Kampuchean dispute. The relations between Vietnam and other countries in Southeast Asia including Thailand improved a great deal amidst the global atmosphere of relationship normalization and economic development.

In sum, Thai-Vietnamese relations before 1990s climbed a long and winding road. Official relations in general were inconsistent, with several active phases and some hibernating periods. During active phases, the atmosphere between the states were mostly strained. However, their conflicts occurred due to external forces, not their direct rivalry. Whereas, communal contacts between the two peoples started long before and continued to grow even in some periods of extremely strained or almost nonexistent government-to-government relations. The Thai-Vietnamese relations before the 1990s under external influences and internal situations narrated above constructed the images of Vietnam in a number of Thai writings as outlined in the following section.

### 2.1.2. Thai writings about Vietnam before the 1990s

Thai writings about Vietnam, i.e. having Vietnam as the main theme, or as the main setting of its theme, can be divided in 3 periods: (1) the Early Rattanakosin Era (spanning the reigns of King Rama I to IV), (2) the Cold War Era, and (3) the Contemporary period (after 1990-2015). This section will study the corpus of Thai written works about Vietnam in the first two periods before the 1990s. Despite that the number of works about Vietnam in this period are not very abundant, patterns in the writing can be summarised as follows:

#### *The Early Rattanakosin Era*

Although Thai-Vietnamese relations started long before as reported in the previous section, it is in the Early Rattanakosin that Thai records formally mentioned Vietnam and the Vietnamese. In the Early Rattanakosin Era, both countries, as pointed out previously, were feudal territories headed by the Royal Court of the Chakri Dynasty in Siam and the Nguyen Dynasty in Vietnam. The late 18<sup>th</sup> century and the whole 19<sup>th</sup> century were the last periods of feudalism before the colonialization and modernization arrived at the region.

*Phongsawadan* or “chronicle”, also referred to as the Thai national biography, is an important type in Thai writing traditions to record and narrate happenings in the feudal history. As a narration, *phongsawadan* offers the Siam court’s view of Vietnam in the historical context of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. *Phongsawadan* of the first four monarchs of the Chakri dynasty spent quite a considerable proportion telling stories about Yuan and its relations with Siam. *Phongsawadan Yuan le Khmer*

*nai phongsawadan Rattanakosin*<sup>9</sup> by Prince Damrong Rajanubhab, and *Phraratcha Phongsawadan Krung Rattanakosin Ratchakan thi 1-4 doi Chaophraya Thiphakonwong (Kham Bunnag)*<sup>10</sup> note down many exchanges among Siam-Yuan-Lao-Khmer courts. Part of the books, the arrival of Prince Nguyen Anh (or Ong Chiang Sue) seeking refuge in Siam and receiving help from King Rama I is widely known to Thai people and is frequently referred to in contemporary Thai writings about Vietnam. Another book *Annam Siam Yut wa duai Kan-songkhram rawang Thai kap Lao, Khmer le Yuan*<sup>11</sup> by Chaophraya Bodindecha (Sing Singhaseni) also records exchanges and military clashes between the countries.

Because the content of *phongsawadan* has been provided in the previous section describing historical records of Thai-Vietnamese relationship, this section therefore does not go into detail once again but to sums up the portrayal of Vietnam. “Yuan” in this series of *phongsawadan* first, refers to the Nguyen Lords and their followers as subjects of Siam, who came to Siam for assistance, stayed under the patronage of the Chakri kings and tried to return Vietnam to restore their power. After cordial relations early on, Yuan, referring to the Hue royal court of the Nguyen Dynasty, was considered Siam’s enemy in the battles between An Nam and Siam (*An Nam - Siam Yut*). Both Siam and Vietnam were feudal kingdoms, and hence had strong nationalist sense of protecting their territories and expanding their influence. At the same time, anyone or anything that could endanger their territorial sovereignty and political power would be viewed as enemies. Chao Phraya Thiphakornwong

<sup>9</sup> “Yuan and Khmer Chronicles in Rattanakosin Chronicles”

<sup>10</sup> “The Royal Chronicle in the Reign I-IV of Rattanakosin Era by Chaophraya Thiphakonwong (Kham Bunnag)”

<sup>11</sup> “Annam-Siam War: the Warfare between Thai versus Lao, Khmer and Yuan militaries”

(1961, p.188) in *The Royal Chronicle of the Ratanakosin Era: The Third Reign* (in Chetana Nagavajara, 2004, p.156) told about the warning of the ageing King Rama III to his assistant that: “Wars against the Vietnamese and against the Burmese will probably not recur, but do not rule out (the possibility of wars with) the Westerners.” This sentence revealed that in the reign of King Rama III, Vietnam was viewed as a serious enemy, as dangerous as Burmese, who had always been the Thais’ historical arch rival. Yet, the prediction that the war between Siam and Vietnam would not recur indicates that such feeling of critical rivalry existed mostly in this particular reign. Also, in Rato’s opinion (2013), An Nam - Siam clashes did not originate from direct conflict between two kingdoms, but from the ambitions to get greater or absolute control over their common vassal - the Khmer Court.

The images of Vietnam in Rattanakosin’s *phongsawadan* are not just bounded in the spheres of politics and military, though. Many pages of those chronicles tell about the Vietnamese who moved to reside in Siam. Apart from *phongsawadan*, the well-known *Nirat Phukhao Thong* (“The Travel Poem to the Golden Mountain”) by Suthorn Phu mentions “*ban Yuan*” or Yuan village/ community, which should have been in the neighbourhood of Bang Pho with many shops and residents who would be earning their livings as fishermen and retailers:

At Ban Yuan, full of shop houses

They store fish and shrimps in tanks for sale.

In front of the shops lie fish nets.

Men and women arrive to look.

(trans. Montri Unmavijani, 1990, p.66)



Aside from this, there are brief records regarding the religion of the Vietnamese who came to Thailand as either Buddhists or Christians. It was told in Thai chronicles that when the Vietnamese Buddhist communities in Siam expanded, they invited monks from their homeland to come and build quite a few Yuan temples in Bangkok and nearby provinces. Vietnamese Buddhist monks even earned the favour of King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn and were invited to perform rituals at royal ceremonies. In addition to *phongsawadan*, which narrates the stories about the coming of Vietnamese monks to Siam, *Tamra phithi Phra Yuan* (“Book about Ceremonies of the Yuan Monks”) describes a variety of their Buddhist rituals that are still performed to these days. It shows that the Vietnamese communities were well-established in Siam; they had keen religious beliefs and an unwavering intention to preserve their traditions.

To sum up, the Early Rattanakosin Era was a dynamic period in the history of Thai-Vietnamese relations, especially in the reigns of the first three kings in the Chakri dynasty. Vietnam appeared mainly in Thai writings of old literary conventions such as *phongsawadan*, *klon*, and historical records. Due to the historical context, the Siamese court’s perception of Vietnam was influenced by feudal and nationalist frames of mind. Yuan, An Nam or Vietnam appeared in their *phongsawadan* as dependents or patronized inferiors, before becoming troublesome rivals for regional power. Apart from that, the description of the life of Vietnamese communities in Siam in less popular sources portrayed the image of lucky refugees that received good living conditions and the freedom to follow their beliefs and customs. On the whole, they reflect the Thai self-perception that Siam was a peaceful, wealthy and generous land governed by a mighty royal court.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Siam, as King Rama III predicted, no longer had to be concerned about clashes with the Burmese or the Vietnamese. The needs to preserve national sovereignty in facing European colonial powers became more urgent. The feudal systems of Siam were reformed in the reigns of King Rama IV and V; the country changed its name to Thailand and underwent a nation-building and modernization process. Meanwhile, Vietnam, after toppling the French and Japanese colonial rule in in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, had to fight the two Indochina Wars. As a result, there were scarcely any Thai books to be found written about Vietnam.

#### *The Cold War Era*

Vietnam appeared in Thai books again in the Cold War Era from about 1965 until 1985. Thailand and Vietnam fell under the global polarization of the Cold War, the former being an ally of the United States while the latter on the side of the Soviet bloc. The 1960s was the time when the US asserted its full involvement in the Southeast Asian region, including backing the South Vietnam government in the Vietnam War and exchanging Thai support for their anti-communist and military activities through development aid. In this climate, most of the books, heavily affected by the political mindset of the Thai state, relating Vietnam with communism through the portrayal of the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese refugees in Thailand. Meanwhile, another side of Vietnam was revealed from personal overseas experience of the anti-Vietnam War movements in America. Under the overall milieu of the close relation between Thai literature and politics in its American era (Anderson, 1985), both perspectives of Vietnam in Thai books were strongly associated with politics and ideology.

The first batch of books were works like *Songkhram Vietnam* (“The Vietnam War”) (1968), *Ruchak Phuanban* (“Getting to know a Neighbour”) (1979), and *Vietnam laeo Thai?* (“Vietnam, and then Thai?”) (1976) as well as books about the Vietnamese refugees such as *Yuan ya le* (name of a lullaby about Yuan) (1975) and *Yuan Opphayop* (“Vietnamese Refugees”) (1978). *Songkhram Vietnam* is a collection of M.R. Kukrit Pramoj’s scripts from his radio program *Phuaen Non* (“Friend at Bedtime”) dating back to 1962. As the program host, M.R. Kukrit Pramoj often updated his audience with the current domestic and regional news with a copious reportage on the Vietnam War. His talks not only reported and discussed the situation of the war but also stressed the grave toll the war took on the country and its people. Three to four years after the Vietnam War ended, he wrote *Ruchak Phuanban* to assess the defeat of South Vietnam and American troops at the hands of North Vietnam and draw out lessons for Thailand. A number of reasons leading to the failure of South Vietnam are elaborated in detail, and the writer from time to time reflected back on the situation of Thailand. The third book of the group, *Vietnam, laeo Thai?* was written by Phan Rakkaeo to discuss the possibility that Thailand might become communist following Vietnam.

Another theme related to Vietnam examined by Thai books of this period was “Yuan opphayop” – the Vietnamese migrants coming to Thailand at the end of World War II. The two books *Yuan ya le* by Rit Itthipracha (1975) and *Yuan Opphayop* by Khachatphai Burutsaphat (1978) covers a wide range of aspects regarding the Vietnamese refugees in Thailand. The main points that both of the books contain are: the migration of Vietnamese to Thailand, their life and movement within Thailand, the problems of Thai authorities in managing Vietnamese refugees, the refugee

repatriation back to North Vietnam, and solutions to the problem. While containing similar themes, each book adds its own flavors. Itthipracha explains the origin of Vietnamese people, the history of Vietnam and the story of Ho Chi Minh. He also emphasizes on the danger of the refugees' movement led by Viet Minh on Thai politics and security, describes in details the tricks that Vietnamese refugees used to get Thai citizenship, and lastly, points out the shortcomings of the Thai government in dealing with the issue. Meanwhile, Burutsaphat focuses more on foreign relations: the role of North Vietnam and South Vietnam in the issue of Vietnamese refugees in Thailand, and the impact of the Yuan issue on Thai diplomatic policies toward Vietnam.

These books mirrored the historical context of Thailand and Thai-Vietnamese relations from the 1960s to the 1980s, which evolved under the impact of the ideological division on a global scale and the anti-communist policies born of the collaboration between the U.S. and the Thai governments. In the view of the propagandized and propagandizing Thai state, Vietnam War, being in such a very close proximity to Thailand, carried the communist threat from outside while domestic insurgents were deemed to be communist within Thailand's borders. Therefore, apart from international and regional context, the works about Vietnam should be considered alongside Thai internal politics under military regimes and their message regarding communism for the construction of Thai identity.

Feangfu (2011) pointed out in her PhD thesis, *The Construction of Modern Thai Identity in Thai Literature 1958-1976* that the discourse "fear of communist threat" was used as political weapons for the pro-American and anti-communist

policies in Thailand since the Second World War (p. 35). Communism was projected to be a foreign danger that would do harm to “nation, religion and king”, the core of Thainess. Therefore, Phibun, as a Prime Minister and with his establishment of the Ministry of Culture, intensively portrayed “communism as public enemy number one” through campaigns in popular media such as radio, folk theatre, plays. The government associated internal political activities with “communist parties and influences exterior to Thailand, whether they were from China, Vietnam, Laos or the Soviet Union” (ibid, p. 39). Furthermore, Sarit’s regime as of the late 1950s accused any opposing political ideas and insurgency activities of being communists to legitimize the government’s political decisions as well as their suppression of such opposition. The label “communists as dangerous ‘foreignness’ and ‘un-Thainess’”, therefore, played a crucial role in the construction of Thai political identity under the military rule in the Cold War climate (ibid).

The construction of the image of Vietnam in Thai writings of the Cold War Era is part of the above process or at least affected by its mindset. Although the authors - including M.R. Kukrit Pramoj, an aristocratic-turned-politician and a loyalist scholar, Phan Rakkaeo, a Thai Navy Captain, along with Khachaphai Burutsaphat, an academic government official involved in helping to solve the Yuan issue, all tried to keep a neutral voice in presenting their data about the Vietnam War and Vietnamese refugees, their viewpoint went in the same flow with the mainstream view. The image of North Vietnam was constructed as a communist regime whose war and ideology surely threatened Thai national security. North Vietnam was addressed as “kha suk”, i.e. the enemy (Pramoj, 1979); this word persisted the image of Vietnam being the opposite side against Thailand. Meanwhile, South Vietnam, despite winning

Thailand's recognition and alliance, is criticized to for failing to deal with the communist threat from North Vietnam. The images of North and South Vietnam both dramatized the frightful image of communists and hence sustained the concern about the looming communist danger spreading to Thailand from outside.

At the same time, the Vietnamese refugees were portrayed to be an inside threat to Thai domestic security. Both “Yuan kao” and “Yuan mai” communities<sup>12</sup> were accepted by Thai society without much controversy or discrimination until the late 1940s after the Pridi government. From the beginning, the communities of Vietnamese refugees had kept very close contact with their homeland through personal relatives, their support for the anti-colonialist wars and preservation of their authentic language and traditions. As a result, their nationalist activities were perceived as being communists and supporting the communist regime in North Vietnam. They were suddenly viewed by the Thai authorities as a dangerous non-Thai group, especially the “Yuan mai” group. Rit Itthipracha expressed his overt dislike of the Vietnamese refugees in his book *Yuan ya le* (1975), viewing them as an invading group who came to seek shelter in Thailand but took advantage of the Thai hospitality, causing numerous troubles for the Thai authorities, grabbing business from Thai people, and worse than that, supporting the spread of communism.

The fear of “communist subversion” rose to fever pitch in the early 1970s when communist threat seemed to come both from outside and inside Thailand (Feangfu, 2011). The wariness grew in degree and scope in Thai society with the

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<sup>12</sup> “Yuan kao” or “old Vietnamese” indicates the Vietnamese that came to settle in Siam from the very first migration to Ayuthaya until before the Second World War. “Yuan mai” or “New Vietnamese” refers to migrated to Siam/Thailand at the end of the Second World War, mainly from Laos and the Central of Vietnam to flee the French attack.

outcome of the Vietnam War getting clearer, the withdrawal of American troops, and the accusation of October 1976 protestors being communists. As a result, most of the aforementioned books about Vietnam were produced around this strategic time: 1975, 1976, 1978, 1979. The crucial factor adding up to the exaggerated communist hatred was strict press control by the military dictatorship for decades, which facilitated the state propaganda and concealed from the public true understanding of the government activities, including their involvement in the Vietnam War (Anderson, 1985; Baker and Phongphaichit, 2014). The withdrawal of the US military from South Vietnam in 1969, the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, the establishment of Thai-Vietnamese official diplomatic relation in 1976 did not help much in improving the relationship between Thailand and Vietnam. The main obstacles lay in the Kampuchean dispute and Thai unsettled political situations which did not allow the governments to carry out its diplomatic policies effectively.

Nevertheless, intellectuals and university students, as significant social groups in Thai society, formed their own network of discourse in contrast with the aforementioned state discourse. According to Kongkirati (2002, abstract), their channels of communication and publications since early 1960s “became in effect a forum for alternative public discourse in a society long dominated by the dictatorial regime’s propaganda and mainstream print media”. They circulated another image of the “imperialist” American military in Thailand and the Thai state’s complicity with the United States in attacking their Indochinese neighbours (ibid). Art and literature for life re-emerged vigorously in early 1970s, especially after the 14<sup>th</sup> Oct 1973 Uprising (Limapichart, 2011; Sangkhaphanthanon, 2013), and were used as effective tools to introduce their socialist perspectives. Consequently, the formulated discourse

of communist threat from the Vietnam War was questioned, which can be demonstrated by the two books that won considerable attention from the society at that time - *Made in U.S.A.* and *Ngo ngao tao tun* by Sujit Wongthet (1973).

The two books *Made-in U.S.A.* and *Ngo ngao tao tun* (“Complete Idiot” or “Made in U.S.A. 2”) in fact, did not directly address the condition of Vietnam or the Vietnam War. Sujit Wongthet aimed to bring a new representation of Americanness from his real experience in 1971 in New York City, Syracuse, Ithaca, and especially with his mingle with students of Cornell University. The writer depicted the confusion of overseas Thai intellectuals encountering the forceful anti-Vietnam War activities of American students and the sudden shaking-hands between the U.S. and China. He also narrated another version of the Vietnam War told by an overseas Vietnamese student that Vietnamese people suffered so much, and that they fought not for communism but against external powers interfering Vietnam’s internal affairs. Sujit went through what Anderson (1985, p. 29) called “a powerful double impact” of “Americanization” on overseas Thai students: first, an extraordinary anti-war movement in the heartland of the democratic liberal world, then, their spreading of new information and awareness back to Thailand. The new narrative of the Vietnam War, on the one hand, shook Thai “old knowledge” or “ignorance” of the US and American-Thai relationship as well as of communism (indicated by the book title), thus, challenged the pro-American and anti-communist discourses that constituted Thai identity in the American Era (Feangfu, 2011). On the other hand, Sujit’s new information revisited the image of Vietnam as an aggressive communist invader and reconstructed it as a victim in the Vietnam War instead. This side effect of the “awakening” among progressive intellectuals did change the perception of this



important group in Thai society including Khamsing Srinawk and Naowarat Pongpaiboon, who composed written works about Vietnam in the contemporary period. Khamsing recalled his similar experience to Sujit Wongthet in his own book about Vietnam while Naowarat told of his acquaintance with socialism in my interview with him in March 2018, which will be referred to later in discussing the books' content. There might be other writings with similar perspective that the limited time and scope for this part did not allow me to collect more.

To conclude, the image of Vietnam in Thai writings of the Cold War Era was closely associated with the Vietnam War and the communist world in opposition to the free world to which Thailand belonged. The image of Vietnam was distorted and demonized in accordance with the military-led ideology heavily influenced by the US, and with the construction of legitimized Thainess. Both the Vietnam War happening in Vietnam and the issue of the Vietnamese refugees in Thailand were constructed in the perspective that Thailand was the one suffering their consequences. Such official discourses by the Thai state dominated other voices and affected the public perception and understanding of Vietnam for a long time.

This section cannot go into further analysis because each period of Thai writings about Vietnam is worth a more comprehensive research. Still, this brief summary uncovers the trends of Thai writings in the construction of the images of Vietnam in two periods: the Early Rattanakosin Era and the Cold War Era. In spite of their being in two different historical periods, socio-political contexts and genres of the writings, Thai perception of Vietnam can be wrapped up with Thongchai Winichakul's observation:

In the Thai [mainstream] perspective, Siam had helped Vietnam [the Nguyen Dynasty] to survive only to have it become a new arch rival... Vietnam is seen as an aggressive expansionist power in the region. This image is reformulated and reinforced during the Cold War as Thailand sees in the communist Vietnam the bastion of the communist influence in the region, giving support to the insurgent movements that tried to destroy Thailand, and backing the regimes in Laos and Cambodia after their revolutions. (Winichakul, 2004, p. 124)

Dominating as the Thai state's discourses were, they could not entirely suppress dissenting voices. The anti-war movements and written works by Thai intellectuals and students found their ways to redefine the subject and to disclose the dishonesty of the U.S. and Thai military governments. By countering the biased and rigid mainstream portrayal of Vietnam, they unveiled "the possibility of the emergence of new Thai cultural and political identities that are evolving, alive, dynamic and pluralistic" (Feangfu, 2011, p.117). Yet, this societal dialogue is an ongoing process that had to wait for riper conditions to gain more attention. The context of the contemporary period would provide such favorable climate, which will be discussed hereafter.

## **2.2. Thai-Vietnamese relations and Thai writings about Vietnam in the Contemporary period (1990s - 2015)**

This section focuses on the period from 1990s up to the time when this research is conducted, 2015 to be precise. Besides, the year 2015 is chosen as the end

of this time scope since the end of 2015 was when the ASEAN Community (AC) was officially established. Although the dimensions of Thai-Vietnamese relations were multiplied by this regional cooperation frame since Vietnam became a member in 1995 and the preparation for the AC took place several years before 2015, this time-marker is a milestone in the development of the whole region as well as of individual members. Since 2015, the relations between member countries must reflect this new dynamic more seriously, as do their perceptions of one another.

Whereas, the start of the time period needs more treatment due to the complexity of the particular context. This section therefore will discuss the context of international and regional events in relations to the reformation of the two countries' policies as well as the change in people-to-people relations to explain why the 1990s serves as an important time-marker. This context paved the way for much warmer Thai-Vietnamese relationship and the appearance of a new corpus of Thai literature concerning Vietnam, which will be detailed later on.

### *2.2.1. Why the 1990s as time-marker?*

First of all, I need to explain the reason for choosing the 1990s to be a time-marker. One may argue that 1976 or 1986 could be other reasonable options. With regard to the former, although Thai - Vietnamese diplomatic relation was officially established in this very year, Thai internal unrest in 1976-1977 did not allow its government to implement its foreign policy smoothly. Student movements increased the hatred and fear of communists in Thai society. Then came the military involvement of Vietnam in Cambodia. Thailand wanted to resist this strongly and mobilized the fellow members in ASEAN (then consisting of six nations) for support.

This led to tension between Bangkok and Hanoi again. Neither is the year 1986 appropriate for parsing out the beginning of the new phase. Despite the fact that Vietnam announced Doi moi or “Renovation” policy in 1986, it took time for the policy to really seep into the Vietnamese economic and political apparatus, and for Vietnam to open itself to foreign investment. Also, it was not until 1988-1989 that openness was displayed in Vietnam’s foreign policy (Thayer, 1999). Laws on foreign investment were passed in 1987, but FDI only began to have measurable impacts on the economy and society as of 1991 (Kokko, 2008).

#### *International situation*

Dramatic upheavals taking place in the world at the end of the 1980s and the early 1990s caused the collapse of the old bipolar Cold War world order which had existed for almost fifty years. In November 1989, the Berlin Wall – the most visible symbol of division at the heart of Europe, was pulled down, followed by the domino collapse of the communist countries in Eastern Europe. East and West Germany were unified. Just as the Berlin Wall had come to represent the division of Europe, its fall came to represent the end of the Cold War. Rapid changes in Eastern Europe led to the declaration by Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev and U.S. President George H.W. Bush on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December 1989 that the Cold War was over. Shortly after that, free elections were held in Eastern Europe. By the summer of 1990, democratically elected governments took power in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. In Bulgaria and Romania, reformed communists retained control of the governments, but new center-right parties entered Parliaments and became active on the political scene. In the Soviet Union, internal political conflict mounted with

pressures from the pluralist movement for faster democratization and economic reforms. The USSR formally dissolved into 15 separate republics on December 25, 1991. The above tremendous events obviously signified the turn of the world from polarization to multilateralization and diversification, as well as initializing a trend of relationship normalization between major powers.

Moreover, the World Wide Web was invented in 1989 and launched later in 1990-1991. This opened up a transitional period of rapid, complex, and highly disruptive innovation of the world's science and technology. It attacked the old mindset of leaders throughout the globe and increased their awareness of connected and interdependent world economies.

*Regional atmosphere as it pertains to Thailand's and Vietnam's situation*

The atmosphere of a region is more or less affected by the situation and foreign policy of each state in the area. This was so apparent in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the Southeast Asian region settled and headed toward mutual trust and cooperation after five decades, partly thank to the adjustment of policies by Thailand and Vietnam.

First, let us examine the changes in Vietnam's situation. The sixth national party congress of the Vietnam Communist Party in 1986 marked the Party's adoption of Doi moi or "Renovation" policy, which dismantled, to some degree, Vietnam's state-centered apparatus in favor of a more market-oriented economy and open to foreign investment. Clearly it would constitute a radical shift in Vietnam's domestic economic and political management as well as foreign policy priorities. Nevertheless,

the policy announcement did not have an immediate impact; practical changes were visible only after several years.

The new thinking on Vietnam's policy which had gradually developed since the mid-1980s originated from manifold domestic sources (Bolton, 1999) (besides the external factors outlined before). In regard to ideology and politics, the Vietnamese leaders began to recognize the drastic transition in the communist bloc, the changing relations among major powers, especially between the United States and USSR, and the trend of "economic race" replacing the "arms race" among countries. Another source accounting for Vietnam's new direction was its sick economy as a result of multiple decades of central planning. Both the Vietnamese leaders and people were aware of Vietnam's low level of economic development and living standards. Other countries in the region had enjoyed dynamic economies, a prosperity boom and a big improvement in people's well-being for a decade or so. Meanwhile, Vietnam was one of the poorest countries in the world at that time. As the country opened up and more of the outside world permeated Vietnam's borders, the Vietnamese increasingly updated their knowledge of their situation compared with people elsewhere. Decades of war and economic mismanagement left the economic infrastructure in very poor conditions. The USSR with its own economic burdens and problems could no longer provide Vietnam with profuse aid as it had in the past. In the autumn of 1988, it appeared that Vietnam would collapse.

Implementation of the doi moi renovation began during 1987, starting with allowing increased autonomy of state enterprise activity (Council of Ministers Decree 188, 1987) and foreign investment (Law on Foreign Investment, 1987). As a result,

some economic gains began to be recorded: In 1989-1990 the country was able to decrease the inflation rate appreciably 8 times lower than the peak of over 400 per cent in 1986. GDP average growth rate from as low as 3 per cent in 1985-1986 had a remarkable rise to about 8 per cent in 1988-1990, and stabilized around 9 per cent during 1992-1996. FDI inflow from only 4,000 USD in 1989 would reach 375,000 in 1991, and 925,000 in 1993 before a breathtaking increase to nearly 2 billion dollars in 1994 (World Bank figures). Total food output increased from 18.4 million tons in 1986 to 21.5 million tons in 1989. It became even greater in the 1990s, thus changing Vietnam from a food importer to exporter (Vu T.A., 1994). These initial but very important achievements in economic reforms reassured the Vietnamese leadership of the correctness of their policies.

As part of the successful renovation, Vietnam undertook a series of foreign policy initiatives including a general openness in its relations with other countries (e.g. China, ASEAN members, and the US). The foreign policy implications of doi moi had begun to emerge as a “multi-directional foreign policy orientation” in 1987 and 1988. This new orientation was then formally adopted by the Vietnamese Communist Party in 1991 at the 7<sup>th</sup> National Congress, declaring the wish of Vietnam to be a friend of all countries in the world.

“It was clear to Hanoi’s leaders that ‘doi moi’ could not be accomplished without a comprehensive settlement of the Cambodian conflict” (Thayer, 1999). The decision to adjust its security policy, to withdraw from Cambodia and Laos and to reduce its large standing army was adopted in 1987. Vietnam withdrew all troops from Cambodia in 1989 and the problem reached a conclusion with the Paris Peace

Agreement on Cambodia in 1991. The decision also cleared the biggest obstacle for Vietnam' relations with China, the United States and with ASEAN countries. By 1991, the often-strained relations between Vietnam and China moved towards political normalization. Finally, in 1995 Vietnam formally joined ASEAN and normalized its relations with the United States.

Now let us look at the nearby country - Thailand, during that same period of time. In 1988, Chatichai Choonhavan was appointed to be Thai Prime Minister. With his experience as an army officer, diplomat and politician, Chatichai pragmatically re-examined Thailand's situation and allegiances in the post-Cold War period. The 1989 Special Report by Association of the US Army concluded that "there is a feeling in Bangkok that the Thai-U.S. security alliance is becoming less and less important. U.S. military assistance has dropped from \$107 million in 1985 to \$29 million in fiscal year 1989" (p. 41). The Thai Army turned to China to purchase arms and equipment at "friendship" prices, proving the expanding Sino-Thai cooperation and a desire to be less dependent upon Washington. In his speech titled *Thailand in the Changing International Context* on June 10, 1989, Chatichai highlighted the fact that countries in the world were in a political and diplomatic reconciliation process, moving closer to each other through technology and economic cooperation (p.1). The economic dimension became an essential component, besides security and politics, of the "omnidirectional foreign policy" that Thailand applied at the beginning of 1990s. Siddhi Savetsila, then the Minister of Foreign Affairs, described the three effects of this omni-direction: Through the application of the new foreign policy, Thai (1) "internal and external security", (2) "internal and external economic power", as well



as (3) “external political influence must - and indeed can - be strengthened” (1999, p.298).

It was also trade and economic expansion that mattered most and led to Chatichai’s new stance toward neighbouring countries. In 1988-1990, the Thai economy expanded by approximately 10 per cent, with GDP in 1990 exceeding 85 billion USD (World Bank figures). This performance was in the forefront of the rapidly developing Asian economies. The constant growth of the Thai economy in two decades prior to the 1980s, which was largely dependent on manufacturing and export, prompted Chatichai’s government to look around for new sources of cheap labour as well as natural resources for investment. Thailand realized that their neighbouring countries were a treasure house of raw materials that were waiting for the Thais to invest their money and management in<sup>13</sup>. Consequently, Chatichai announced the new orientation of his government policy towards Indochina – “turning Indochina from battlefield into marketplace”.

It can be stated that 1988 and 1989 were the important years for Thailand in its regional cooperation as a result of initiating constructive relationship with nearby socialist states. Soikham (2013) argues why this policy created a new momentum in ASEAN region and moved Thai-Indochinese relations from conflict into economic cooperation: In the establishment of SEATO in 1954 and then ASEAN in 1967, the

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<sup>13</sup> Figures by Thai Ministry of Commerce (in Center for International Studies, Thammasat University, 2003, p. 30-32) show a sharp rise of 355.5 per cent in trade value between two countries from 350 million baht in 1988 to almost 1,600 million in 1989. Noticeably however, Thailand imported more from Vietnam than the value it could export to the country during 1988-1991. In 1988 Thailand imported 231.7 million from Vietnam while exporting only 118.5 million to the later. The trade deficit continued to rise until 1992 before Thailand could export more than import in the trading with Vietnam. This proved the urgent needs of Thailand in importing resources from Vietnam in those first years of bilateral trade.

United States was the core supporter. These two organizations were founded with the aim of strengthening economies and living standards of the member states. In fact, SEATO, and ASEAN, at its birth, were the attempt of the US to prevent communism. Thailand during 1970-80's period did not exactly realize the importance of regional cooperation outside of the need for regional security. "Actually, it could be said that Thailand did not absolutely focus on regional concerns, but Thailand was worried about the Vietnamese plan to create the Federation of Indochina by annexing Laos, Cambodia, and the 16 northeastern of Thailand" (ibid, p. 4). By contrast, with the decision to "turn Indochina from battle field to marketplace", the Thai government reached out to embrace the Communist countries of Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Burma. Chatichai (1989, p. 3) pointed out that the best solution to the Cambodian problem was to get in touch with Vietnam, to communicate with Vietnamese leaders as well as the government in power in Phnom Penh in order to negotiate for a true and lasting peace. Apart from that, if the Thai private sector did more commerce with Indochinese countries, mutual trust and interest could definitely be built and increased, diminishing disagreement and conflict in the region. Although Chatichai's government was toppled by a military coup shortly after that, its foreign policy towards neighbouring countries was continued by Anan Panyarachun (in office during 1991-1992). Anan's personal acquaintance with Vietnamese leaders helped mend the fences and build more mutual confidence, thus, the relations between Thailand and Vietnam continued to improve (Center for International Studies, Thammasat University, 2003, p. 53-54).

As regards the regional situation, it should be noted that the role of super powers in Southeast Asia changed dramatically in the post-Cold War period. Due to

its strategic geopolitical position and its proximity to China, Southeast Asia was a major battlefield of superpower competition from 1950 to 1989, considerably influencing and being influenced by the dynamics of Sino–US and Sino–Soviet relations. However, the end of the Vietnam War and then the end of the Cold War, the role and the interference of these three nations became less noticeable in Southeast Asian politics, and in Thai-Vietnamese relationship in particular. Hoang (2007) reasons that with a sequence of geopolitical events at the end of 1980s, powerful countries reached out for compromise, Russian lost much of the Soviet Union’s influence and no longer was a counterbalance to China’s actions in Southeast Asia, the US rose as the dominant world power and US-Chinese relations got worse. The halt of both confrontation and coalition among influential nations eased their burden on the Southeast Asian region. Vietnam could no longer depend on the USSR’s aid, and had to find their own way both politically and economically. The omni-directional diplomacy of Thailand meant its becoming less tied in with any particular power and pursuing more independent policy for political and economic gains.

Amidst the new environment of the late 1980s, ASEAN asserted itself more vigorously in the international arena as a bloc. It was obvious that the establishment of SEATO and later ASEAN in its earlier stages was heavily influenced by American anti-communist policies. In spite of agreeing on the attempt to defeat communism, these countries did realize the need of less dependence on the U.S. As McMahon (2000) argued “the nations of Southeast Asia, allies or neutrals alike, shared a strong nationalist consciousness that often manifested itself in various forms of anti-Americanism... They longed for Asian solutions to Asian problems.” Therefore, McMahon (ibid, p. 197) quoted an opinion of Thai Foreign Minister Thanat Khoman

in as early as April 1966 in talking with his counterparts from Malaysia and the Philippines that it was time “to take our destiny into our hands instead of letting others from far away mold it at their whims.” Or as Philippine Foreign Secretary Carlos Romulo put it in 1971, “the continuing tragedy of our time is that our affairs are very much shaped by the ill-considered actions of the superpowers” (ibid, p. 199). Being aware of the prospect of further interventions, the ASEAN foreign ministers declared in Kuala Lumpur in November 1971 a common commitment to establish Southeast Asia as a “Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality”, a zone “free from any form or manner of interference by outside powers”. It should be admitted, nevertheless, that these comments and declaration could not become practical plans or actions at the time they were delivered, but the awareness was there.

Entering the 1990s, their initiative increasingly came to reality with the admission of new members including Vietnam, then Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. One milestone of both Vietnam and the region was the acceptance of Vietnam’s membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 1995. Vietnam’s joining ASEAN absolutely reflected the fundamental trend towards regionalization and globalization, and the desire for cooperation and development. The crucial point is the nations overcame tremendous obstacles such as fear and distrust from the past, the gap in development level, and especially, ideological differences. For the first time, a socialist country which used to be viewed as a dangerous source of spreading communism became a member ASEAN. Vietnam paved the way for the other countries, namely Lao, Cambodia and Myanmar to join the organization not long after that. The complete membership of all 10 countries into ASEAN in 1997 was a strong indication of the association’s central role in regional affairs.

To conclude, the positive turn in Thai-Vietnamese relationship occurred as a result of both external and internal factors. The international landscape was changed tremendously with the collapse of the Soviet Union and communism in Eastern Europe, the end of the Cold War, the dynamism of US-Soviet-Sino relations, the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia, and the determination of ASEAN to taking Southeast Asian solutions to Southeast Asian problems. Inside Thailand and Vietnam, the new generation of leaders with pragmatic mind realized the necessity of multilateral foreign policy to ride the international tides, to open up their countries, and to boost their economies. All of these remarkable happenings made the years around 1990 a turnaround in Thai-Vietnamese relation.

#### *2.2.2. Thai-Vietnamese relations from the 1990s to 2015*

Thai-Vietnamese relations has developed steadily since the early 1990s.

The book *Thai-Vietnam: Strengthened Political, Economic and Social Relations since the Soviet Collapse to Present* published in 2003 by the Center for International Studies, Thammasat University also takes 1991 as a milestone year to divide phases in Thai-Vietnamese relations. The book describes how rapidly the bilateral relations expanded right after 1991. The years between 1992 and 1996 witnessed more high-level visit exchanges than ever before with 23 official visits including 12 visits by Thai and Vietnamese leaders (p. 52-53). After political unrest in Thailand in 1991 calmed down, in January 1992 Anand Panyarachun became the first Thai Prime Minister to visit Vietnam since the two countries established their official diplomatic relationship. On this occasion, the Thai government gave a loan of 150 million baht to the Vietnamese government, an amount which was not actually

remarkable but the act in itself took on political significance. Especially, visits by Thai Royal family members (by His Royal Highness Crown Prince Maha Vajiralongkorn in 1992, and then Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn in 1993) verified the significant change in the two countries' relations and the restart of their mutual trust and friendship. (Hoang, 2007, p. 162, 164; Sripana and Trinh, 2005, p. 228)

Enhanced political relations led to more economic activities. In the official visit of Vietnamese Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet to Thailand, the two governments established Thai-Vietnamese Joint Economic Committee in October 1991, pushing the average growth rate of bilateral trade to 20 per cent between 1992 and 1996. In the field of investment, Thai joint-ventures were allowed to operate in Vietnam as of 1991. Economic collaboration has been the main drive of the mutual relations in these years.

Apart from bilateral cooperation, Thailand and Vietnam take part in many common multilateral mechanisms, the most important of which is the ASEAN frame. Vietnam's admission to ASEAN in 1995 has indeed brought the two countries into a new era of dynamic cooperation. The decision to admit Vietnam as a member of ASEAN, which was truly strategically significant, was made at the 27<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Ministerial Meeting in Bangkok in 1994. The membership of Vietnam, and later Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar made clear that the whole of mainland Southeast Asia was committed to creating a cooperative atmosphere and boosting collaborations and exchanges in various fields.

Also in 1995, the “Agreement on Thai-Vietnamese Tourism Cooperation” was signed, enabling Vietnam to become a new destination for Thai tourists. Then in 1997 the two governments also agreed on a visa exemption for diplomatic and official passports and visa facilitation for regular passports. The door into Vietnam was wide open for Thai travellers when Vietnam and Thailand committed in 2000 to provide a visa exemption of 30 days for regular passports of Thai and Vietnamese nationals. (Center for International Studies, Thammasat University, 2003, p. 92)

Connectivity is another key driver of mutual exchange between Thailand and Vietnam. Air Asia, a low-cost airline opened their first route to Vietnam in 2005 with three Bangkok - Hanoi flights per day, then launched the second route between Bangkok and Ho Chi Minh City in 2008. Lower airfares were welcomed by low-budget to middle-income tourists. Vietjet Air and Nok Air began operating flights between Thailand and Vietnam in 2014 and 2016, respectively. Vietnam became a more attractive destination to Thai travelers because of the development of low-cost airlines.

Land transportation was also available and even more economical for Thai travelers to go to Vietnam. The East-West Economic Corridor Project was launched in 1998 as an initiative of the operations of the ADB-co-funded Greater Mekong Sub-region Program. The project has successfully achieved the target of enhancing infrastructure to promote development and integration of member countries. The Route 9 extends 1,320 kilometers as a continuous transport corridor as well as economic corridor connecting Myanmar, Thailand, Lao and Vietnam. Between Vietnam and Thailand, it links important provinces and towns such as Da Nang, Hue,

Quang Tri, through Dansavan and Savannakhet of Laos, into Mukdahan and Northeast Thailand. The road distance within Vietnam is only 271 kilometers from the port city Da Nang to the border gate Lao Bao and intersects the north-south national highway at interchange nodes. The completion of Thai-Laos Friendship Bridges No.1, 2, and 3 in 1994, 2006 and 2011, respectively, also made it much faster and easier to reach the north-eastern gate of Thailand from the east.

All of this infrastructure development stimulated not only trade and investment but also package tours and independent travel by Thai people to Vietnam. As a result, the number of Thai tourists to Vietnam from 16,458 in 1996 tripled to around 45,000 in 2004; then increased significantly to almost 113,000 in 2010 (figures by the Tourism Authority of Thailand - TAT). The Thai share of international inbound tourists into Vietnam was about 3% and was always the country sending the 10th most tourists to Vietnam between 2000 and 2010. In 2005, the TAT organized for the first time a bus tour from Nakhon Phanom through Tha Khet and into Vinh. It was soon developed into a regular land tour between Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. In November 2007, the three countries signed an agreement on land transportation, opening up new opportunities for tourism connectivity by land. It should be noted that the Thai residents in the Northeast region, many of them Viet Kieu (Thai citizens of Vietnamese origin), count for a large proportion of Thai tourists to Vietnam travelling through this land route. According to the General Statistics Office of Vietnam, the number of Thai travelling by land to Vietnam through the Central route was as many as 80,000 in 2006, then increased to 110,000 in 2007, and reached more than 113,000 in 2011 (Vietnam National Administration of Tourism, 2012).



Today, Thailand and Vietnam are strengthening economic, cultural and political relations with close co-operation and mutual support. Their strategic partnership, established in 2013, is evident from frequent meetings between the heads of states and high-level meetings. There are about 10 important collaborative mechanisms between the two governments such as the Joint Cabinet Retreat, meetings between two Foreign Ministers, the Joint Committee on Bilateral Cooperation, etc. In the private sector, the links between business associations have been getting stronger due to more frequent interaction. Only in five years from 2012 to 2016, the bilateral trade between Thailand and Vietnam has increased by 46%. In 2016, Thailand's investment in Vietnam reached over 8 billion USD, ranked 10th amongst top countries investing in Vietnam. At present, there are 10 airlines operating nearly 40 flights per day between the two countries.

When exchanges grow in frequency, width and depth, the understanding between two peoples is certain to improve. Perception and attitude towards one another get friendlier. Theera (2012) reported obvious change in the perception of Thai stakeholders towards Vietnam and Thai-Vietnamese relations as the result of his survey conducted in 2007. Vietnam was no longer or by any means considered a danger to Thailand as in the past. Except for the concern that Vietnam was a competitor in commerce and investment that might surpass Thailand if Thailand did not continue developing, Thai stakeholders' opinion of this neighbouring country was generally positive. Theera added that Thai-Vietnamese relations have had more diverse dimensions, which helps rapidly heal their antagonism in the post-Cold War era and accelerates their friendship in the globalization era. The fundamental

dimensions to acknowledge are regional integration frames and people-to-people relations. This opinion agrees with what has been explained in this section so far.

The 120,000 Vietnamese Thais that spread over 17 provinces in Thailand (figure by Thai-Vietnamese Association) have made important contributions to the friendship between the two peoples. After the discrimination on the Vietnamese refugees in Thailand was improved in 1990s and Thai citizenship was granted to a large number of them, Vietnamese Thais enjoyed new status and could grow their own enterprises from previously informal businesses. Locally and domestically, they rapidly gained influential economic and social roles, and even became a swing vote in local elections (Sukaree, 2015; Thongkaew and others, 2016). Bilaterally, they contribute actively to their homeland through commerce and investment, activities of historical and cultural promotion, donation and remittances back to Vietnam. The interesting aspect here is the reconstruction of the image of Vietnamese refugees and their history for the sake of diplomatic relations between two countries. Nguyen Q.T. (2009) and Setthasart Watrasoke and others (2015) offered that the stories of the Vietnamese refugees, of Ho Chi Minh and of their monuments and museums, which used to be appreciated by only a small circle but treated negatively by Thai governments in the past, now have been revised and promoted at both state and local levels. The memorial sites in Phichit, Udonthani and Nakhon Phanom were preserved by Vietnamese communities for the history of Vietnamese national salvation and were officially recognized by Thai authorities to augment Thai-Vietnamese understanding and friendship.

This section has been used to review the situation of Thailand and Vietnam and their relationship from the 1990s up to the present (2015). Many of the happenings have made a direct impact on the way Thai people travelled to and viewed Vietnam.

On the whole, the two countries have overcome many obstacles to shift their relationship from foe to friend, from enemy to partner. Favorable conditions were created by the interplay of warmer international atmosphere and Thailand as well as Vietnam's subjective adjustment during the post-Cold War period to the globalization era. In that climate, Thai-Vietnamese relations and exchanges broadened from limited aspects to numerous areas and deepened in the level of government as well as common people. This also fostered Thai writings about Vietnam to offer more diverse and noteworthy trends and to contribute to the mutual understanding between two countries.

### *2.2.3. Thai writings about Vietnam from the 1990s to 2015*

In order to have a reasonable understanding of Thai writings about Vietnam in the most current phase, one should take into consideration the broader socio-historical context and Thai-Vietnamese relationship as it was broken down in the two previous sections. Yet, one cannot overlook the trends in contemporary Thai literature and the situation of Thai adjustment of perceptions towards its neighbouring countries.

As was previously concluded Section 2.1., the Thai writings about Vietnam at the end of the Cold War era reflected the rigid mainstream mindset as a result of a top-down development of national identity and military dictatorships; but on the other

hand, it also evidenced the tilt toward pluralism by progressive social groups within Thailand. This is in line with Sattayanurak's analysis of such rapid transformation of Thailand's social and cultural structures since the late 1960s: "the mainstream thought on 'Thainess' [was] too narrow to respond to such changes" (2005, p. 30). As the situation evolved, new social classes and more public spaces in the print and electronic media from 1970s onwards comprised a representation of Thai's society "celebrating diversity" with ethnic, social and cultural varieties (Baker and Phongphaichit, 2014, p. 226).

Two novels, *Kieu bao Nachok* ("Overseas Vietnamese fellows at Nachok Village") (2003) and *Phuan Rak Rim Khong* ("Good friends by the Mekong River") (2004) were written in that context when Thai society was softening its policies and attitude towards marginalized ethnic groups. In *Kieu bao Nachok*<sup>14</sup>, Phanumas criticized the state's political excuse of "national security" which limited the rights and welfares of many people including the Vietnamese Thais (Writer's Foreword, p.11). The Nationality Act, as it was amended in 1992, still provided Thai citizenship to stateless people on the condition of birthplace within Thailand borders, which did not do enough to many Vietnamese refugees living in Thailand. That the book was one of the short-list nominees to the S.E.A. Write Award in 2003 affirmed the fact of the changing Thai mindset towards plurality. Beyond domestic issue, *Kieu bao*

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<sup>14</sup> Phanumas Phumithaworn had collected data about the history of the Vietnamese refugee community for 20 years before he felt that his *Kieu bao Nachok* could be publicized (Jaisa-ard, 2006). The short novel narrated the Vietnamese refugees' daily life family activities, nationalist movement, efforts in preserving Vietnamese language, some Vietnamese cultural traditions, and their amity with Thai people in the region. Phanumas dug deep into the worry of those taking refuge in others' land, and at the same time, their gratitude of Thailand and Thai people that provided them with shelter and support. He tried to communicate the message that Vietnamese refugees in the story did not mean to do harm to Thai people although their nationalist activities caused worries and suspicion to Thai governments. The book is praised for its sincere and a lively portrayal of Nachok Village in about 1970s which helps readers understand the true soul and mind of Vietnamese refugees in Thailand (ibid).

*Nachok* with the sensitive issue of Vietnamese refugees was published just in time for the 30th year anniversary of Thai-Vietnamese diplomatic relations in 2006 as a call for a solution to this hindrance to improve trust between the Thais and Vietnamese.

*Phuan Rak Rim Khong* (2004)<sup>15</sup>, a juvenile novel, depicts the multi-racial but racist society in the northeast province of Nong Khai around 1975. It reflects the dynamics between Thai people and immigrant groups from nearby countries including the Vietnamese refugees as full of fear, hatred, and skepticism under the shadow of the Cold War era. It shows the Thai sentiment that non-Thais were enemies and/ or inferior to the Thai kind-hearted and generous people, who were lucky to be born in a prosperous Buddhist land. Yet, the short novel narrates the process of the children successfully overcoming the serious racial prejudices and building friendships – through sincerity and good will. *Phuan Rak Rim Khong* together with *Kieu bao Nachok* reflect the incorporation of Vietnamese refugees as an ethnic group in Thai society and the elimination of legal and socio-political obstacles to that acceptance.

The realisation of the inappropriateness of defining Thai identity based on the Thai-centered perspectives above was not restricted in Thai borders. In the same humanist and cultural inspiration, Thai perceptions of neighbouring countries were questioned and put to revision. Take Vietnam as an example: The shift from the Post-Cold War Era to the Globalization Era with increasingly integrated economies, the

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<sup>15</sup> In *Phuan Rak rim Khong*, the Vietnamese appeared first in negative rumors about wicked communists. Also infamous for being selfish and cheating, they were spitefully called “Kaeo”. Tien, a Vietnamese boy, hated being “Kaeo thuk” (unhappy/ pitiful Kaeo) and tried to run away from this identity. His family poverty and his own cheating habit in gambling to win any piece of money confirmed his friends’ prejudices; no one wanted to make friends with him. However, when some good friends gave him care and help, he felt so grateful that he gave up cheating to win more trust. Finally, Tien was comfortable with his identity, and tried to improve the images of Kaeo in the Thais’ eyes. The teenagers developed good friendship no matter which racial identity each had.

renovation of Thailand and Vietnam each in their domestic and diplomatic policies, their extending cooperation in both bilateral relations and regional frames certainly opened up new dimensions to Thai perspectives of Vietnam. Such external and internal influences have been thoroughly demonstrated in the Introduction, Literature review and the part on Thai-Vietnamese relationship in the Contemporary period. In short, improved regional relations and the participation of more stakeholders in such relations make the images of Vietnam in Thai understanding more diverse and positive.

The process of re-defining Thainess and adjusting Thais' views of its neighbours occurs in parallel with the dynamic inner development of contemporary Thai literature. Suradech Chotiudompant (2014) explores contemporary Thai short stories and novels after 2000 to categorize them into six trends in his article as follows: (1) the metropolis of Bangkok as a stage for contemporary fiction works; (2) complicated consequences of intensive capitalism and consumerism upon people's lives; (3) social and cultural conflicts in the age of globalization; (4) political tension and the difference in "shirt-colour" ideologies; (5) rural areas under big changes from the influence of urbanization; and lastly, (6) the complexity of human minds and self-expression in this era.

Some above big themes and features of Thai literature will embed to a certain extent in the way Thai writers view and write about different countries they travel to. In addition, Chotiudompant in inspecting the third trend figures out that although cross-cultural communication turns people into world citizens, people continue to judge other groups with stereotypes. One remarkable manifestation of this is the

considerable literary space Thai writers give for the relations between Thailand and neighboring countries. It is pity that they reflect Thai prejudices in which Thailand does not respect or want to learn about neighboring countries.

Uthis Haemamool (2014) also agrees on the increasing internationality in contemporary Thai literature when discussing *New Phenomena in Contemporary Thai Literary Cycle*. The article reflects his perspectives from working in multiple roles as a writer, critic and editor. In the first part of his article, he observes the contemporary socio-political context and idea movements shaping Thai literature. The border line distinguishing fiction and non-fiction is blurred since they borrow the characteristics of one another; facts and personal narratives are more difficult to divide. Besides, false discourses cause obstacles to the creation of writers. Then Uthis notices three outstanding phenomena in the contemporary Thai literary environment: First, writers nowadays tend to work more than one jobs. Second, literature is integrated with other kinds of art such as visual art, film, mass media, etc. Third, Thai writers now works more internationally, i.e. inter-discipline and inter-culture. In other words, Thai literary community is integrating more into world community.

In short, one trend both Chotiudompant and Haemamool agree on is the broadened international and regional scope of contemporary Thai writings as the result of globalized communication and from the active attempts of the writers themselves to find new topics to present to the readers. We also realize the fact that once again Thai identity is ever-evolving. The lifestyle of metropolitan Bangkok exposes its inhabitants to immense internationality. At the same time, they have higher individualism, more isolated lives and unconnected relationships. Travelling

out of the usual limited boundary is a quest the Thais and these writers make for a claim of their identity. Interestingly, their two articles were published in the book *Reaping the Harvest in the Unknown Fields* – the title conveys well the noteworthy tendency of contemporary Thai writers to be willing to explore uncharted cultural territory.

This is displayed in literary exchanges in the Southeast Asian region, in which Thai writers' interest in neighbouring country formed first as a natural result of mutual contact, then with growing awareness. The “neighbouring element” appeared here and there in Thai writings for quite a while, such as in short stories, documentaries or translations of literature in the region<sup>16</sup>. The S.E.A. Write Awards was founded as a result of Thai initiative in 1979 and has honoured many talented writers in the region, as well as brought together literary wealth for further understanding among neighbouring countries. Still, its influence on Thai readers regarding knowledge about countries in Southeast Asia is limited.

At the turn of the new millennium, the growth of the Thai middle-class with a penchant for travelling, more convenient connectivity in Southeast Asia, more secure and open atmosphere in ASEAN enable both individual writers and literature institutions to have more experiences with and in other countries. Soon after Thailand and Vietnam normalized their relationship after the settlement of the Kampuchean issue in 1991, a new phase of Thai writing about Vietnam started with a travelling diary by H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn (1993) - *Annam Siam Mit*. The book has a similar name to that of a well-known book about the war between two

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<sup>16</sup> For more details, read “Literary Messages of ASEAN” edited by Trisilp Boonkhachorn (2012) and “Arts and Science of ASEAN Literature” edited by Pichet Seangthong (2015)



nations in the Early Rattanakosin era - *Annam Siam Yut*. Princess Sirindhorn artistically replaced the word “yut” (war) with “mit” (friend) in the title, indicating a new era in Thai-Vietnamese bilateral relations as well as a turning point for Thai writing about Vietnam. Although mere itineraries and simple narrations of every places and activities comprises the book, it does unveil a country of diverse aspects worth travelling and learning. Many other authors followed her in discovering Vietnam and writing about their travels after going to the country.

After *Annam Siam Mit* - more of a symbolic pioneer, *Xin chao Vietnam* (“Hello Vietnam”) (1997) by Teeraparb Lohitkun made a stronger impression on a larger audience. The book provided a fresh depiction of newly-opened Vietnam with little-known images through Teeraparb’s lively unique style. Its influence won him the Mekong River Literature Awards and was considerably empowered by his popular television documentary *Lok Sa-lap Si* (“Varicolored Worlds”) about neighbouring countries. Teeraparb therefore was referred to in some successors’ books, especially his description of romanticized images of Hue and of Vietnamese daily life. The followers include Phitsanu Sup with *Chaliang Tawan Ook*<sup>17</sup> (2000), Khamsing Srinawk with *Khoam Hanghoen thi yu Tit Rua Ban* (2002), Niphatphon Phengkaeo with *Lao Rueang Mueang Viet* (2003), Surasawat Suksawat with *Vietnam Song Rot* (2004), Suphalak Kanchanakhundi & Suthida Malikaeo with *Sisan haeng Vietnam* (2006), Sirisak Aphisakmontri with *Bon Dao Si Thong* (2009), Wanrawi Rungsaeng with *Vietnam Klang Pha-yu Fon* (2010), Pitsanu Janvitan with *Yon Yuan* (2011), Wut

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<sup>17</sup> Following are the translations of the book titles in respective order: “Eastern Passageway” (2000); “The Detachedness in Neighbourhood” (2002); “Telling Stories of Vietnam” (2003); “Two Tastes of Vietnam” (2004); “Colours of Vietnam” (2006); “On the Golden Star” (2009); “Watching Vietnam” (2010); “Vietnam in the Middle of Storms” (2010); “Travel in Vietnam, Get Knowledge” (2011); “Along the Land of Vietnam” (2013); “Vietnam after the Wars, a Land of Beauty and Meaning” (2014); and “Vietnam, so Close yet so Far” (2016).

Loetsukprasoet with *Vietnam Thiao Ao Rueang* (2011), Niphatphon Phengkaeo with *Liap Thin Phaendin Viet* (2013), Prachakhom Lunachai with *Vietnam Phaendin Lang Songkhram nai Khwamngam lae Khwammai* (2014), and Somlak Wongrat with (2016). *Vietnam Chitklai Muan Klaihang*

*Khian Khaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam* (“Writing about the Golden Land of Vietnam”) is quite a special case when Naowarat Pongpaiboon (2013) composes it in the form of poetry while actually its content is that of a travelogue. Forty poems in the collection describe places and people across the country as well as his feelings about them after five trips in Vietnam. That travel writings absolutely outnumber does not lessen the importance of fiction genres, including the short-story collection *Khwam Lap thi Sapa* (“Secret at Sapa”) by Thatsanawadi (2003), and novels, namely *Vietnam tam Lamphang* (“Alone in Vietnam”) by Khachonrit Raksa (2010), and *Rak nai Man Fon* (“Love in the Rain”) by Prapatsorn Sevikul (2012). They provide in-depth pictures of Vietnamese society and Vietnamese people as individuals in the stories.

In terms of official literary relations between Thailand and Vietnam, the two writers’ associations drew up and signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) in January 2005. Collaborative activities were limited, however, in some visits and exchanges. In the excited anticipation of ASEAN Community establishment, the Writers Association of Thailand and Vietnam’s Writers Association met to renew their MOU in 2012 and carried out more practical activities such as visit exchange or publishing multilingual literary collections. Prapatsorn Sevikul initiated the first official visit and was the president of the Writers Association of Thailand at that time. He also actively fostered the second one, in which he and Khajornrit Raksa were

members of the Thai delegation. After the trip, more individual works and orders for projects about Vietnam were produced.

Overall, there is a remarkable difference in the way contemporary Thai writers studied and wrote about the country of Vietnam. The genre “travel writing” comprises the majority of 15 over 20 writings about Vietnam. All the other writers who composed fiction went to Vietnam before creating their literary works, too. That means the authors did not stay in their home country to write about a far-away subject from secondary sources like in the Early Rattanakosin Era or the Cold War Era. Under new convenient conditions of the present time and Thai-Vietnamese harmony, Thai writers went and explored the country, collected factual data and wrote of their own first-hand experience. As a result, Thai books published between the 1990s and 2015 could disclose more dimensions of the country, and the Thai portrayal of Vietnam was thus based more on reality.

Adding up to realism of experience, the increasing number of writers and their varied backgrounds has created new domains within the body of Thai literature about Vietnam. The books are written by independent travellers, academic researchers and professors in anthropology or arts, journalists, diplomats, or professional writers, most of whom play more than one role. Some are beyond middle-age and have first-hand experience of the Cold War period such as Khamsing Srinawk, Praphatsorn Sevikul, Naowarat Pongpaiboon, or Pitsanu Janvitan. Others are younger but have travelled with certain impressions of the Cold War atmosphere, either with their childhood memories of negative Thai propaganda-induced images of communists as Niphatphon Phengkeao memorized, or from Western media and literature as Teeraparb Lohitkun

often mentioned; but then they realized that reality and the stereotypes were entirely dissimilar. Many had partiality for Vietnam before their trips such as Prachakhom Lunachai, who found a shared fighting spirit with Vietnamese people from his own lifepath, or Wanrawi Rungsaeng with her admiration of Ho Chi Minh and penchant for Vietnamese food.

The writers' intention and aspirations also contribute to the construction of Vietnam's images in their works. Some just went simply as travelers but then the firsthand experience in the country prompted them to search for data about Vietnam by themselves and produce their history-oriented writing such as Wut Lertsukprasoet and Sutti Phong Wutthichat. Others including Pitsanu Sup, Surasawat Suksawat, Sirasak Aphisakmontri, Sutthida Malikaew, and Niphatphon Phengkeao study specific subjects like architecture and art, the ethnic life of Tais in Vietnam, or produce anthropological and humanist documentaries; their narrations are in the according breath. Pitsanu Janvitan, as the Thai Ambassador to Vietnam, offered many facts, figures and diplomatic stories, which provided more insight into Vietnam and Thai-Vietnamese relations as well as cleared out fallacious assumptions about Vietnam. At a more general level, they exhibit the contribution of Thai-Vietnamese collaborations in diplomatic, academic, social and cultural fields to Thai perceptions and knowledge of Vietnam.

Many writers travelled and published their books about Vietnam in this era of increasing consciousness of ASEAN neighbors. Some of them stated the objective clearly of promoting mutual understanding and friendship between the two countries and of the region like Praphatsorn Sevikul with his novel project *Literature for*

ASEAN, and Naowarat Pongpaiboon with *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum* (“Writing the Land of Suwannaphum”). In this respect, the role of marketplace should not be left out. Eager readership, new chances for writers to publish, not to mention generous budgets and sponsorships for ASEAN-labelled projects were a strong stimulus for the writers - the former winning grants from the ASEAN Association of Thailand, and the later under the Ministry of Culture’s sponsorship. Also, previous translations of literary works from ASEAN have recently enjoyed renewed interest and new ones are warmly welcome, which opens up the chance for Thai books with related topics to reach new readers other than Thais.

The images of Vietnam in contemporary Thai writings are constructed from the interplay between many factors such as the traits of Vietnam itself and its changes in the new era, a more favourable context of Thai-Vietnamese mutual relations, the situation of Thai culture and literature as well as diverse objectives, perspectives and styles of Thai writers from varied backgrounds. Nationalist traditions never fade away completely. Some old thoughts are perpetuated and expressed in new ways. The feeling of competition is frequently displayed in comparisons between the two countries, in which the Thais would view Vietnam as inferior or competitor. The Thai travellers complained about its underdevelopment and inconvenience on the one hand, and on the other, found it an idyllic oasis for a nostalgic trip of urban middle class. Later, it is expressed here and there in the fear of Vietnam as a fast-growing competitor, especially in economic development, that would soon catch up or surpass Thailand. To put it another way, the nationalist feeling persists but is not so explicit or intensely politics-related.

Nevertheless, positive perspectives and attitudes are more dominant. The hostile images of battlefields and communist attackers have been replaced by the portrayal of Vietnam as war victim with enormous sufferings that wins Thai sympathy. Obvious is the respect and recognition for Vietnam's long-lasting history, rich and unique culture, brave and hard-working people. Besides, Vietnam is portrayed in its energetic transition from a traditional to modern society; troubles are mentioned not with hatred but with acceptance as part of the process of a country's development. Vietnam is viewed as an interesting neighbor and a good tourist destination worth discovering. As in fictional stories, the portrayal of Vietnam and Vietnamese characters becomes increasingly complex with the writer's more comprehensive research and understanding of the deep layers of Vietnamese culture and society. The image of Vietnam as a good friend and partner of Thailand starts to take form, which proves a flourishing Thai-Vietnamese relationship at people-people level.

In conclusion, although the contemporary period from the 1990s to 2015 is relatively short, its dramatic changes of context, the image constructors, the subject of the images, and the way they are constructed comprise a picture of Vietnam with distinct features compared with those of previous historical eras. It confirms the shift of Thai society's awareness and perspectives of neighbouring countries from biased and negative attitude to more pluralist, close-to-reality and friendly perspectives. Beneath this general trend, one needs to keep in mind that it is hard to defy any clear-cut, complete representations. Due to the complexities of the contemporary society (context) and human (writers) with interactive influential factors, all should be considered in the on-going process of image construction. The images of Vietnam and

Vietnamese people in these written works will be discussed in detail in the next three image-based chapters.



### Chapter 3

## VIETNAM AS A COUNTRY OF WARS

Chapter three analyses the image of “Vietnam as a country of wars” and the construction of the image of Vietnam in contemporary Thai writings. Textual analysis affirms that the image of Vietnam is closely associated with wars, although when the Thai authors travelled to Vietnam to write their books, the war was long over and the situation was different. This image persists in contemporary Thai writings about Vietnam regardless of the genre – fiction books as well as travel writings.

Among the Thai writers who travelled to and wrote about Vietnam, many inherited a rather historical mindset. The first part provides the old discourses about the Vietnam War together with the historical context that constructed them and their impact on the writers’ mindset; their knowledge and stereotypes met with the reality they experienced in Vietnam, confirming the image of a country of wars but in a completely different way from what they thought. The next and main part of the chapter reports how the Vietnam War is portrayed as a result of the interplay of many factors as well as the change of stakeholders in the construction of such a picture. The analysis will point out the mismatch between the old and the new perspectives, the former which is fading and the latter which comes in as a replacement.



*What wars of Vietnam contribute to this image?*

To explain Vietnam's history in one sentence the Vietnamese often say it is one of resistance against outside powers. For the purpose of this research, we need to consider first which among those wars are mentioned in Thai contemporary books.

Vietnam started to be mentioned in Thai books from the time of the migration to Siam in late Ayutthaya and especially from the Early Rattanakosin Era. Consequently, the Thais knowledge of wars in Vietnam mostly includes the Annam-Siam War, Indochina War I, and Indochina War II – more popularly known as the Vietnam War.

One war that many Thai people know about is “Annam-Siam yut” or the clash between Siam and Vietnam in the reigns of King Rama III from Phongsawadan or chronicles. For example, Pitsanu Sup (2000, p.87-91) tells stories in which Siamese troops were defeated in Chau Doc, or the Siamese legions were not welcomed by the Nguyen's Court after King Gia Long (Ong Chiang Sue) had passed away. Regardless, the conflict between the two courts was not so serious because both were busy facing the approaching colonization threat, commented the author. The story of Ong Chiang Sue is referred to by other authors like Somlak Wongrat in Vietnam *Chitklai Muan Klaihang* (“Vietnam, so Close yet so Far”), Prachakhom Lunachai in *Vietnam Phaendin Lang Songkhram nai Khwamngam le Khwammai* (“Vietnam after the Wars, a Land of Beauty and Meaning”).

Another war – the Indochina War I – took place during 1946-1954 between the French forces in their attempt to rule Indochina again, and the Democratic

Republic of Vietnam with a strong determination to protect their newly won authority. The war did not make a big impression on Thai people except for the Dien Bien Phu battle as a final victory of the Vietnamese over the French. It is mentioned briefly in *Bon Dao Si Thong* (“On the Golden Star”) by Sirisak Aphisakmontri (2009) as the book focuses on his main traveling objective – to study the Tai ethnic groups who live near Dien Bien Phu, the old battlefield. The Thai book that gives the Indochina War I a considerable volume is *Vietnam Thiao Ao Ruaeng* (“Travel in Vietnam, Get Knowledge”), in which the two authors present facts of the battle and analyze the reasons for the French downfall and the Vietnamese victory.

The war that imprinted on the Thai perception of Vietnam is probably the Vietnam War (the Indochina War II); a major conflict on the globe in the second half of the twentieth century involving the United States of America – a main character of the world stage. In the Southeast Asian region, the Vietnam War is by far the fiercest war that has occurred. Moreover, Thailand had a special relation with this war. According to Ruth (2012), for Thailand the Vietnam War is “a conflict that had preoccupied the nation’s military and political leaders since the late 1950s”. Thailand had an indirect and later a direct involvement in the war. Thai military governments – since the Phibun government – allowed the US to use their land for military bases to train and keep aircrafts which later bombed Vietnam; this before the Thanom-Praphat government accepted the official invitation of the South Vietnam’s government to enter the war in 1967. Thai official involvement in the war was marked by their sending of the “Queen’s Cobra” and “Black Panther” divisions to South Vietnam. The Vietnam War affected Thailand's domestic situation in terms of security and politics as well as society and economy.

When a Thai traveler generally mentions the image of Vietnam associated with “wars,” they often mean the many wars Vietnam had since the feudal era to the modern time. When going into details, it is the Vietnam War that they can reflect on. The simple reason being that the previous wars happened so long ago – even before most of the writers were born. All they know of the wars is their name, the main actors, and the result or some facts and anecdotes from historical documents they can hardly relate to. Only the Vietnam War, the most recent war, was given a considerable space in the contemporary Thai books. Before they started their journey, they spoke about it with information from secondary sources or from personal memories; when they went to Vietnam the first-hand experience from the sites and the people they met brought them a different understanding of the Vietnam War. What they perceived was far from what they knew. The next three sections will describe how the old stereotypes in the Thai mind were gradually replaced by new knowledge of and emotions towards the war they acquired during the trips.

### **3.1. A reminder of Thai previous impressions and memories of the Vietnam War**

From what the Thai writers disclose about their little knowledge of Vietnam before they actually visited the country, one strong impression is about the Vietnam War. The trips made tangible what many authors had watched, heard, or read about the war from movies, books, and news made by foreign sources. Stories, news, posters, and cartoons by Thailand itself about frightful Vietnamese communists were also recalled. Few writers of older generations had lived their working years through the Cold War era. Given that they did not experience the Vietnam War directly as

participants or relevant actors in any way, they had personal memories related to it such as Thai anti-communist or anti-Vietnam War activities in the US. This section will go through these Thai contemporary books to understand what the authors knew about the wars prior to their trips, and whether this knowledge had a role in the construction of the image “Vietnam as a country of wars”.

*The Vietnam War from the Western media: strong impression but vague understanding*

In examining the images of the Vietnam War in the Thai writers’ mindset before traveling to Vietnam, it is noticed that these images largely come from secondary sources. While reading the travelogues by Thai writers about Vietnam, readers will meet titles of western movies and books from time to time. Princess Sirindhorn in her trip to Vietnam (1993) remarks that Cu Chi is one of the most exciting parts of the whole history of the Vietnam War, and refers to another book named *The Tunnels of Cu Chi: A Remarkable Story of the Vietnam War*. This is a well-known book by two BBC journalists that provide original accounts from people fighting on both sides of the combat.

Niphatphon Phengkaeo (2003) imagines Vietnam from reading. She is moved by the fight of Vietnamese people under Ho Chi Minh’s leadership in the book *Vietnam* by the Phim Thai Publishing house, and is attracted to romantic fiction by Nathi Burirom, the novel by Anthony Grey about *Sai Gon* as well as Hollywood movies about the Vietnam War.

A vast body of Western literature has been dedicated to the Vietnam War, including scientific research volumes, fiction stories, autobiographical accounts and poetry. Journalists, novelists, playwrights, poets, songwriters, and filmmakers have created powerful, heartfelt works documenting their thoughts and beliefs about the war. This literature deals mostly with the participation of the United States in the war and the consequences of it. *Sai Gon*<sup>18</sup> by the British writer Anthony Grey – first published in 1982 – has been translated into many languages and has become a bestseller in many countries. On the American side, Graham Greene's classic *The Quiet American* (1955) is the first novel to explore the origins of the Vietnam War in the French colonial atmosphere of the 1950s. Autobiographies are also remarkable works – *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976), *A Rumor of War* (1977), or *Dispatches* (1977).

Many of the books have been made into movies, which establish the base knowledge of Thai people about Vietnam before visiting the country. Pitsanu Sup, in his preface of *Chaliang Tawan Ook* (“Eastern Passageway”) (2000), reveals that recent Thai generations know Vietnam mostly from western movies, which are surprisingly abundant. These movies have Vietnam as the main topic or are related to the Vietnam War in one way or another.

Teeraparb Lohitkun also confirms that Thai people are familiar with Vietnam better than some far-away places in Thailand itself thanks to Hollywood and French films:

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<sup>18</sup> *Sai Gon* is a saga spanning from 1925 to 1975 about four families; one wealthy and influential family from America; one family of French colonial settlers; one powerful and pro-French family of Vietnamese landowners; and one family who were servants of the French. They are woven in complicated relations and witness the most important events of Vietnam in fifty years from Vietnam's struggle for independence from the French to the final fall of South Vietnam.

Movies about the Indochina wars by Hollywood's first-rank directors, such as Francis Ford Coppola with his *Apocalypse Now* or Oliver Stone with *Born on the Fourth of July* won many Academy Awards. This is the reason why movie watchers all over the world know about Vietnam. Similarly, Thai people feel more familiar with this nearby country than with many places in their homeland such as Nan, Betong or Sangkhlaburi. (*Xin chao Vietnam* ("Hello Vietnam"), 1997, p. 22)

Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*<sup>19</sup> and Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July*<sup>20</sup> are among the most well-known Hollywood movies about the Vietnam War and among the most compelling statements about the war for many people. The inspirational *Apocalypse Now* (1979) is an epic war film, directed, produced and co-written by Francis Ford Coppola. It was honored with the Palme d'Or at Cannes, nominated for the Academy Award for Best Picture, and the Golden Globe Award for Best Motion Picture - Drama. Meanwhile, *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), one among many literary and cinematic accounts of the Vietnam War written, produced and directed by veterans, was a critical and commercial success. It was nominated for

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<sup>19</sup> *Apocalypse Now* depicted the travel upriver of Captain Willard of the US Special Forces to assassinate Colonel Kurtz, who set up his own army in the jungle during the Vietnam War. The film reproduced the American movie formula of a hard-boiled detective hero in a Vietnamese setting. When released in 1979, it was received not simply as a movie but as an important cultural event, an intellectually respectable statement, however "right" or "wrong" it might be, about the war (Anderegg, 1991).

<sup>20</sup> The movie *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) was transferred from a fictional biography of the same name by marine corps sergeant Ron Kovic published in 1976. It is one among many literary and cinematic accounts of the Vietnam War by the soldiers who participated in combat. Oliver Stone, who co-wrote the screenplay, produced and directed the film, was also a veteran. This account of Kovic represents the fate of a generation of men raised on stories of heroism and the adventure of World War II, promised glory in battle but bitterly faced the opposite reality, became an anti-war and pro-human rights political activist. *Born on the Fourth of July* is considered part of Stone's "trilogy" of films about the Vietnam War - following *Platoon* (1986) and preceding *Heaven and Earth* (1993). (IMDb)

eight Academy Awards and won two as well as four Golden Globe Awards and one America Award.

Its fame and its tie to Saigon is so great that a pub named after the film still operates in Ho Chi Minh City, welcoming many travelers including Suphalak and Suthida, the two writers of *Sisan haeng Vietnam* (“Colours of Vietnam”) (2006):

From Hotel Rex turning left to Dong Khoi Road, one will see a special place called Pub “Apocalypse Now”. This music-and-dance pub is named after the movie released in 1979...American travelers who read Lonely Planet will not miss the chance to drop in this club at least once when in Ho Chi Minh City. (p. 104)

Rex Hotel, another relaxing hub of American GI officials and reporters at the heart of Ho Chi Minh City, reminds Suphalak and Suthida of the war movies it appears in:

When I hang out sipping beer here, I cannot help thinking of war movies. Rex Hotel has been well-known since the Vietnam War because it was the place where American reporters chose to stay during that time. Those who like reading books or watching movies of this war will encounter this hotel in many scenes. It can be considered a symbol of this city. (p. 102)

Apart from the aforementioned films, many can be added to the list of Hollywood movies about Vietnam such as *The Green Berets* (1968), *A Rumor of War* (1977), *Dispatches* (1977), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *In Country* (1984), *Casualties of War* (1989), to name but a few. This corpus deals with different aspects of the war,

different locations related to the Vietnam War, different moments in the war's history, or different perspectives of the war. A number of them were shown on Thai cinemas. Regarding Thai audiences, Hollywood films also leave long-lasting influence. According to the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) and based on the Thai titles available, about twenty western films about the Vietnam War were released in Thailand, for example, *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), *Good morning, Vietnam* (1987), *Hamburger Hill* (1987), *Full Metal Jacket or Born to Kill* (1987), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), *Casualties of War* (1989), *The Siege of Firebase Gloria* (1989), *Jacob's Ladder* (1990), *Flight of the Intruder* (1991), *Heaven and Earth* (1993), *The Quiet American* (2002), *We were Soldiers* (2002), etcetera. It is not simply that the above movies were shown in Thai cinemas. Many of these cinematic works were filmed in Thailand, which certainly won more attention from the Thai audiences: *The Deer Hunter* in Soi Phatphong, Bangkok and Saiyok District of Kanchanaburi Province; *Casualties of War* in Phuket Island; or *Heaven and Earth* in Nakhon Pathom Province. *Good morning, Vietnam* is even more special not only for using Thailand as its filming location but also casting a Thai actress as its main character. Like the authors of *Sisan haeng Vietnam* (2004, p. 102) imagined to meet in their trip Vietnamese girls like Jintara Sukhaphat in *Good Morning Vietnam*. It is understandable why the names of these Hollywood films appear in the impressions of many Thai writers about the Vietnam War.

However, when we re-examine the impact of fiction and media on contemporary Thai writings of Vietnam that Teeraparb, Pitsanu Sup and other writers mention, it turns out that the effect is not that large. Teeraparb, a journalist wholeheartedly passionate about documentaries, is apparently a keen reader and movie



watcher. The decade of 1980-1990 was the time he was a devoted producer of the television documentary program *Lok Salap Si* (“Varicoloured World”) about neighboring countries of Thailand. As he told (Interview 2018), this work required him to gather as much data as possible about his target destinations before on-location filming. He remembered having watched many award-winning Hollywood movies about Vietnam and searched for them as a reference. Despite all the success and influence of such movies on audiences worldwide, Teeraparb admitted that they did not help Thai watchers much in grasping a true understanding of the country.

Vietnam in the eyes of Thai people and the world can be considered an acquainted person. But in fact, the world and Thai people know very little about this acquaintance. The reason is we know this country from the Vietnam War but we do not know their mind and soul, nor how they live in reality. (*Xin chao Vietnam*, p.21)... The world wants to know more about Vietnam other than war...and war...(ibid, p.23)

In this respect, Teeraparb meant that the Thai knowledge of Vietnam, inherited from the past perceptions and acquired from Western media, was only surface understanding. In my interview with him, he added that despite all the movies he had watched and the data he had tried to collect before the trip, real experience blew all the presuppositions away. Vietnam in reality was totally different from his imagination.

Pitsanu Sup, in his book preface (2000), agrees with Teeraparb about a lack of understanding of this neighboring country. After some relations between the Nguyen Dynasty and the Krung Thonburi and the Rama Dynasty in the Early Rattanakosin

Era, the two Indochina wars broke out, causing a long interval in the relationship. “It can be said that we Thai people know very little about Vietnam...[A]fter that Vietnam becomes very far and strange to us.”

The point we should highlight here is that however popular they might be, however frequently they are mentioned in Thai travel writings, the role of western sources in some books is limited only to giving Thai writers a vague clue about Vietnam with horrifying wars, or a western-influenced perception of the country.

*Impressions of Vietnamese communists from Thai propaganda*

The impressions about the Vietnam War of some Thai writers have their origin from Western movies and books as well as from what they heard about the Vietnamese communists during the years that the war took place. For example, Niphatphon Phengkeao (*Lao Ruaeng Muaeng Viet*, 2003, p.17-20) still remembered the posters illustrating communist ghosts catching children to eat their livers. When she grew up, she felt scared of the images and news of the Vietnam War from newspapers, in addition to news of poisonous Yuan food which would make human organs shrink. The end of the Vietnam War was another event engraved on the calendar with her father’s mark “the Fall of Saigon.” Another happening she related to Vietnam was the 6 October 1976 massacre when Thai police searched Thammasat University finding a big Vietnamese flag, which supposedly would be raised up when students had succeeded turning the country into communism. All these memories built up bad and scary images of Vietnam before her real exposure to the country; many of them were rumors or stories without proof.

Likewise, Pitsanu Sup mentioned similar things he knew of Vietnam:

We knew that Vietnamese people liked eating dog meat when they came to Isan region for refuge. We knew that eating Yuan noodles shrinks male organs when we joined anti-communism. (*Chaliang Tawan Ook*, 2000, preface)

Previously, we have heard him remark that the Thai knowledge of Vietnam in the past, little as it was, originates mostly from secondary images from western media. From this extract, we learn of another source – rumors within Thai society. Pitsanu’s noteworthy way of expression unveiled a fact that the negative attitude towards Vietnam was a historical result of the anti-communist period, when difference in ideologies meant rivalry.

The memories of the Thai writers above disclose one important aspect of the Vietnam War to Thai domestic politics during that time. With regard to this issue, Ruth (2012), and Puangthong Pawakapan (2013) analyze how the Thai governments during the American Era not only obtained good benefits in return for supporting the US military activities, but also made use of the Vietnam War to create excuses to maintain their absolute rule. The Thai governments could generate public support for their policies by propagandized discourses about demonized communists and the approaching threat of Vietnam’s communist war to emphasize the needs of fighting communists in as well as out of Thai territory. “Propaganda war<sup>21</sup> seemed to succeed

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<sup>21</sup> The propaganda war that Thai governments implemented in the Cold War period produced discourses throughout 1960s-1970s in treating a series of cases such as US military bases, the Thai Queen Cobra and Black Tiger divisions sent to South Vietnam War, the left activities by intellectuals and students, etcetera. Some discourses to name were: Communists were barbarian, inhumane, opposite to the civilized liberal world; or North Vietnam was no more than a lackey of the Soviets and

in building the nationalist feelings of loyalty, pride and extreme love for the country...However, it also caused antagonism, disgust, hatred, suspicion and fear towards the opposite side or who they presumed as an enemy.” (p. 27) Its discourses were promoted by the mass media before spreading widely in the society through anti-communist posters, the magazine *Seriphap* (“Liberty”) or cartoons about communist danger that were shown outdoor in rural villages (Kongkirati, 2002). They were part of the propaganda campaigns that the generation of Thai children sixty years ago (i.e. 1950-1960) were familiar with. Consequently, many Thai travelers – including the writers who wrote contemporary texts about Vietnam – who were blocked from other sources of information under the state control, certainly carried negative stereotypes and doubtful attitudes towards Vietnam before their trips.

*Pieces of personal experiences*

Not all the writers knew about the Vietnam War only from Western media or the Thai State discourse. Some of them had personal experiences of Vietnam and Vietnamese people.

Niphatphon Pengkeao (2003, p. 17-20) had mixed impressions about Vietnam before her real exposure to the country. Her first experience of Yuan (or Vietnam) was the noodles she had in the northeast of Thailand, a delicacy of her childhood. Grown up Niphatphon collected her knowledge of Vietnam from secondary sources

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China, so the meaning of the Vietnam War as a fight for independence and unification did not make sense; or it was indeed to expand communism. Accordingly, the involvement of the US and Thailand in the Vietnam War was righteous and honorable —to protect Indochinese people from destructive communism. With time these discourses were reproduced and altered repeatedly, resulting in Thai hatred towards Yuan or Vietnam, the peak of which was a belief within Thai society that Communist Vietnam would attack Thailand and demolish its main institutions together with the tragedy of October 6, 1979. (Pawakapan, 2013)

for research work. Besides fiction books for leisure, her academic work also required her to read Vietnamese literature and folk stories, together with many historical books for reference. Her first exposure to Vietnam in person was when her father's friend, a Vietnamese scholar, visited her family. The way he patiently listened and explained all the whys of the little girl assured Niphatphon that the Vietnamese were normal people as any other human being. This contact erased her ideas of evil Vietnamese communists she had heard about.

The poet Naowarat Pongpaiboon shared in an interview in March 2018 the development of his personal impression of Vietnam prior to his project *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam* as follows: his understanding of Vietnam changes through time and can be divided in three periods. Naowarat was born and grew up in Kanchanaburi province, where “Yuan” or the Vietnamese community resided in harmony with the Thai and Chinese ones. The second phase was during the Vietnam War; Naowarat, like the majority of Thai society, was provided with the image of Vietnam as a villain. The image of Vietnam outside Thailand was the cruel Vietnam War, a disaster to human life in Thai perception. In the domestic sphere the word “Vietnam” was immediately associated with the cruel “Viet Cong,” – referring to the Vietnamese communists in the war and later covering the students of the October 6, 1976 Incident – and considered an outward and inward threat to Thai security. This uprising imprinted a bad picture of Vietnam in Thai perception for many years. At the same time but on as a counter effect, the incident marked a change in Naowarat's understanding of the country. He joined a group of intellectuals to study social science, socialism, Marxism and neighboring countries, thus adjusting his worldview and attitude. His early breakaway from political prejudice against socialism can be

considered the turning point in Naowarat's perspective of Vietnam. However, the poet agreed that a majority of Thai people who did not have access to counter information had a very bad impression of Vietnam in general, and communism in specific, until recently.

Khamsing Srinawak is another senior writer that witnessed many ups and downs of Thailand from the second half of the twentieth century to the present. His most active writing period dating from the 1950s to the early 1970s coincided with the Cold War era. Therefore, his memories of this time and the Vietnam War are different in nature compared with the impressions the other Thai writers developed. In *Khoam Hanghoen thi yu Tit Rua Ban* ("The Detachedness in Neighborhood") (2002) Khamsing narrated his experience of the anti-Vietnam War movement in the US, quite similar to what Suchit Wongthet wrote in his books *Made in USA* and *Ngo ngao tao tun* ("Complete Idiot" or "Made in USA 2") (refer to page 55 in Chapter 2). Despite their experience not being directly from Vietnam but from the other side of the globe – and the opposite side of the war – it was a closer reality of the Vietnam War than what they knew in Thailand.

Khamsing went to New York and worked as an apprentice at the Times Magazine during 1967-1968 while the hot war was accelerating its severity after the Gulf of Tonkin Incident and the US extended its bombing campaigns to North Vietnam. Working at one of the biggest world magazines, the writer was exposed to enormous amount of news about the Vietnam War. Like American people, he started to know new aspects of the war such as the bombing of the US Air Force to Hanoi or the casualties of American soldiers. Also, anti-war demonstrations, initiated by

university students, happened in front of his eyes monthly or even more frequently, and spread to tens of thousands of people. He wrote letters to friends in Thailand, anticipating the outcome of the Vietnam War.

Once, Khamsing joined a welcome lunch by the Times manager to a Thai senior government official. The high-level official was extremely shocked to see a big demonstration along the streets of New York and could not accept that the US government would allow it to happen. His reaction revealed to Khamsing two things at the same time: first, the ignorance of Thai society of the real situation of Vietnam and the US; and second, the lack of democracy and liberty in Thailand at that time. Khamsing's knowledge of Vietnam and the Vietnam War was still limited, but at least what he came to know in the US unveiled a different account of the propagandized narrative in Thailand.

So far, section 3.1 has reviewed what the Thai writers knew about Vietnam before visiting the country. The knowledge took form in the Cold War Era or what in Thailand was called the American Era. What they knew represents two different versions of the Vietnam War – one is the mainstream discourse, constructed by the (American as well as Thai) state and made public by the media; the other is the narrative by the Thai intellectuals which is less popular but closer to reality. It reflects the fact that the Vietnam War plays a considerable role in the happenings of Thai socio-political life during the Cold War Era. Whichever version of the war the Thais had in their memory, was based on indirect experience. None of the Thai writers had any direct exposure to Vietnam when the Vietnam War was happening. Hearsay from secondary sources or experience from afar hardly gave them an adequate or proper

understanding of the country. Old vague memories, therefore, are quickly replaced by the impressive images or narratives they met in Vietnam.

### **3.2. Images of the Vietnam War constructed from Thai first-hand experience in Vietnam**

#### *Thai reproducing the Vietnamese presentations of the Vietnam War*

The Thai writers started to travel to Vietnam since the 1990s, about thirty years after the Vietnam War had ended. What they saw was a country in its opening and developing stages in the new era of globalization. Yet, the war and its impact are displayed in a number of tourist destinations across the country and many aspects of the Vietnamese life remain an important image of Vietnam in the Thai writers' eyes.

War sites and museums set by the Vietnamese government depict different aspects of the Vietnam War and different moments in the war's history; many of them are different locations related to the war. The Thai writers get access to the primary sources presented by Vietnam through the tourist sites they visit, exhibitions and data from the museums and individual stories of Vietnamese people in the war. In addition – and due in part to the distinct atmosphere of the new context including adjusted relations between countries – a strong tendency towards Southeast Asian regionalism encouraged the Thai writers to portray the Vietnam war with more sympathy and understanding. However, that much of the data about the war came from tourist venues and documents suggests that the Thai portrayal is, in fact, reproduced from the Vietnamese mainstream narrative.



First of all, Vietnam is described to be a country heavily destroyed by the war. It is a common war literature theme to depict war brutality and viciousness as well as the consequences of its destructiveness. The Thai writers construct this image first by reviewing statistics and factual evidence such as casualties, quantity of bombs and chemicals, etcetera. The numbers might vary but they all impress readers about the damages that Vietnam suffers from the deadly war, like those quoted in *Xin chao Vietnam* by Teeraparb (1997):

...The world records that the Vietnam War had three times more bombs than the Second World War, equivalent to 7,850,000,000 tons (seven billion eight hundred fifty million tons). (p.113)

Or Niphatphon in *Liap Thin Phaendin Viet* (2013):

Vietnam had to struggle with the latest and most destructive weapon technology of that time. It was estimated that the quantity of bombs and weapons used in the Vietnam War was as much as that in World War II. And although the Vietnam War was over in 1975, casualties by unexploded bombs include more than forty-thousand people. There are many thousands of disabled people suffering from Agent Orange... It will take about fifty years to dig and solve all the bombs left in the whole land of Vietnam. (p.51)

One more noteworthy data is that three million Vietnamese people died in this war (from which two million were civilians). There were two more million injured and disabled, and three-hundred thousand people missing. (p.68)

The same writer has also pointed out in her first book about Vietnam – *Lao Rueang Mueang Viet* (2003) – the war consequences to both nature and human:

Central Vietnam was heavily bombed with Agent Orange in the war with the American military. Thirty years have passed but the destroyed forest cannot recover. Toxic chemicals are still left in the soil and water until these days. Obvious evidence is clear mountains where even grass does not grow and Vietnamese children in many villages born disabled or suffering from cancer and leukemia. (p.186-187)

The first thought of Khamsing Srinawk on his flight to Vietnam was about the wars and the losses it caused to Vietnam:

It is sad to think that not many years ago this sky, in which our airplane is now flying through, used to be full of roaring war aircrafts. The intense violence can be imagined from the number of more than five hundred million tons of bombs while the total bombs thrown during World War II was only two million tons. The United States lost fifty-eight thousand of their young people. The casualties of Vietnam's side is unknown but should be a large number. (*Khoam Hanghoen thi yu Tit Rua Ban*, 2002, p.19)

Instead of statistical numbers, Naowarat Pongpaiboon in *Khian Phaendin Suvannaphum Vietnam* utilizes figurative speech with bombs.

Phaendin borisut sut-som

The pure land turns desolate

Raboet bap pha-yap pha-yom yang pha-yan

Rains of sinful bombs are to blame

(*U-mong Vinh Moc*)

(“Vinh Moc Tunnel”, p. 219)

This poem talks about the consequences the war caused to the Vinh Moc village, of which some three hundred inhabitants had to dig tunnels for underground shelter against American bombing. The life of sixty families carried on permanently during 1966-1972 in the almost three-kilometer and three-level tunnels under bomb raids of an average of seven tons per villager. Naowarat applies the word “sinful” to weapons to convey the harm of the war that ruined the “pure land” of Vietnam. The strong impression is made not only by metaphors but also by the contrast between “sinful” and “pure”. To add on the effect, the sound of the cluster “pha-yap, pha-yom, pha-yan” evokes the broad, deep and long-lasting impact of bomb raids and stresses on the crime which “Sky/God witnesses”. Through the strengths of Naowarat’s poetry like artistic word choice and rhyme building, the image of bombs becomes a powerful criticism of the crime of wars.

His poem about Cu Chi Tunnel once again impresses readers with the destruction of bombs. This following extract draws a picture of nature being crumbled into pieces by bombs. In addition, there are toxic chemicals, especially what is called Agent Orange<sup>22</sup> which has caused serious health issues – including tumors, birth defects, rashes, psychological symptoms and cancer – among different generations. The personification compares the raid of toxics and bombs with a beast that *khamron* [roars] – its roar destroys everything and horrifies everyone.

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<sup>22</sup> The US program of defoliation, codenamed Operation Ranch Hand, sprayed more than nineteen million gallons of Agent Orange over four and a half million acres of land in Vietnam from 1961 to 1972. It is a mixture of herbicide and defoliant sprayed by the US military to eliminate forest cover for Vietnamese troops as well as civilians and crops that could feed them. (Institute of Medicine US, 1994)

Fon luaeng an kham-ron

Orange poison throws like rain

Mak bom bi ra-boet ra-buaeng

Bomb explosions roar massively

(*U-mong Cu Chi*)

(“Cu Chi Tunnel”, p.243)

While many writers cite the numeral casualties, the brutal weapons, or the visible damages the war brought about to the whole country, Niphatphon constructs the image of the Vietnam war by telling about the emotional loss, and intangible but traumatic pain that Vietnamese individuals suffered. She was “very moved” when reading the diary of Dang Thuy Tram<sup>23</sup> extracted in the display of the War Remnants Museum. Doctor Tram was a North Vietnamese girl who served in a war-zone clinic for three years before she was shot dead at the age of 27 in a US attack while trying to protect her patients. In *Liap Thin Phaendin Viet* (2013), Niphatphon quotes Doctor Tram’s passage written in New Year’s Day 1970:

My youth has flashed in a whirl of fire and smoke. War has robbed my youth of happiness and love. Who doesn’t cherish the spring? Who doesn’t want to keep her bright eyes and lips full of youth? But...in this era, the young people in their twenties must put away their rightful dreams of happiness...Like other adolescents, I have gone to the front. Our youths have vanished in the explosions of bombs, the sounds of bullets. My youth has been

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<sup>23</sup> The publication of Dang Thuy Tram’s diary was a big event in Vietnamese society in 2005. Despite its owner’s death in June 1970, the diary itself had its own life and fate. Mr. Whitehurst, a military interrogator, whose job included sifting through captured documents, decided not to destroy her notes. After keeping it for decades at home, Mr. Whitehurst donated the diary to the Vietnam Archives at Texas Tech University. Soon Dr. Tram's family was located in Hanoi and was brought to Texas to be reunited with the diary. Her wartime diary then became a best seller in Vietnam, bringing the war alive for a new generation of readers. It has been translated into many languages.

soaked with the sweat, tears, blood, and bones of the living and the dead.  
(Dang, 2008, p. 173-174)<sup>24</sup>

Commenting on the extract, Niphatphon writes that it is only one voice – so soft a voice – from the cruel front, and just a fraction of the pitiful fate that Dang Thuy Tram and all Vietnamese people through the country had to face. Niphatphon is a researcher working closely with grassroots people and is very sensitive to human rights violations. She also had childhood memories of Vietnam and travelled across the country many times for documentary writings, even staying in her Vietnamese friends' homes for a while. These explained why she had much compassion towards Vietnam and Vietnamese people during the war. In constructing the image of the Vietnam War, Niphatphon often narrates the stories of individuals to prove the cruelty of war upon their lives and souls.

Niphatphon continues with the story of Phan Thi Kim Phuc, or the so-called Napalm girl: “I felt as if the image of the little girl Kim Phuc running and crying from severe pain appeared in front of my eyes...” (*Liap Thin Phaendin Viet*, p.62). What Niphatphon was watching was an iconic photograph of the Vietnam War, the image of a naked girl burnt by napalm bombs running for her life<sup>25</sup>. The photographer captured the moment she, with other children, was screaming in torment, running up

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<sup>24</sup> The writer Niphatphon quoted Doctor Tram's letter from the Thai translation *Banthuek Dang Thuy Tram* translated by Montira Rato. The extract here is from the English translation *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace* translated by Andrew X. Pham.

<sup>25</sup> The picture of Phan Thi Kim Phuc dominated newspaper front pages in 1972, seven months before the signing of the Paris Peace Accords led to the withdrawal of US combat forces from South Vietnam, and brought Nick Ut, its photographer, the Pulitzer Award one year later. Phuc was then nine years old and lived in the village of Trang Bang, north of Sai Gon. She and her family were sheltering in a temple when they heard planes coming. Afraid of being bombed, they ran outside and she was caught with napalm from the bombs, a flammable liquid that clings to human skin, causing horrific burns when ignited. That image of her taken by Nick Ut jolted people around the world, urging them to anti-war movements, so to a certain extent, it hastened the end of the Vietnam War. (Chong, 2001)

the highway toward him. She had torn off her clothes to stop the burning; the napalm already had seared her neck, most of her back, and her left arm; her face was frozen in an agonizing wail. Kim Phuc spent more than a year in hospitals. Her family feared she would never survive. She underwent a series of painful surgeries and eventually recovered from her physical wounds. Yet the point that the writer Niphatphon emphasized here is that the terror and her inner pain lasted much longer. The confession of Kim Phuc deeply touched Niphatphon as well as the readers. When Kim Phuc was finally ready to talk about her story in public, she told CNN that for decades she could not find peace. She thought if she had died she would not have had to suffer mentally, physically and emotionally.

Kim Phuc told that the napalm caused her so extreme physical and emotional pain that she did not want to live any more. But then she realized that what tormented her most was not anyone or anything but the enmity rooted in her heart. “I came to learn that growing hatred can kill me”. (*Liap Thin Phaendin Viet*, p. 72)

Another material used by the Thai writers to construct the image of Vietnam as a country of wars is war sites. Cu Chi Tunnel<sup>26</sup> is one outstanding historical site mentioned in many Thai books. For instance, Princess Sirindhorn narrated her visit to Cu Chi Tunnels in 1993 in detail from departure time, what she saw along the way, features and role of the tunnels, how Cu Chi people lived underground and fought

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<sup>26</sup> The network of Cu Chi tunnels was dug by Vietnamese guerrilla troops in order to combat the better-supplied American and South Vietnamese forces. It runs extensively under the jungle terrain of Cu Chi District, seventy kilometers northwest of Ho Chi Minh City, linking their bases in the outskirts of Sai Gon and all the way to the Cambodian border, covering a distance of more than two-hundred kilometers. Visitors can now crawl through some short passages, view some rooms and traps, and can even eat some cassava roots, a typical food of the tunnel soldiers.

with American forces, and the activities for tourists and herself. The Cu Chi Tunnels also appear – though briefly – in seven other books while the authors of *Liap Thin Phaendin Viet* and *Vietnam Phaendin Lang Songkhram nai Khwamngam lae Khwammai* devote many pages of their books to a detailed description of this network of tunnels. What these works highlight about the Cu Chi Tunnel is the image of a guerrilla war (“*songkhram chorayut*” in Thai). In their portrayal, Vietnam, as a small and less equipped country, had to build tunnels for underground shelter and activities to avoid bomb raids and deal with a more advanced armed military. The underground life and fight for years of Vietnamese people should be the best visual evidence of how severe the war was (as well as their hard-core fight which will be further discussed in Chapter five).

Other places often mentioned by the Thai writers to illustrate the Vietnam war are the historical museums throughout the countries. One good example is the War Remnants Museum<sup>27</sup>, located in Ho Chi Minh City, also a must see for international tourists. Unification Palace is another iconic landmark preserved after the Vietnam War. Before the fall of Sai Gon, it was used as the presidential palace of South Vietnam. It symbolizes the end of the war with many world-famous photographs of tanks crashing through the iron gate, and Vietnamese soldiers running into the building and up the stairs to hang their flag from the rooftop.

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<sup>27</sup> The War Remnants Museum consists of both indoor displays and outside areas. The main building is devoted for collections of photographs from western sources which powerfully convey the brutal effects of the war on civilian victims; while outside are displayed US military aircrafts, bombs, weapons, etcetera. One corner simulates French and South Vietnam prisons on some far islands, including the “tiger cages” that imprisoned the Viet Cong or Vietnamese communists, and the appliances to torture them.

From the Thai construction of the image of the Vietnam War, it is noticed that the source of the data has changed. The press control and data restriction in the past no longer exist to limit the understandings of Thai people or to prevent them from updating their knowledge of other countries. The new era of mass communication and the efficient connectivity in the Southeast Asian region enable Thai tourists and travelers to get access to other sources. The examples so far have shown that war sites – which are numerous across the country – as well as their displays and information, have left an impression upon Thai writers of the war damages and sufferings for the Vietnamese people.

The frequent appearance of these war-associated places and data in Thai travelogues about Vietnam is of no coincidence. Absolutely, the historical importance of the places gives them the reputation of being worthy of a visit. Many places are part of world history, and are targeted destinations of tourists when traveling to Vietnam. Yet, one can realize that different Thai books construct the image of the Vietnam War from similar materials such as casualties, war weapons, well-known cases of individual sufferings, war sites and exhibitions. Many of the Thai writers reproduce what they witness in their trips.

In the perspective of Western scholars such as Tai (2001) and many others who co-wrote the book *The Country of Memory*, an official narrative has been presented by the Vietnamese State about the history and especially wars of national salvation against outside powers. “The traditional depiction of war [is] something forced on the Vietnamese people rather than initiated by them” (ibid, p.172). During war time, the aim is to legitimize the war efforts, mobilize the population and



strengthen their will to fight. After the war, war sites and museums are a practice to honor those who died in the war and generate popular support for its cause. Using the materials presented by Vietnam, the portrayal of the Vietnam war in contemporary Thai writings, therefore, cannot avoid such discourse. The books also highlight the losses of the country and its people and the rightness of their national defense.

To clarify why individual accounts related to the Vietnam war are female rather than male, Tai (2001, p.173) points out “the figure of vulnerable women” serves the Vietnamese historical representation of war as “an exercise in patriotic self-defense”. Images of injured little girls or wives and mothers in grief indicate a country being invaded; while images of female soldiers prove their sacrifice to the national struggle. This contrasts with Western war literature and media that often focus on the masculine experience of fierce battles. Accordingly, the stories of Dang Thuy Tram and Kim Phuc – the former as a female fighter defending her homeland and the later as a victim of combat activities, work well to narrate the Vietnam war the way the official accounts of history would like to be told.

Reproducing the Vietnamese discourse of the War, the attitudes of the Thai writers are, in general, on the side of Vietnam. It has been mentioned previously the sadness and sympathy Niphatphon felt toward the losses Vietnamese people suffered from the war when she looked at the photograph of the napalm girl or read Doctor Tram’s diary. Other feelings are respect and recognition for the fight they took. Some like Pitsanu Sup (2000) or Prachakhom Lunachai (2014) not only show their pity for Vietnam but at the same time, also strongly criticize France and the US for causing such damaging war to Vietnam.

So far, the portrayal in contemporary Thai writings confirms the fierceness and cruelty of the war that the authors had learned from popularly known media works and publications. Nonetheless, symbolic images of the war previously constructed by the West and Thai mainstream sources are now replaced by the writers' real exposure to historical sites and war consequences in Vietnam. Manipulated by the presentations of Vietnamese mainstream sources, the Thai writers reproduce the image of a country that suffers from heavy physical damages and a people hurt by deep inner pains in a war for national defense.

*Thai writers' attempts to present new aspects*

However, the Thai writers also display efforts to seek for and present different images other than what is provided by the Vietnamese government and the tourism industry. Some travelled in little known places; others talked to people or searched for different stories.

Typical for the first case are Wut Loetsukprasoet and Sutthiphong Wutthichat who travel of the popular tourist routes. Despite the book *Vietnam Thiao Ao Rueang* ("Travel in Vietnam, Get Knowledge") (2011) also covering important touristy places, it is the intention of the writers, who are very keen on Vietnamese history, to guide their readers mainly to the historical aspect of Vietnam. They therefore visit many museums like Vietnam's History Museum, Museum of Vietnamese Revolution, etcetera to supply their book with historical facts, figures and stories. For example, in exploring Hanoi, few Thai travelogues would introduce Hoa Lo Prison Museum, where French authority imprisoned Vietnamese activists during their colonial rule in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *Vietnam Thiao Ao Rueang* might be

the only travel documentary that gives Thai readers in-depth information about Dien Bien Phu, the little valley where Vietnam defeated the French troops in 1954, as well as about Dong Hoi, the demilitarized zone at the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel that separated North Vietnam from South Vietnam, also an intensively bombed battlefield in the War. Moreover, the two authors describe the consequences of the Vietnam War not from figures of death, injuries or damages but from war artifacts in a village in Quang Tri Province. The village had almost been destroyed in carpet bombing by American military. When Wut and Sutthiphong travelled to the place (2011), a huge pile of explosive shells was still visible and the villagers still earned their living by collecting bomb scraps. Waking around a fort, they discovered many AK bullet heads unearthed by rain and weather. Unexploded bombs are not totally dug up though the war had been over for forty years by then. And when riding a motorbike around, they still saw along the way some warning signs saying “Do not enter”.

Similarly, Pitsanu Sup also points out the fact from his first-hand experience that war remnants are still so easily found in Vietnam today to convey how serious the damages left by the war in the country. His book *Chaliang Tawan Ook* (2000) tells that selling metal scraps from war weapons and appliances was a profitable job after the war and even in the 2000s. Vietnam used to export hundreds of tons of such scraps per year; shells of bullets and bombs were even adapted into home appliances and children's toys.

The scale and complexity of the Vietnam War need alternative forms of portrayal to bring readers a more comprehensive understanding of it. In addition to all the factual stories and memoirs disclosed by travelogues, fiction is an efficient genre

to depict the consequences wars bring to human life. Prapatsorn Sevikul makes use of the imaginative characteristic of the genre to reflect on the loss the Vietnamese generation born in the wartime through his novel *Rak nai Man Fon* (2011).

In a scene, Uncle Dinh shows Bao An – a little boy then – a picture of a woman dressed in local dress and standing by her bicycle. She still looked young and quite beautiful. The innocent child was told that was his mother’s sister; his aunt who died not long after she took this photo, killed by bombs dropped by American planes. Uncle Dinh’s voice trembles though he tries to hide his sadness. When someone dies in the war, it is not simply the death of a person. The dead passed away but those who stay behind live with a grief that can never be fully healed.

Moreover, wars change people’s life paths forever, like in the case of Dinh and Mai, the uncle and the mother of the main character in *Rak nai Man Fon*. The death of Dong and Hoa at the front meant that Dinh and Mai forever lost their friends, Dinh lost his brother, Mai lost her husband and sister. Mai raised her son alone, never getting married. Whereas, Dinh tried his best to win her love and take care of her but she harshly refused. Their whole life, Dinh and Mai lived in loneliness and were emotionally tortured by the love they could never reach. The war, though not directly, stole the happiness they could have had.

Apart from the cruel and tragic reality of wars, some Thai writers construct the image “Vietnam – a country of wars” from a distinct lens. On the other side of the coin, the war is depicted in literature not only in a realistic face, but also with romanticized style. It reflects the universal hope of human beings for the victory of

peace over wars, and humanity upon merciless reality. This is the main theme in the book that Prachakhom Lunachai (2014) emphasizes:

It was so hard for the Vietnamese to be able to overcome that swamp. Many generations had to sacrifice their time and lives before the people could enjoy the beauty of peace. Looking at the case of Vietnam makes us relate to the situations happening in many regions in the world. It is like when we think of the world and human life after watching a play or movie. Because in the beauty of rivers, mountains, seas, human life, or art and culture, there is hidden meaningful philosophy. The flower of love is more beautiful on the peaceful land where the war is over. (Preface)

Right from the title *Vietnam Phaendin Lang Songkhram nai Khwamngam lae Khwammai* (“Vietnam after Wars, a Land in Beauty and Meaning”) and many times in his book, Prachakhom employs many symbols. He constructs the image of post-war Vietnam from flowers, love, and the beauty of nature. Peace is tagged with meaning and beauty while war is compared with a swamp, a bad and dirty thing. Prachakhom conceptualizes a philosophy that when the war is over, people will feel more deeply the beauty and meaning of peace. The perspective and aesthetic expression of Prachakhom is distinctly of a romantic pen.

Likewise, Prachakhom even associates the chaotic traffic in Vietnam – an issue quite unrelated to wars – with a new front the Vietnamese have to fight in. In the case of Vietnam, bad urban transportation is more probably the result of poor infrastructure and low public awareness. Nevertheless, Prachakhom, with his romantic writing style and so deep war imprints in mind, emphasizes on the perpetuation of

Vietnam's patriotism from country protection and fighting wars in the past to nation building at present:

Vietnamese people ring their bicycle bells and motorbike horns all day, they drive and crosscut others' vehicles very often. But they do not take it seriously...they ride their vehicles to the destinations they aim at. They overlook small things to care more about bigger and more important ones.

The land of Vietnam was divided into two halves for many years. Countless towns and villages became battle fields. Before peace could be won back, blood and tears were shed all over their water and land. The great lesson of their country imprints on their heart from generation to generation...

National missions resound in their hearts, urging them to leave their houses early in the morning to enter the battle of life. (p.34)

The writing style and background of the writer play an essential role here. Prachakhom Lunachai is a known contemporary Thai writer with up to 10 literary awards for his novels and short-story collections. His works are very much inspired by his life experience which is full of positive worldview and determination to overcome obstacles. This aspiration becomes a romantic flow throughout his book, the title of which well captures his perception of Vietnam. His view and attitude towards the country are always recognition, respect and praise whether it is the Vietnam related with wars or a developing country at present time.

A similar positive aspiration is adopted by Wanrawi Rungsaeng in writing *Vietnam Klang Pha-yu Fon* ("Vietnam in the Middle of Storms") (2010) as expressed

in the figurative title and throughout its narrative. She compares that besides the continuous fight with nature's rainstorms, Vietnam had to face heavy storms of war which took tremendous energy to overcome and heal from. While rain and storms are a typical metaphor of obstacles and difficulties in literature, the bright sky after the storm is a symbol of a better future. The writer further elaborates on her image of "Vietnam in the middle of storms" where Vietnamese people can find happiness even in the midst of rough weather and hardships; and the war is viewed as a meaningful fight in Vietnam's long process of conquering obstacles for peace and well-being.

Meanwhile, the poet Naowarat depicts the Vietnam War and points out that in their wars against enemies, the Vietnamese try to protect the peace and sovereignty of their country.

<i>Songkhram pen tham kam chai</i>	Justice is to win in wars
<i>Thuk yuk thuk samai</i>	Every times
<i>Songkhram haeng a-tham ra-yam yap</i>	Evil falls to knees, shivery
<i>Saphan haeng santi sadap</i>	Bridge of Peace listening
<i>Pleng kan khan khap</i>	Eternal songs
<i>Prakhom satcha ananta-kan</i>	Saluting the truth of all times
<i>Phu dai khue phu rukran</i>	Those who invade
<i>Phu dai bandan</i>	Those who create
<i>Santi withi pen tham</i>	The peaceful way gets justice
( <i>Saphan Ben Hai</i> )	("Ben Hai Bridge", p.225)

To construct the image of war in this poem, Naowarat uses similar contrasts to Prachakhom's: war versus peace, the good and the bad, the right and the wrong. Visiting the Ben Hai River at the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel, the military demarcation line between the North and South of Vietnam, the poet saw the harshness of battles in the past. On

the other hand, he metaphorizes the peaceful river at the moment as a witness of the struggle between the evil versus the good. From that, he draws out a philosophy that at any time, injustice will always be defeated. The idea articulated in Naowarat poetic language makes a romanticized image for the Vietnam War ending: the defeated invaders collapse miserably in the witness of Ben Hai River and Bridge while the song saluting peace echoes high up above.

The three writers – Prachakhom, Wanrawi and Naowarat – offer a new romanticized image of the Vietnam War, in which Vietnam is glorified to be a country that stood up to protect their rightful peace. The war becomes a field for the Thai writers to demonstrate their love for peace and their expectation of the victory of Justice over evil. It should be reminded that this image may, again, be inspired by Vietnamese discourses of a long history of nation building and the legitimacy of its national salvation wars. Regardless, this recognition is a novelty in Thai writings compared with those in the Rattanakosin Era and the Cold War Era. When military conflict and ideology contradiction between Thailand and Vietnam no longer exist, it is more comfortable for the Thai writers to revisit the war and praise the victory of Vietnam. The use of romanticized symbols, literary metaphor and poetry is also a new attempt in the Thai construction of the Vietnam war's image.

The following short story by Thatsanawadi is a combination of both reality and romanticism. *Khvam Lap thi Sapa* (“Secret at Sapa”) addresses the Thai participation in the Vietnam War, a largely forgotten and ignored historical part by the Thais. On the other hand, the writer focuses on the emotional aspect and the story ending looks forward to a hopeful future.



In his short story, the author – then a Thai teacher in Vietnam – was invited to visit his student’s family in suburban Hanoi. Out of his expectation, one of the student’s uncles died in a battle against the Thai troops<sup>28</sup> near Saigon not long before the end of the Vietnam War.

I could see the pages I read in front of my eyes now that I felt panic...The Thai troops called “Queen Cobra” and “Black Panther” came to Vietnam to help Fa-rang kill our neighbors...And one of the victims was the one in the photograph in front of me at this moment...“Wilaiwan’s uncle told that his brother died in the battle with the Thai troops near Saigon before the war ended”, Damrong translated the words by the veteran that made me sad.

Here Thatsanawadi addresses the aspect of war consequences in a family. This rarely mentioned aspect is opened up with touching feelings like uneasiness, guilt, regret and sadness. The story, nevertheless, ends up in reconciliation and friendly atmosphere. The guilty feeling was eased when the Thai teacher paid respect to those who passed away and received forgiveness from the Vietnamese.

Many Vietnamese considered Thai people our enemy. But when everybody was told about Teacher’s devotion in teaching us, people here loved him very much. In general Vietnamese people loved to live in peace.

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<sup>28</sup> In January 1967, Thanom government officially announced their decision to send Thai regiments to South Vietnam. “From 1965 to 1972 Thailand sent 37,644 military personnel to South Vietnam as part of the Free World Assistance Forces fighting there” (Ruth, 2012, p. 1), including two special units of the Royal Thai Army, and one each from the Royal Thai Air Force and the Royal Thai Navy. The division of 2,207 combat troops in the name Queen’s Cobras Regiment was the first Thai army force that went to the Vietnam War in 1967, serving both as combat and support units. A larger number of 11,000 troops, nicknamed Black Panther Division were offered later in July 1968 August and stayed through the end of 1971. The total number of Thai personnel there made Thailand the third largest foreign military present in South Vietnam after the US and South Korea, although, nowadays Thailand is almost absent from Vietnam War history; the Vietnam War is likewise absent from Thai history (Ruth, 2012).

Before sitting down to the meal, I asked to burn an incense for her uncle, and everyone agreed. I stuck the incense and prostrated once to pay respect to him the Thai way. When I looked at his picture again, his eyes and lips seemed to smile at me with friendship. I avoided his eyes, secretly heaving a deep sigh. (p. 28)

This story goes further than admitting the participation of the Thai military in the Vietnam War and its consequences; it offers a positive solving of the war's aftermath. The author manifests the change from "otherness" or "rivalry" as the result of ideology, conflicts and war into understanding and sincere compassion between the two peoples. The emotions of both Thai and Vietnamese people are portrayed with deep human psychological analysis, especially on the side of the Thai teacher.

Last but not least, in the process of constructing the image of "Vietnam as a country of wars," many moments the Thai writers reflect back to their country and suggest Thailand learn from Vietnam's experience. Vietnam's loss and pain should be a good lesson for other countries including Thailand to avoid wars by any means. This opinion appears in *Vietnam Klang Pha-yu Fon* (2010) and *Vietnam Thiao Ao Rueang* (2011). In the former, the two authors employ Vietnamese voices to convey their worry about the current Thai political situation:

"In the end we still have to live together. We don't want Thai people to be divided like we used to be divided by outsiders." This is their view about the political situation of our country. (*Vietnam Klang Pha-yu Fon*, p. 247)

After the passing of the wars, Vietnamese people have learnt to let go of the past, forget hatred and forgive those on the opposite side. The Vietnamese have learnt to live together in peace and they hope the Thai will not be separated like they used to be. While Wanrawi ends her journey with the above conclusion, Wut and Suthipong set it as their motive from the beginning:

We also hope that the Vietnamese long-lasting history in fighting against superpowers and solving domestic conflict will be a good lesson for our society when Thailand has to face economic wars from new imperialist countries and serious domestic collision in the present. (*Vietnam Thiao Ao Rueang*, p. 17)

Let us notice that early 2010 was the time when Thai political and social life turned into a series of disorders – after the 2005 election – with the second win of the Thaksin government; prior events such as street demonstrations by the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD) or Yellow Shirts followed the by airport occupation, the military coup in 2006, finally led to the Red Shirt movement to counter the Yellow Shirts and bring Thaksin back to power. Around the massive rallies of both colors, small bouts of violence occurred and eventually increased. Over months since Red Shirts poured into Bangkok and kept demonstrating and camping around the city’s commercial and administrative centers, and on May 19, 2010, when the army decided to clear them by force, more than ninety people died – some members of the security forces but mostly protesters (Baker and Phongpaichit, 2014). Those incidents showed big changes and deep rifts in Thai society, and enormously threatened the secure and confident feeling of Thai people.

The way the consequences of the Vietnam war stirred up worries about the domestic situation of Thailand shows a different perspective of the Thai writers. In this respect, they are not very affected by the Vietnamese official narrative about the honorable fight for national independence. Instead, the Thais view it a civil war among the Vietnamese people themselves that has caused serious problems and bitterness.

### 3.3. Chapter discussion and conclusion

Chapter three analyses the first outstanding image of Vietnam that is depicted in contemporary Thai writings – Vietnam as a country of wars. The chapter is divided into two main parts analyzing first, the old impression of the Thai writers regarding the Vietnam War and then, the portrayal of the war from their own experiences while traveling in Vietnam.

Before journeying to the country, propaganda media and political discourses were effective mechanisms to create and drill ugly and scary images of Vietnam and Vietnamese people. What is left in the writers' memory is then a severe war presented by Hollywood movies, and a communist threat looming over Thailand in the Cold War era. The main stakeholders consisted of the US – who tried to find legitimacy for their involvement in Indochina – and the Thai military governments – for their domestic oppression of any opposition. The distorted portrayals available, thus, hardly gave Thai people a reasonable understanding of Vietnam. Thai people, under the press control of the military governments only had access to limited information, hence,

they either knew little of the country, or they were affected by the mentioned discourses.

These discourses are now confronted with new ones offered by a new stakeholder – the Vietnam State. Textual analysis affirms that the image of Vietnam is closely associated with wars although, by the time the Thai writers travelled to Vietnam to research their books, the war was long over and the situation was rather different. Yet, the image of Vietnam associated with wars is constructed from different angles with new materials. Vietnam is portrayed as suffering from war damages both materially and intangibly. This aspect is proven with statistics, iconic war sites, war remnants and people's stories from displays that the Thai writers are able to observe during their journeys. The Vietnamese mainstream sources play a considerable role in presenting the image of a people which has to conduct a guerrilla fight to protect their country and the tragic aftermaths of war.

Nevertheless, the Thai writers do not merely repeat such static images in their books. Their efforts to discover new aspects of the Vietnam War, thus creating a multi-dimensional picture of Vietnam as a country of wars, should be acknowledged. They construct the war image from emotional and individual accounts of Vietnamese people, the one aspect Thai people hardly got access to in the past. The image of the Vietnam War is not constructed exclusively through big actors and facilitators like the states, governments, military, weapons and battles; the fate and stories of people are now revealed. Readers can reach the emotional life of Vietnamese people at war as well as their post-war life still faced with bitter leftovers. In addition, there is a romanticized image of a brave fight for peace and justice, constructed by literary

techniques. Lastly, the Vietnam War is viewed as a useless civil war, hence a lesson for Thai people about domestic conflict and conciliation. Ultimately, the contemporary Thai writings elaborate the critical role of Vietnam and its wars in the Thais finding, defining and displaying Thai identity from its anti-communist era to the present time.

The nature of image construction has changed, leading to the changed image of Vietnam as a country of wars. Information is no longer constrained to only one dominated source, the Thai writers can get access to the data they want. Their voices are not controlled, thus, have equal chance to be heard by their audience like other voices from the state or the mass media. In other words, the Thai image construction of Vietnam is not done at the (Thai) government level and forced upon the society in a top-down direction. The first-hand experience the writers acquire in their trips to Vietnam gives them information from the other side of the war. However, this does not mean the Thai writers are the only stakeholders in this course. Their efforts to present new angles of the Vietnam and war are considerable but the Vietnamese State with its mainstream discourses is a no less an influential stakeholder.

Although the image “Vietnam as a country of wars” is outstanding, the wars have been over for decades. Even though remnants, memories and exhibitions of the Vietnam War are still there, the focus of the country and its people is no longer about wars from the past. The image of war starts to fade and another image of Vietnam draws more attention: “Vietnam in transition from traditional to modern society,” which is about to be analyzed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4

# VIETNAM AS A COUNTRY IN TRANSITION TO DEVELOPMENT AND INTEGRATION

If the image of Vietnam in Chapter three is very much related to the past wars that continue to persist in the present life of Vietnam as well as in the eyes of international travelers, Chapter four deals with the image of a more current on-the-stage Vietnam. While the previous image is the combination of remaining consequences of the discourses with recent prevailing constructions, this image concerns a contemporary Vietnam – “a country in transition to development and integration”.

The transition process took place in Vietnam when the country moved from war to peace, from the post-Cold War era to the globalization era, in which changes started difficultly and then got more and more intensive. A combination of many factors including international evolving situations, isolation and backwardness, and economic crises forced Vietnam to start a “new thinking” and carry out reforms, marked by the momentous declaration of “Doi Moi” or Renovation policy in 1986. The renovation concerning market economy, decentralization of decision making, opening for different ownerships, boosting production, and etcetera created dramatic changes to Vietnam's domestic situation.

Vietnam also revised its policies in international relations, diplomacy and foreign trade, leading to a series of integration milestones: the military withdrawal

from Cambodia in 1991, ASEAN membership and relation normalization with the United States in 1995, entering World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 2007 and so forth. Its opening and deeper integration into the world systems improved Vietnam's image in the regional and international domains (Elliot, 2012, p. 161). Certainly, the prolonged process of renovation in Vietnam was never smooth. In reality, various problems showed up and became increasingly complex over time. Apart from thinking differences in the leadership which caused uncertainty during the renovation process in the early 1990s (Elliot, 2012; Pike, 1994), anxiety arose of critical "social evils" (Sidel, 1998) due to economic expansion and integration in various aspects.

In this context of changing and opening Vietnam in diplomatic, economic and socio-cultural dimensions, its image in Thai perception is renewed. Textual analysis of contemporary Thai writings demonstrates the efforts of Thai writers to introduce new images of Vietnam during times of peace and while on the move.

Given that it cannot be divided with a sharp time-marker, contemporary Thai writings show the image of transitional Vietnam in roughly two phases. The Thai writers that travelled there in the early days of a newly opened Vietnam described two contrasting faces of the country with two distinct attitudes: nostalgic admiration and romanticism of a beautiful and tranquil country, and a strong criticism of a materialist society in its new exposure to capitalism. Whereas, books of the later phase portrayed more comprehensively and neutrally the changes in all spheres of the country. Between the two opposite faces of the image of current Vietnam, traditional characteristics have difficulty maintaining their roles while modern, new elements gain dominance. Given that they are portrayed in intertwinement in the writings, this



chapter analyses them separately as two essential natures supplementing the complete image of Vietnam in transition.

#### **4.1. Nostalgic, romanticized images of Vietnam**

To fully portray the fundamental changes happening in Vietnam, the Thai writers often compare and contrast the modernized face with the traditional, romantic and idyllic side.

##### *4.1.1. Admiration of Vietnam's unchanged nature and traditionality*

Admiration of Vietnam's unchanged nature and traditionality is clearly exhibited in books of the early period when Vietnam was newly opened to the world including *Xin chao Vietnam* ("Hello Vietnam") by Teeraparb (1997), *Lao Rueang Mueang Viet* ("Telling Stories about Vietnam") (2003), Niphatphon's first book about the country, among other books. On their way across Vietnam, the writers were amazed to discover the pristine nature, leisure lifestyle, as well as traditional sophisticating values.

The first unchanged feature of Vietnam in the eyes of Thai writers is its nature and landscape. Look back to the time around the year 2000, the picture of Vietnam in these early years was that of an unmodernized country, portrayed through peaceful provincial and rural areas. In Thatsanawadi's books, provinces such as Bac Giang or Son La are completely rural villages with fertility and richness in nature. When Thatsanawadi had a chance to visit his student's hometown in Bac Giang, situated fifty kilometers to the east of Hanoi capital, he narrated:

There were rice fields and vegetable gardens in both sides along the way from Hanoi to Bac Giang. The peasants were working laboriously. The watery rivers and canals made me think of my barren Isan. (*Khwan Lap thi Sapa*, 2003, p. 25)

In describing the picture of fertile nature in Vietnam, the writer at the same time reflected the nature of his homeland. He was born and grew up in Mahasarakham Province in northeastern Thailand, where landscapes are drained land and fields from droughts. Therefore, the fertility and richness of nature here was very enjoyable to him.

What impressed Niphatphon was Vietnamese rural landscape with small and tidy houses in a very comfortable, green and shady living environment. She immediately realized such serene beauty because this picture, in her opinion, could hardly be found in or had long gone from Thailand. It was a nice nostalgic surprise as if she was “turning back to the past or to her previous life” in entering the land of Vietnam (*Lao Rueang Mueang Viet*, 2003, p.70).

Furthermore, Niphatphon found that pure breeds of plants and animals were still abundant in central Vietnam in general, and particularly Dong Ba market in Hue where she was visiting. The market was full of innumerable vegetables such as pumpkin, cucumber, gourd, beet root, corn, rice, berry rice, to name just a few. She also described the feeling when she touched them, or hold handfuls of different kinds of local rice. The amazingly prosperous nature here is viewed by Niphatphon as to be extremely precious because it had long disappeared from modernized life in big cities of Thailand and Vietnam. The underdevelopment of the central region of Vietnam in

her eyes, was not a negative thing; on the contrary, it helped protect the purity of the land from the threat of hybridization and modernization.

An Nam or Central Vietnam is still a very pure land. As a matter of fact, this region is distant from more developed and modernized areas; connectivity was relatively limited. Besides, the people here have low living conditions; animal raising is thus a suitable occupation for their living. The current genes and breeds here have been naturally selected through thousands of years renovating and feeding people in Southeast Asia. They are therefore very strong and of high quality, unlike those in the north and south regions which have been hybridized with animal and plant varieties from Europe and America. (ibid, p.119, 121)

In addition, in the early days after opening the country, Vietnam's traditional way of life was an outstanding image that often brought surprise to foreign travelers. Teeraparb used a considerable part of his book to describe the life of “van chai” or fishermen community who spent their lives on mobile fishing boats. Likewise, Niphatphon was reminded of the fisherman’s lifestyle she had witnessed in her field study in the sea provinces of Thailand. The sail boat and fishing tools which were difficult to find in Thailand were still used in everyday life and work in Vietnam.

I never thought that in my life I would have a chance to see a ‘real’ fishing sail boat that actually sailed on water, having wind blown into its sails... The picture forgotten in my deep memory of the Songkhla Sea is now in front of my eyes on the river of Vietnam. I suddenly had goose bumps...Such sail boats no longer existed in the seas of Petchburi, the

Andaman Sea or Songkhla Lake, but are seen everywhere in the Vietnamese River. (ibid, p.178)

When her boat ran through the villages she also saw many fishing tools like “yo” and “bam,” which she called “ancient” tools and which had been used by Thai fishermen long ago. “The past of Thailand is still here in the daily life of the Usakhane [Southeast Asia] people” (ibid, p.178). Niphatphon Phengkaeo is a documentary writer who mainly collect her data from the field. She is specially interested in indigenous knowledge, local life and common people, culture and customs (Thongdaeng, 2013). That is why she felt so glad and excited with the richness of Vietnam’s nature and human life. Deeply behind is her nostalgia for the old things being defeated by changes. The old way of life in Vietnam on the one hand emphasizes the traditional look of Vietnam and, on the other once again reflects the regret of them disappearing from her homeland.

The third romantic beauty of Vietnam through the Thai lens lies in its old towns, represented by Hoi An and Hue. The little ancient port town of Hoi An always makes its guests fall in love with its charming wooden shop-houses, old roofs, quaint lanterns, picturesque canals and its special atmosphere.

When we rode bicycles into Hoi An, the town gradually disclosed its pretty and charming appearance to us. Along the streets were wooden-carving and lantern shops, and old man writing Chinese letters with paintbrush, and many young girls dressed in ao dai and Yuan hats. It looked as if the ancient port town were recovering its busy and restless life of two hundred years ago.

(*Lao Rueang Mueang Viet*, 2003, p. 159)

In spite of the big number of foreign tourists coming to Hoi An these days, the sophistication and ancientness of Hoi An naturally trains them to behave politely. The town's pulse was active but its style looked leisurely; people walked for sight-seeing with bright faces and light hearts in a clean and safe environment. The special thing is that every full moon night, the whole town would turn off electric lights to be in the orange, cream and red light of lanterns. (ibid, p. 165)

The nature of Hoi An Ancient town itself brings such romantic beauty. Not only Niphatphon, but other Thai writers such as Wanrawi Rungsaeng, Sirisak Aphisakmontri, Suphalak Kanchanarudi and Suthida Maikao, are all certainly mesmerized by the charm of Hoi An<sup>29</sup>. However, while the other writers, who went to Hoi An several years later, considered the town a well-preserved-and-managed living museum, Niphatphon viewed Hoi An in 2003 as a stronghold of traditionality in the approach of booming tourism. Despite the number of tourists flooding into Hoi An, it remains a unique and conservative town. Moreover, Hoi An's inner strong spirit can even cast its decentness upon the hasty tourists, representing the superiority of its old-fashioned world over the modern and material world.

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<sup>29</sup> Located in Viet Nam's central Quang Nam Province, on the North bank near the mouth of the poetic Thu Bon River, Hoi An remains an exceptionally well-preserved example of a Far Eastern port dating from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the nineteenth century. The town comprises about one-thousand brick or wooden houses in commercial and domestic vernacular structures, reflecting both indigenous and foreign influences. The old houses —many of them still private homes — are unique with timber frame, moss-grown walls, deeply plain roofs, old furniture in their pristine past arrangement. They are arranged side-by-side in tight, unbroken rows along narrow pedestrian streets. Culturally, Hoi An was a crossroads of the local *Vietnamese*, the Asian (Japanese, Chinese, Indian), and the Western peoples during their trading here. These diverse cultural influences remain visible in the town's preserved structure and lifestyle today. Moreover, coming to Hoi An in the middle of months, one will be bathed in the sparkling, romantic and mysterious scenery of Hoi An in Full Moon Festivals, held on the 14th day of every lunar month. The Old Town becomes more festive than usual, enchantingly decorated with colorful hanging silk, glass and paper lanterns while all electrical equipment is off.

Another town that bathes the image of Vietnam in Thai writings in romantic colors is Hue<sup>30</sup>, an old capital with rich legacy of history, art and culture. That should be how Teeraparb Lohitkun of Xin chao Vietnam felt visiting Hue. He was so impressed that he ranked it the best traveling destination of Vietnam.

If you are planning to travel to Vietnam after America has lifted its commercial embargo against the country, I suggest you visit Hue first. It is a civilization from which the current culture of cuisine, architecture, arts, and etcetera, originated. Many things that have died from Indochina are left to experience in this town. (*Xin chao Vietnam*, 1997, p.120)

Hue is represented with Teeraparb's genuine adoration for its deep philosophy and artisanal culture, as well as its natural and human beauty. He adores the ideal beauty of Hue, which he termed "*ngam am-phrang*" or the "hidden beauty" (ibid, p.130). That is Hue people think true beauty should be the beauty that needs discovering. People are supposed to keep appropriateness in conversation, not to boast about themselves, to listen to others and speak only half of what they know. Hue houses lie peacefully and quietly after many exterior green layers of trees and flowers. Women's secretly appealing dress and sophisticating hat add an important part in such beauty, which will be mentioned soon after.

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<sup>30</sup> Located in Central Vietnam, Hue was the national capital, the political, cultural and religious center of Vietnam under the Nguyen Dynasty – also the last dynasty – during the 19<sup>th</sup> to early twentieth century. Mostly well-known for its historical values and exclusive ancient architecture, the large complex of Hue Citadel was recognized as one of the World Heritage Sites by UNESCO in 1993. All essential royal buildings of Hue, including the imperial city and king tombs, lie on the bank of Song Huong – Perfume River, creating a perfect combination of artificial architectural work and picturesque nature. Hue is also known for many famous poets and artists whose creative works are inspired from the city's romantic setting.

Similarly, Niphatphon of *Lao Rueang Mueang Viet* regarded Hue with admiration and respect for its richness of art and philosophy. She claims “Hue is the town that produces countless Vietnamese artists, poets, and scholars. It is said that Hue people have poetry in their soul and their daily speaking... Hue women are also more beautiful than in other cities” (p.149).

Accordingly, feminine beauty is an essence of Hue’s attractiveness as well as a symbol of Vietnamese classic beauty. This female elegance often comes together with and is supplemented by the traditional dress *ao dai*<sup>31</sup> and conical hat *non*<sup>32</sup>. Costumes not only prosper women’s outward beauty, they contain deep philosophy and artistic culture. Teeraparb proves this through Hue’s typical hat and the way women utilize it to decorate their charm or to express their feelings.

The way Hue girls use their hats to veil their face is a “classic” strategy to avoid men’s sight. It is also polite and practical. A woman only needs to turn her neck or lightly bend her head down, and the hat will nicely conceal part of her face. Or when she would like to send a message to her lover, she will make “non bai tho”. At first glance, it is no different from other hats, when we open it to sunlight —however — the hidden patterns, message and

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<sup>31</sup> The “Ao dai,” officially recognized as the national attire of Vietnam, has a long history in which its design has changed through many periods. The shape of ao dai close to how it looks today was developed by the Nguyen Lords in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. Adapted from some local dresses, ao dai now has a hugging-body design of two long flaps tightened at waist to flatter body curves and worn over loose pants. Nowadays, Ao dai still remains popular and influential in the modern-time Vietnamese culture.

<sup>32</sup> The “Non” has remained an entirely hand-made craft even up to present, consisting of dry palm leaves that are sewn on a perfect conical bamboo frame. Vietnamese artisans often incorporate sophisticated decoration to make the hat look more appealing and elegant. The most famous pattern is called “Non Bai Tho” [hat with poem] of Hue. Love poems together with images of Hue’s symbol are inserted between two layers of leaves, which become readable when held against the sunlight. Although it may not be as commonly used anymore in the daily lives in the urban parts nowadays, the hat was very much an integral part of Vietnamese life in the past and still is in the countryside.

poems in the inward layer will come into view. Thus, “non bai tho” represents Hue’s preference not to speak or show emotion directly. (*Xin chao Vietnam*, p.124-126)

Certainly, the image of Vietnam is romanticized by the charming and elegant beauty of Vietnamese women. The Ao dai and the Non have made their way to cultural presentations in the recent years – which is supported among both the government and the people – such as art performances, diplomatic receptions, cultural festivities, international competitions and beauty contests always receiving warm international recognition. Consequently, the image of Vietnamese ladies in Ao dai and Non also appears in Thai media and books as a symbol of a traditional Vietnam.

Teeraparb’s romantic description of Vietnam should be counted for his effort to introduce new images of the country other than wars. During the early 1990s he was a devoting producer of the television documentary program *Lok Salap Si* (“Varicolored World”) with well-received series about Lanchang territory, Angkor Wat, Vietnam, Chaophraya River, Sipsong Panna, Myanmar, and etcetera. The writer told in an interview with the newspaper manager, that his motivation came from the true reality he experienced in neighboring countries he had travelled to. He started his productions with the three Indochina countries —Vietnam, Lao and Cambodia — which stunned him with their long and rich culture. He recalled the Thai nationalist history that emphasized only images of wars, massacres and dreadful battles. Therefore, he was motivated to bring his audience things that Thai people hardly knew such as the countries’ civilizations, their life and way of thinking. (MGR Online, 2016)



Apart from his claimed objective, Teeraparb's description of Vietnam, especially his partiality of Hue and Hue people, is inspired from his nostalgic worldview; not only about Vietnam since his nostalgia arises when he talks about other countries, too. He prefers the old classic manner and behavior from Hue, Luang Phrabang or Chiangmai than a westernized conduct:

The word “da” of Hue people is like “kha/khrap” in Thai language. These days, they still say “da” in their daily conversation the same as Lao people in Luang Phrabang and Chiangmai people politely say “jao” or even clasp their hands together to pay respect to each other. Meanwhile, people in other places change their greeting way into the Western hand shake or wai in an awkward way, especially the teenagers. (*Xin chao Vietnam*, p.121-122)

The unravaged beautiful personality and speaking manner of the people in these places represents valuable unchanged cultures before the damaging effects of modernity arrived and stole away their values. In Teeraparb's perspective, the fading traditions are more beautiful and decent than the Westernized fashion. His expression also indicates a critical attitude toward those who do not care about preserving them. Teeraparb's nostalgic feeling even turns radically into anger and criticism towards the capitalism that was changing Vietnam upside down, and which will be analyzed in section 4.2.

Niphatphon was not so disappointed as Teeraparb. Despite her regret for Thailand's loss of such valuable resources, Niphatphon was happy to see that neighboring countries were still so naturally prosperous. She drew a conclusion that her journey to these new lands, in fact, led her to the indigenous roots of Southeast

Asian people including the Thais. She appreciated the similarities within the region and its peoples even under the surface of diversity.

The area surrounding our country is where cultural exchange of Suwannaphum peoples occurred. It is also the “bank” of indigenous species of plants and animals that preserve richness of life, as well as of tools and instruments that represent the knowledge of generations regarding production. It is a storage of languages including ancient words associated with wisdom which were born together from similar agriculture in this whole area. They are like ribbons from the same coil, separating and changing according to the geography, culture and life. But the same root helps us trace back things that have vanished from Thailand.

[Thai people can] track down the root of our ancestry in their [Vietnamese people’s] life, and find many cultural values that capitalism has not attacked or ruined in their land. It will help us see our identity more clearly, understand our country as well as ways of thinking and living more fully so that we can decide which are ‘myths’ and which are ‘truths’... Many journeys are not to figure out the cultural ‘difference’ but to uncover the hidden ‘similarity’... Things I discovered in Vietnam well validate this fact. (*Lao Rueang Mueang Viet*, p.179-181)

To this point, readers can realize that many times the image of pure and beautiful Vietnam is a reflection of Thailand in the past, and nostalgia is a prominent feeling of the Thai writers, especially Teeraparb and Niphatphon, in praising the retro, peaceful and romantic aspect of Vietnam. They recall the similar tranquility of nature

and lifestyle that once used to exist in their country. They feel regretful that it can no longer be found in Thailand. And not only Vietnam triggers nostalgia in Thai writers but they also do feel nostalgic visiting other countries in Southeast Asia.

It should be reminded again that *Xin chao Vietnam* and *Lao Ruaeng Muaeng Viet* were written in 1997 and 2003 respectively, when Vietnam had opened for a while but not long enough for modernity to reach many parts of the country. Therefore, the land and people in many provinces were still very fresh and pristine; traditional culture and lifestyle still dominated and stood firmly against early weak changes; the romanticized portrayal of Vietnam was outstanding.

#### 4.1.2. Worry about Vietnam's traditionality amidst globalization

Thai books written in a more recent period contain less romantic images. When they do appear, it is in order to project changes, modernity or materialism more clearly. Unexploited nature and indigenous culture have lost their superior power; their places are shrinking in the threat of urbanization and capitalism. The old values have to struggle and compromise with new ones. People still miss the old days but accept the changing situation. The writers' romanticized perspective is displayed in their emphasis on the importance of traditional values and the need to preserve them in parallel with modern life.

Take novels by Khajornrit Raksa and Prapatsorn Sevikul as examples. Both Jam in *Vietnam tam Lampang* ("Alone in Vietnam") (2010) and Rain in *Rak nai Man Fon* ("Love in the Rain") (2012) travelled to Vietnam for a change from their life and problems in Bangkok. What Jam found in Hanoi is another big city that was too

chaotic and touristy. Only when she went to Tam Dao did she find the peace she had been looking for. It was a small mountainous town not far from Hanoi but isolated enough to give her calm and a secure feeling. However, there were not many such peaceful places left in the developing country. High up in a mountain – and hard to reach as it was – Tam Dao was a representation of original places in Vietnam already confronted with Westernized signs such as foreign tourists and a pub opened for their entertainment. Regardless, Khajornrit Raksa appreciates the mountainous tranquility and coolness which soothed the hot emotional confusions of modern city life so that its dweller could find out the answer to her problems.

Rain was introduced to both the traditional and modern aspects of Vietnam. Hanoi's long-lasting history and culture is depicted through tales such as tales of the establishment of Hanoi and the origin of the name Sword Lake, through authentic food or the leisurely lifestyle of old men gathering by a tea street stall. They were told by the Vietnamese guide, Bao An to his Thai tourist Rain in a simple, condensed presentation but with a proud enthusiastic voice. The writer reflected the uninterrupted flow of Vietnamese history and culture through generations in the way Uncle Dinh taught history and tales to Bao An, then he later told his foreigner tourists. In other words, this cultural heritage was carefully preserved and proudly presented by Vietnamese people to give their own children and international friends a deep understanding of Vietnam (Prichapanyakul, 2017).

However, almost every time a traditional feature of Vietnam was mentioned, there is the shadow of them disappearing soon and being replaced by modern things. For example, on their strolling along the ancient streets of Hanoi, he pointed the scene

to his tourist: old men sitting on small plastic stools, gathering around a tea vendor in the evening twilight. To Rain's wondering on how they could see each other, Bao An responded they did not have the need to see the others clearly for having been friends their whole life. What they sought was communication; they talked and shared every bit of news from weather, work, children, to the current situation of the country and so forth. Nevertheless, Bao An foresaw that the custom of people drinking tea and sharing their lives with friends could hardly subsist long. When roads were newly built or extended, people in Hanoi might not go out to drink tea leisurely and talk with each other like in the present, they would go to luxurious coffee shops or stay alone in high modern condominiums.

Bac Ninh, a nearby province to Hanoi was described similarly. Traditional culture and way of living is portrayed through the beauty of Temple Lim and the custom of singing "Quan Ho". Rain felt she was visiting a different world in entering the big gate of Temple Lim. Shady giant trees and a bushy garden, a hundreds-of-year old temple by a small pond and a green mossy yard—all contributed to a picture of Vietnamese temple architecture. The festival of worshipping a goddess was held every year in the wish that her spirit would protect the village. The tradition of singing the well-known folksong "Quan Ho" is an essential part of this festival. It was lucky for Rain to be welcomed by a kind old man in the temple; she learnt the Vietnamese tradition of inviting tea to guests. Most interestingly, she had a chance to meet a middle-aged Quan Ho singer and listen to the beautiful melody and lyric. Once again, readers find a picture of the deep-rooted traditions, and slow and peaceful lifestyle of older generations in harmony with the surrounding environment. However, even provincial rural villages are approached by expanding urbanization:

The same Japanese car ran from the temple back to the way they had come. The girl turned and looked back as if she wanted to memorize the clay path and rice fields before their car entered the asphalt-covered main road with low modern houses and shops. “Back to the future...,” Rain whispered. “It is unbelievable that old and new worlds are separated just by one road. It is unbelievable, too, that they can keep the old days some hundred years ago so well in the present.” (*Rak nai Man Fon*, p.56)

Through the portrayals of Hanoi and Bac Ninh, Prapatsorn continues to claim the valuable role of traditional life as an oasis for city habitants to search for in the midst of the new chaotic way of life. He keeps a romantic hope that the two worlds can exist in harmony.

At the same time, the writer recognizes how the appearance of modernization and urbanization surround traditionality from all directions. Bao An and Rain’s reaction to where they visited and what they saw show deep nostalgia on the one hand, and the acceptance of changes on the other. Aware of the unavoidable globalization, Bao An still hopes it would not sweep away the old peaceful picture of Vietnam or affect the essential role of local culture in Vietnamese life so soon. Meanwhile, Rain’s nostalgia is much stronger: “Every time I see something new, I feel as if we have lost something that can never be found again. What we lose can be a piece of history, archeology, tales or interesting stories...” (ibid, p.180)

Rain openly shows her preference for traditions rather than modernity. Every time Bao An told her of changes in Vietnam, she regretted they had occurred or

wished they would not have happened. She loved all the traditional places and cultural customs she was introduced to. She also preferred eating at street-food stalls like Hanoi locals do than modern fast-food shops or deluxe restaurants. Visiting the old quarter of Hanoi, she had nostalgic regret for many ancient zones in Bangkok which had shrunk because of modernization, and a constant wish that changes would not come to Hanoi so quickly. When their car had engine problems on the way back to Hanoi after visiting Lim temple, instead of reacting with anger, worry or impatience, she enjoyed the natural atmosphere full of the moist scent of the soil and plants amidst a darkness she had never experienced before.

After all, Rain's nostalgia is a continuity of what Thiraphat and Niphatphon used to feel — discovering in their trips things they do not know or long lost. The difference is an apparent worry that the traditionality they appreciate is becoming the minority.

#### 4.1.3. *Neglect of modernity, Traditionality in world friendship*

Mentioning the romanticized image of Vietnam, we cannot miss *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam* (“Writing about the Golden Land - Vietnam”) (2014), a collection of forty poems by Naowarat Pongpaiboon about places and people across the country. The writer travelled to all important places in the country, from the northernmost provinces like Dien Bien, Lao Cai, Son La, through big cities of three regions including Ha Noi, Hai Phong, Hue, Da Nang, Nha Trang, Ho Chi Minh City, to southern areas such as Mekong Delta and Can Tho, past natural beauty spots as well as well-known historical and cultural destinations. The work, as a result,

is very much of a travelogue in the genre of poetry, in which Vietnam is imaged romantically through a beautiful, diverse nature and rich long-developed civilization.

His poems are full of appreciation of the loveliness of landscapes he explored and the people he met along the way:

Flowing fog, flying clouds – like painting  
 Dazzling softly – light from the sun  
 Blurring under mist – cold mountains  
 Nurturing all the land of Vietnam  
 (“Sapa”, p.53)

Write world, write love from heart  
 Great values, true love for language  
 Strong heart, grand soul – like dragon  
 Forever ever –goodness and beauty  
 (“Pay respect to a poet”, p.155)

In the poet’s view, these values constitute a strong energy for Vietnam’s present development as a continual current throughout its history.

Naowarat’s construction of the image of Vietnam does not include any sign of conflict between traditionality and modernity. He intentionally avoids mentioning details of the deteriorating nature, economic and political aspects, or urban changes for the worse under the critical effects of globalization (Interview 1 March 2018). Yet, it does not mean this romantic portrayal of Vietnam has no nostalgia, the feeling of longing for the ideal happiness in the past.



The above feature of this poem collection, firstly, comes from the conventions of its poetry genre. Nirat, as one type of Thai lyrical poetry, emphasizes on versification such as verse, meters, rhymes, word choice and the use of homophones and synonyms. “The aesthetics of Thai verse rest heavily upon the quality of *“phairo”* – “beautiful to the ear”, and good poetry must always meet this requirement” (Mosel, 1961, p. 9). Naowarat preserves this prosodic point of view and has been very successful in creating acoustic effect and beautiful language for his poems.

Secondly, nostalgia is the essence of Nirat as the introduction chapter has touched on it (section 1.6). Despite that Nirat has developed new orientation toward its subject matters from idealization of love and nature toward more reality of life (ibid), nostalgia never fades in this genre. In the case of Naowarat, his poetry motivation has come from expression of love to broader scope of preservation of beauty in nature and human life. Accordingly, nostalgia moves from lamentation of a separated loved one to a feeling of treasuring all the beauty and the good in this world. Certainly, the other side of this feeling is a fear of new, modern or bad things that can attack and change the good old days.

In *Khian Phaendin* (“Writing about the Homeland”) (1998), which led to the idea of *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum* project later, Naowarat already stated this intention. He is determined to write about his homeland with a focus on the natural beauty of Thailand rather than man-made works. For him, nature was the invaluable foundation that the homeland gave humans but human beings were exploiting it instead of treasuring and protecting it. Therefore, the naturalist poet would like to

record the beauty of Thailand's nature before it could be destroyed thoroughly (*Khian phaendin*, 1998, Writer's preface).

Similarly, Laoness in *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Lao* (2004), according to Withaya's thesis (2012), is full of the poet's nostalgia in this sense. Laoness is depicted first as a land of happiness due to its ancient and valuable cultural heritage and abundant natural and environmental resources. Such nature and slow lifestyle brought simple but meaningful happiness to the Thais after the 1997 monetary crisis in their quest for the past and peace. Second, Laoness is where Thai travelers could find out their root thanks to the similar culture between the two peoples. To put it another way, Laoness was represented as a mirror of Thainess in the past; Lao becomes a place to satisfy Thai nostalgia when they are injured from capitalization and globalization.

Naowarat's nostalgia continues to show in *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam* through his denial to include modern socio-economic aspects. He leaves out political and economic spheres and does not mention negative social issues. This absolute exclusion is an indirect judgement of the writer that modern changes are non-compatible with his ideal romantic world. Even his poem about Ho Chi Minh City, the biggest commercial city of Vietnam, constructs its image through big trees, a river, diversity in styles and people, and a history full of ups and downs. In other words, the poet's construction of images of Vietnam is filtered through his poetic, romantic perspective.

Yet, the writer's nostalgia in this book is not a total escape from reality. Motivated by the atmosphere of ASEAN regionalization, his romanticized image of

Vietnam is more open to integration. *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam* marks the start of Naowarat's serious and active attempt to give Thai readers (and audiences) new portrayals of countries in the region (before Malaysia, Cambodia and Myanmar not long later). It was composed in 2014 prior to ASEAN Community official establishment at the end of the following year. Thai society excitedly prepared for the event and searched for knowledge of its neighbors. This phenomenon urged many Thai writers to compose about neighboring countries in the early 2010s such as Jadej Kamjorndet, Khachonrit Raksa, or Prapatsorn Sevikul with his novel series *Literature for ASEAN* and Naowarat Pongpaiboon with *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum* projects. The ASEAN-oriented writing motivation led to Prapatsorn and Naowarat's perspective that tourism is not threatening to traditional values and integration can help introduce them more widely. The writers present a welcoming attitude and hope of friendship instead.

The poem about Hoi An, for example, highlights the active life of the town at present.

Deck rooms, build malls	Set up, expand
Grant, inherit	The string of bond
Set up, expand	Peace and unity
	Along, around
The charming town	May you be well
In every way	Have many friends
May you be well,	Hoi An people

(“Hoi An lantern”, p.123)

Here cultural identities are visible in the daily life of Vietnamese people, and are openly presented to tourists. Tourism is not considered representative of capitalism and globalization threats, but of extending friendship. The growing of shops, houses, etcetera is not viewed as a failure of preservation or an attack of capitalism, but as the non-stop flow of local culture in Hoi An life and its well-known charm to international tourists. The regular four-word pace as well as the repeat of certain sounds (/t/, /s/, /m/) and phases (“tang ko to kan” [set up, expand], “yu di chong di” [may you be well]) echo the continuity of Vietnamese culture.

The poet continued to romanticize the picture of dynamic exchange and harmonious friendship between Vietnam with its neighbors like Thailand, Laos and Cambodia:

Welcome greetings	Musical tones
“Ban tu dau den?”	From where? You come”
“Toi den tu nuoc Thai	I’m from Thailand”
Friendly laughers	Khmer, Thai, Lao
“Good bye Vietnam”	We have to leave
Parting in friendship	“Tam biet Viet Nam”

(“Can Tho floating market”, p.263)

#### 4.1.4. Thai nostalgia in constructing the image of Vietnam

One point to notice is that the romanticized image of Vietnam constructed by the Thai writers is overwhelmed with nostalgia. By expressing the nostalgic emotion for the traditional beauty of the country they are visiting, they at the same time reveal

nostalgia for similar things that Thailand used to have in the past and how much modernized and globalized their society is at present.

Thai nostalgic emotion is part of the big popular current in international literature and travelogues. (Burton, 2014) in his book *Travel Narrative and the Ends of Modernity* views twentieth-century nostalgia as “an irreducibly plural phenomenon” which “takes on very different forms and dimensions” (p.87). Discussing about this cultural practice, he states “In nostalgia of place-making, spatial categories are often considered in terms of binary opposites as in rural/country [nature, rice fields and forests] and urban/city [culture and civilization]” like two sides of one coin (p.4). He further demonstrates that nostalgia exists counter to modernity; they signal the complexity of the present. “Nostalgia is a means of grappling with modernity’s consequences, a subjective response to the spectacle of change, a prerogative of cultures that consider themselves advanced, a practice intrinsic to modern life: to ‘have’ nostalgia is to ‘be’ modern” (p.87).

Teeraparb’s admiration of small ancient towns and disfavor of bigger modernized cities, Niphathphon’s discovery of the representatives of Thai long-lost nature and way of life in Central Vietnam, Jam and Rain’s inner happiness with serene landscape and traditional culture – all reflect the binary contrast between “traditionality” of Vietnam versus “modernity” of the changing Vietnam as well as the changed Thailand. Even Naowarat’s focus only on beautiful poetic aspects is an escape from modernized aspects of the society.

Furthermore, Thai writings about Vietnam validates Jim Taylor’s discussion in *Nostalgia, Imagination and the Religiosity of Urban Space: Signs of the Thai*

*Metropolis* (2002). According to him, “Middle class urban Thais have a nostalgic desire to re-connect with some imaginary communal place where there is still ‘rice in the fields and fish in the water’ constituted before the disruptive effects of modernization, rationalism and urban industrialism” (p.8). Nowadays, as the city is a centre of administrative, economic and political power, “Rural people/things” might be considered by “urban [civilized] people and in official, central dominant discourse as low, marginal culture”; at the same time, it is “constitutive of the imaginary and emotional repertoires of that dominant culture” (p.6). When the modern and urban Thais travel, they bring along such nostalgia with them. Like travelers and tourists in general, travel writers seek for places of “unspoiled” beauty. And when they meet such idyllic places they feel as if they go back to the past and see their roots.

Readers can also understand much about the Thai urban middle class who travels to seek such connection. The fictional characters – Rain in *Rak nai Man Fon* and Jam in *Vietnam tam Lamphang* are two good representatives. Rain<sup>33</sup> represents many Thai teenagers these days who grow up with good living standards but lack the warm care and love from their family. Rain, therefore, often travelled abroad for a change. The mere reason Rain decided to go to Hanoi was that Singapore was hosting a movie festival and hotels were already full. Regardless, as soon as she began her journey she was eager to know more about Vietnam and liked Vietnam a lot for its traditionality. Meanwhile Jam<sup>34</sup>, a more mature lady in terms of age and life

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<sup>33</sup> Rain came from an unhappy family, in which her parents were divorced and had little time to care for her. Her father had no time for her while the only care she got from her mother was “take care of yourself”. To compensate for his constant busyness, her father gave her any material supplies she asked for. After getting fed up with clothes or convenient appliances and facilities, Rain changed her requests into overseas traveling, and Vietnam was one of her destinations.

<sup>34</sup> Jam had divorced parents and her own family was on the edge of breaking up. She was a beautiful and attractive art designer of a magazine, married to the owner of a computer game shop, who loved

experience, had more complicated problems such as a strict divorced mother, her love affairs and a looming divorce with her husband. She went to Vietnam looking for a break from all these problems before she could figure out some solutions to them. Rain and Jam represent city-dwellers in contemporary Thai society, with personal problems intertwining with social problems that are hard to solve.

Not only in fiction but also in travel writings, nostalgia is a popular feeling among the traveller writers who write about Vietnam. This is related to what Chotiudompant (2017) or Santasombat (2016) have concluded about the intensively capitalized metropolis of Bangkok – complicated human soul with high individuality – and their failure to explain the confusing experience they encounter. Abundance of material things cannot compensate for the unhappiness of a child from a broken-up family and that of an individual from a divorce. They are like lonely and lost souls that fail to understand their own selves and the meaning of their lives, thus, they try to find a way out through single travel to distant places. Their cases also give an insight explanation for the recently increasing tendency for independent traveling: modern Bangkok inhabitants have become more prosperous, yet are victims of disconnected relationships.

To conclude, the Thai nostalgic feeling in the journeys in Vietnam originates from the typical view of modernized residents towards a place less materially

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cooking and doing house work, and kept their house neat and clean all the time. Jam's beautiful dream of love and marriage life unfortunately became a nightmare when her husband changed so much after only six months together. He became stricter towards her, set up many rules and conditions, paid no attention to her but was addicted to chatting online. Despite her wild efforts to save their marriage including praying to sacred monks and amulets, consulting with fortune tellers, etcetera, they were like two strangers living in one house, and both ended up having affairs. Jam sank back to her old bad behavior of running after lust with countless men, also resulting from her lack of care from her divorced parents. Jam went to Vietnam looking for a break from all her problems before she could figure out some solutions to them.

developed. It is on one hand, an indication of the comparative gap in terms of modernity between Thailand and Vietnam and on the other, the anticipation of the inevitable globalization and capitalization in Vietnam.

#### **4.2. A strong criticism of capitalized Vietnamese society**

The previous section has discussed one side of the image of changing Vietnam. It describes the romantic and nostalgic aspect of Vietnam before and on the verge of dramatic changes. On the opposite side is an opening country that is described to have been capitalized and materialized. Vietnam's new face is constructed negatively with disappointment and sarcasm.

The author that dedicated quite a large portion of his book to writing about the shift of Vietnam's policies is Teeraparb Lohitkun. First, he mentioned Vietnam's adoption of new economic direction and the dramatic changes it caused to Vietnamese society. He, however, seemed to find it a dilemma and mocked the fact that a socialist nation having strictly followed Marxist ideology now welcomed the capitalism it used to absolutely resist. He told about many phenomena and stories to demonstrate such a paradox:

It is normal to find young Vietnamese girls of the new era in sexy poses on the calendar of bank offices in Hanoi side by side to the slogan "We will faithfully follow the direction of President Ho Chi Minh". We shall now discuss Vietnam as a socialist country in the era of "keeping ideology in the



drawer and putting Ho Chi Minh's political thoughts on the shell". (*Xin chao Vietnam*, 1997, p.54)

A senior member of the Vietnamese Communist Party returned to Hanoi after many years taking his position in the Vietnamese Embassy in the Soviet Union. He asked his niece whether she and her friends still learned Marxist-Leninist philosophy and Ho Chi Minh ideology. "Oh my god," his niece expressed great shock in hearing the question, "this time no one learns such things, Uncle. Now everybody learns English and business management instead." (ibid, p.61)

Teeraparb represented unfavorable capitalism with people's indifference to old ideologies, girls' new and open fashion, and the arrival of imported Western goods which were viewed to be against the traditional refined values.

The strict regulations of a socialist society have relaxed and the anti-capitalism attitude has reversed; now Vietnam opens its arms widely to welcome foreign capitals. In the beauty contest Miss Saigon two or three years ago, Vietnamese girls wore much sexier suits than girls of Miss Thailand contest (p40) ...And when you are doing shopping in the streets, do not get shocked if you happen to see paddlers selling condoms, cards of sex positions, or sex toys besides Hall candies. Because you are in Vietnam in the new age, which is more open to everything than you can imagine. Well, Marxism has taught that changes are eternal. (ibid, p.47)

Teeraparb is distinguishable for his strong disagreement, anti-modernity attitude, and a sarcastic tone in telling about socio-cultural changes happening in Vietnam. It should be noticed here that Teeraparb's strict judgement applied not only to the beauty contest of Ho Chi Minh City but also to Miss Thailand Contest. In other words, what he was against was the way girls showed their body in bikini and sexy costumes. Referring back to the way he narrated Vietnam's traditional beauty (refer to page 133-134), he treasured the sophisticating traditionality in all the places he visited. Likewise, the subject of his criticism here was not specifically Vietnam but changes in general and the way people betrayed their traditional values and welcomed new things so eagerly.

From his construction of the image of opening Vietnam, the fast, upside-down changes are considered a negative consequence of capitalism. Below he gave another case to evidence that the era of ideologists was over. Those who loved and adored these leaders now became subject to suspense.

Another friend saw a life-size plaster statue of Uncle Ho ... He suddenly had the idea to buy it to put in his house... On the day back when he checked in at the airport, his luggage, especially the box containing Uncle Ho statue, was examined critically. It was troublesome because he had to unbox it and then pack it again. "I shouldn't have bought it... I ended up creating trouble for myself," he complained. "Why? What is wrong in buying a statue of Uncle Ho?" "No, it is not wrong. But the police question why a foreigner can love Uncle Ho so much he brings his statue back home. They suspect that

we can put illegal things inside that Uncle Ho.” ... Oh my god, a tragicomedy indeed. (ibid, p.76)

He was surprised at the rapid speed of the Vietnamese society in adapting itself to new situations. What was ridiculed by him were socialist leaders' ideologies that were once sacred but now ignored by Vietnamese new generations – “kept in the drawer and put on the shell” – in his words. This is not contradictory with his regret of old values because the old he cherished means beautiful cultural traditions and customs, not political elements.

Another proof Teeraparb provides for the changes in Vietnamese society is that people now think in sharp business terms. Private businesses and street sellers took advantage of the change in goods' demand-supply to push the price up. He recalled that in 1992 he was lucky to come across a book shop in Hanoi, where he could buy a valuable book at a shocking cheap price. He did not believe his ears when hearing the price of twenty baht for a hard-covered book with historical photographs of President Ho Chi Minh. He assumed it was a kind of propaganda book by the Vietnamese Communist Party, hence the price was low and accessible to mass readers. He gladly bought five of them to give his friends back in Thailand, who shared his admiration of Ho Chi Minh. Three years later, he travelled to the country again and intended to buy more copies. “The wind of change has blown the book price up to the ceiling... Twenty dollars for one book... Fixed price, no discount...?” (p.75). Not only did the price inflate surprisingly for the rising demand, but the seller told the price in dollars as well, which meant every single person in Vietnam had adjusted themselves and their business very quickly.

One important feature of the image of an open Vietnam was a capitalized society under the power of capital or money. Changes in Vietnam happened further than just the busy and bustling lifestyle. In the Thais eyes, capitalism came together with the new materialized thinking of “money can buy anything”; what Vietnamese people valued were countable material things instead. Somlak Wongrat saw it in the way Vietnamese refugees of the Vietnam War or “boat people” were welcomed back. Anyway, her tone is not satirical but lightly ironic.

When Vietnam announced to open its trading with other countries and invited foreigners to invest in Vietnam, the Vietnamese who fled away from the war many years ago all came back as wealthy foreign investors. Even those who were called “boat people” now are rich and return to their homeland as Rachasi [supreme rulers], bringing money to Vietnam. The investors who are flooding in include both foreigners of different races and Vietnamese of different nationalities. (*Vietnam Chitklai Muan Klaihang*, (“Vietnam, so Close yet so Far”, 2016, p.172-3)

One more bad thing in Vietnamese capitalized society is corruption. Teeraparb criticizes corruption through the “cigarette diplomacy” of Vietnamese officials:

Government officials everywhere are the same wether in a capitalist or a socialist country. Their signature is money and gold. Vietnam in the new era appears to be what is called “cigarette diplomat”. The custom refers to when someone wants a government official to sign something, they have to hand him an envelope and cigarettes. If they are Saigon cigarettes you have to sit and negotiate for a long while. If you give imported cigarettes, they only ask a

little before signing. It is said that if it is the brand 555, then they will sign immediately. Even if they are resting, they will get up to sign for you. (*Xin chao Vietnam*, p.58)

By criticizing Vietnamese corrupt authority, Teeraparb voiced his complaints about political leadership, no matter which political system they were from, not excluding Thailand. This following example is much clearer:

The shortcoming of Halong is not having an airport. We have to travel by bus from Hanoi for five to six hours on roads in bad conditions. "...The truth is five years ago the government had a project to build a highway from Hanoi to Halong...", the young tour guide told. "But the Vietnamese Communist Party got a new Board of Committees, who cancelled projects by the old one. It is too bad and that is why Vietnam is still backward like this..." The naughty reporter comforted him "...Oh, friend. Just think that your country has gone far! Your party has helped your country to catch up with Thailand... in terms of terrible political and bureaucratic systems..." (ibid, p.84-5)

It is obvious that in constructing the image of Vietnam, Teeraparb Lohitkun kept reflecting back to his home country. There was more in his disappointment, anger and satire in witnessing Vietnamese society being capitalized. Sometimes he even explicitly used Thailand as a comparative measurement for the level of capitalism in Vietnam. In other words, the writer saw a reflection of Thailand that has already been capitalized more intensively than Vietnam.

### 4.3. A Comprehensive Portrayal of Vietnam's Development and Integration

The two preceding sections present how Vietnam is viewed by Thai writers through romanticized and critical perspectives. Yet, regret, nostalgia or anger cannot avoid or prevent the inevitable currents of change when Vietnam opens its door for integration. Many Thai writers who traveled to Vietnam more recently have a neutral and accepting attitude towards its changes. Change in domestic situations and international relations is an outstanding feature of Vietnam that appears in the books. Like Wanrawi summarizes regarding "Vietnam Today," confirming that images of rapidly expanding enterprises and commerce of an active and positive society have replaced desperate images of the country and people at war.

Vietnam today is different from what many people have imagined or perceived. The images of small people with sad, war-frightened faces, or images of boat refugees with fear in their eyes have stayed in the past. Now there are only images of rapidly developing cities. Vietnam will soon follow other fast-growing capitalist countries. Numerous foreign businesses and goods have sprouted in Vietnam like mushrooms. (*Vietnam Klang Pha-yu Fon*, ("Vietnam in the Middle of Storms"), 2010, p.9-10)

Vietnam changes in contemporary Thai writings are demonstrated in the three following points: economic development, socio-cultural changes and opening views.

#### 4.3.1. Economic development

In contrast to the romanticized nostalgic images of the newly opened, unmodernized country mentioned in section 4.1, we have the portrayal of Vietnam in

economic development and globalization. The transformation involves outlook changes of natural landscapes, appearance of the cities, tourism boom and people's eagerness for business opportunities in a more developed economy.

*Physical changes from economic development*

The portrayal of contemporary Thai writings – including both travelogues and fiction books – illustrates a sharp difference between a closed underdeveloped Vietnam in its newly opened years versus a rapidly growing Vietnam some years later.

Pitsanu Sup and Niphatphon Phengkaeo, the authors of *Chaliang Tawan Ook* (“Eastern Passageway”) (2000) and *Lao Rueang Mueang Viet* (“Telling Stories about Vietnam”) (2003) respectively, report the bad conditions of roads and transportation that were their nightmare while traveling to Vietnam. Khamsing Srinawk, the author of *Khoam Hanghoen thi yu Tit Rua Ban* (“The Detachedness in Neighborhood”) (2002) complains about bad transportation, too, and especially Vietnam's regulation on speed limit, which made traveling slow and tiring. One more complaint is how Vietnam did not have clean toilets for tourists, which the Thai tourists had never experienced in Thailand and had not expected to experience when traveling. Such situations do not happen in books of the later period when Vietnam's economy and tourism serviced have much improved, except in some provinces.

Fiction books describe economic effect through first, the contrast between the aforementioned primitive rural areas versus busy and crowded urban cities. The peaceful mountainous town of Tam Dao in *Vietnam tam Lamphang* and the rural

scenery of rice fields, watery rivers, ancient temples, and slow lifestyle of Bac Ninh in *Rak nai Man Fon* (2012) are distinct from the bustle and chaos of Hanoi. Second, the writers prove the shrinking gap between cities and rural areas in Vietnam due to expanding urbanization and modernization. Foreign tourists and entertaining centers such as pubs and bars – though still few – have already arrived at a small town high on the mountains like Tam Dao. Visiting Bac Ninh Province, Rain noticed that Lim village was almost reached by urbanization. The village “of the old days some hundred years ago” had only one road to separate it from the urban world of modern houses and shops (*Rak nai Man Fon*, 2012, p.56).

Next, the most obvious development of Vietnam is depicted by both fiction writing and travelogues through the growth of cities. If previously Hanoi has been compared with more authentic localities to highlight the process of urbanization in the country, the following examples will demonstrate the rapid transition of the city itself. Hanoi of the year 2000 and before in Thatsanawadi’s eyes was like a small town despite it being a developing capital. Hanoians in Thatsanawadi’s books still travelled by bicycle and did their shopping almost every day at fresh markets. Children’s toys were as simple as animals made from leaves. Some signs of modernity like luxurious shops are mentioned but very few.

Hanoi in Thai contemporary books of the later phase is no longer a small peaceful town; the number of people, shops, and motorbikes in Hanoi – and all their continuous operation – constitute the image of a rapidly developing city. Almost all writers mention being overwhelmed by the unsystematic and chaotic transportation



here. Kajonrit Raksa illustrates vividly how Jam got lost among noise and traffic, from street stalls and vendors, and even by the unexpected approach of strangers.

Vehicles moved disorderly all day and night. Trucks with full loads of sand or soil ran as if they were the boss of the road and parked any place they liked. The bus terminal was so noisy with sounds from loud siren-like horns, drivers beating the back of their buses, staff scolding and calling each other as well as inviting passengers to board, vendors enticing customers, and so on. Her ears were exposed to such numerous undistinguishable sounds that Jam could not keep calm sitting. A man rudely pulled her back-pack, trying to lead her to his bus. A female beggar extended her hand so close it almost touched Jam's chin and said something endlessly. (*Vietnam tam Lamphang*, 2010, p.147-149)

Not only for Jam but these are the first and most popular impressions of many Thai writers and travelers who are used to a more quiet and composed manner in public spaces. Strange and exotic things and situations in Vietnam – which often bring confusion surprise and even cause insecure feelings to unprepared tourists – are a typical representation of developing countries.

While all the fiction books choose Hanoi to be their setting, the travel writings in this study cover a number of places across Vietnam. Among them Ho Chi Minh City, the commercial hub of Vietnam, is considered the fastest developing place in the country. *Sisan haeng Vietnam* (“Colors of Vietnam”) (2006) reveals the picture of Ho Chi Minh City in full transformation:

Ho Chi Minh City, previously called Sai Gon, is bustling and crowded with people and motorcycles moving endlessly through its streets (p.98). The city changes very fast. The price of real estate in Ho Chi Minh City soars up unimaginably. The business world here shifts and switches very fast. (p.102)

Teeraparb Lohitkun, similarly, admires the speediness of this city in adopting a totally new face only a short time after coming out of a period of war. He remarks that the GDP growth rate of 9.5 percent in Vietnam, the highest of Asia in 1996, was in large proportion brought by Ho Chi Minh City. He compares the current development of the city to its glorious past and makes a contrast with more recent miserable images. In fact, Saigon was an important regional trading hub from the eighteenth century and while being the capital of Cochinchina and South Vietnam, Sai Gon was often referred to as the Oriental Pearl or the Paris of Asia. When Vietnam opened itself to the world in the early 1990s, Ho Chi Minh City quickly regain the position it shortly lost during the end of the Vietnam War.

Wut and Sutiphong of *Vietnam Thiao Ao Rueang* (“Travel in Vietnam, get knowledge”) illustrate the prosperity of this city and the improvement of Ho Chi Minh City people’s living standards with the increased appearance of brand-name stores and goods. The use of cars and deluxe cars is one important indicator of consumerism. In their several trips to Vietnam in order to collect data for the book published in 2011, they saw the remarkably increased number of car showrooms in the city center. Although the design of these showrooms was not luxurious enough to deserve exhibition, the luxury cars inside confirmed the existence and extension of a Vietnamese wealthy class. More surprisingly, the buying and selling of cars in

Vietnam does not require a down payment like it does in Thailand. Vietnamese buy their cars with an initial cash payment, proving the real financial ability of the owners. The facts are also illustrated with Wut's pictures of many fancy and expensive looking stores like Apple and high-end fashion, or of the grand high modern building Diamond Plaza at the back of the Notre Dame Theatre.

In addition, development and upgrades in infrastructure are often highlighted to prove the development of big cities such as Hanoi:

My Dinh, a new quarter of Hanoi, is recently developed and well-designed. There are eight-lane roads with big traffic islands, ready for building the future skytrain. We do not see electric wires along the streets of this area, opposite to the complex webs we often find in the old center of the city. (*Vietnam Thiao Ao Rueang*, 2011, p.73)

Equally important is the mentioning of the same development and upgrades for Ho Chi Minh City:

In 1992 it was considered...extremely luxurious for a couple to go dining on the fifth-floor restaurant of the Rex Hotel...Nevertheless, these days the fifth floor of the Rex Hotel become too modest compared with tall buildings which are springing up like mushrooms. Some corners of the main streets in District 1 can be mistakenly thought to be Hong Kong...Ho Chi Minh City now has numerous commercial and office buildings and is going to have a sky train soon. (*Sisan haeng Vietnam*, 2006, p.102)

Beside the needs for development and modernization of the country itself, tourism is an important drive of Vietnam's infrastructure changes. Bao An, the Vietnamese tourist guide in *Rak nai Man Fon* (2012, p.180) presented the future plan to meet the demand of the booming tourism: "the Vietnamese government has set the target to increase the number of tourists much more than today's. In five years, Vietnam expects to receive as many tourists as Thailand. That is why we need to prepare in advance, including airport, hotels, tourist sites and conveniences, etcetera."

Lastly, economic development and urbanization have had quite explicit effect in big cities as well as small towns. Wut and Sutiphong (2011) report that fact from Dien Bien Phu. Although the number of people and traffic here are rather thin compared with big cities, there are visible signs such as brightly colorful houses and pre-wedding studios, proving that Dien Bien Phu is getting rid of its old underdeveloped look. The writers believe one would not know this town used to be a fierce battlefield just looking at its current lively development. The author of *Chaliang Tawan Ook* realizes the fast recovery after wars and the bright future of Danang: "Danang nowadays is like the beauty waking up after her long sleep. Living conditions improve a lot after wars. People now have peace and time to work and make earnings. Foreign investors start to come, including Thai businessmen...People in Danang look forward to new chances in the time to come". (p.162)

Vietnam's economic development is often compared with Thailand. The following extract from *Bon Dao Si Thong* (2009) reveals the author's worry that Vietnam's fast growth rate is threatening the Thai economy.

Vietnam keeps developing continually. It has a clear target of becoming a developed country and integrating more into the world economy...Vietnam's rapid development makes Thai economists afraid that one day Vietnam will surpass Thailand. (p.160)

This is probably a popular discourse in the media with which Pitsanu Janvitan, who wrote *Yon Yuan* ("Watching Vietnam") (2011) during the time he worked as Thai Ambassador in Hanoi, disagrees. He offers many insightful data and perspectives about Vietnam in opposition to the fear that Vietnam is a strong competitor who will soon surpass Thailand in economic development, especially in regard to rice exportation. In addition to many persuasive facts and figures, he points out the real reason which is the feeling of "losing face". When this discourse is mentioned with high frequency on Thai television and newspapers, it spreads out and creates a feeling of competitiveness and anti-competitor among many Thais towards Vietnam.

In contrast to the mass media, Thai contemporary travel writings have generally reported the economic development of Vietnam with neutral voice and some with positive attitude.

*People's reaction and their changed life upon new economic chances*

While many writers portray economic development through visible changes of city appearance, transportation and infrastructure, *Sisan haeng Vietnam* (2006) provides noteworthy stories of Vietnamese people in the new economical context. The authors Suphalak Kanchanakhundi and Suthida Malikaao introduce in the writer's

preface that the two journalists travel to Vietnam frequently and have many acquaintances and friends there. Their documentary book is composed from collected data and their views about what they experienced in the country. To present the economic growth of Vietnam, they narrate Vietnamese people's reaction to new opportunities of doing business and how their lives have improved since then.

Mr. Tam at the age of late forty is a government officer at the Department of Commerce of Danang. "Danang was quiet before. But since projects of Danang development and the economic cooperation plan called "East-West corridor" were conducted, more people come to Danang. Traveling is much easier. Now buses from Laos come to Danang every day. There are more tourists from Thailand, too, thanks to more convenient transport." (*Sisan haeng Vietnam*, 2006, p.68) Tam also tells that seeing a good chance for opening his own business, he became the owner of a seafood restaurant and can earn better than through his main occupation.

The two writers present similar stories from Hoi An. The development of Hoi An is not viewed from physical indications – given that this tourist attraction is an old town – but from people's effectively improving their living conditions aside from the heritage preservation.

Mr. Viet's family is another successful story of taking a chance through economic and tourism expansion. He and his wife both agree that Hoi An being recognized by UNESCO as a world heritage brings development to their village at Cua Dai beach. Roads have improved; people who come to visit the town also want to go sight-seeing in the surrounding areas. The family saw a way to earn more from tourism and open a seafood restaurant on their own land by the sea; sources of fresh

food are nearby. Khao, his twenty-eight-year-old son organizes ecological tours and takes his customers to his parents' restaurant. The other son works in a four-star hotel and entices guests to try his brother's tours. (ibid, p.143-144)

Thao, a hotel receptionist shares the pros and cons of the tourism and business boom in Hoi An. Despite the increasing gap between the rich and the poor, people enjoy many benefits. The bust and boom of service and businesses, especially tourism, hotels and restaurants give young people more job opportunities at home. They can earn a good living and take better care of their parents. She herself is satisfied with her current job. (ibid, p.127)

From the above stories, the authors of Sisan haeng Vietnam present the economic development in Hoi An through individual reflections. People's catching business possibilities are not viewed as opportunists or materialists; they are raising their living standards. Furthermore, this is evidence for a nice balance between culture preservation and economic development.

#### 4.3.2. *Socio-cultural changes*

Changes do not occur only to the economic aspects of Vietnam but also a number of socio-cultural fields. Different from physical changes which are visible and obvious, these socio-cultural changes take more time and observation to realize such as lifestyle and traditions, and many times lie in deeper layers – more difficult to figure out like intangible changes in social structure, values and points of view.

*Modernized ways of life*

First, let us review how the life of Vietnamese people in the transitional period has been portrayed in Thai contemporary books.

In Prachakhom Lunachai's eyes, ways of life change most remarkably with common labour; and advanced industries cause difficulties to local simple manufacturing. For instance, an upgraded fishing industry endangers the ways of harvesting and living of poor fishing families in coastline regions. Basket-shaped bamboo boats are the most important tools of Vietnamese small-scaled fishermen. Prachakhom focuses on that role rather than seeing it simply as a popular image attracting Thai tourists visiting Central Vietnam for its unique shape distinguished from any Thai boats.

Basket-boats...Some are floating separately, others are rowed by their owners along the coastline. Far away a big fishing ship with firm roof is releasing its net. Two images represent the contradiction between long-lasting locality and hi-technology era. They also reflect the contrast between big ships that can fish a thousand or ten thousand kilograms per day versus small boats which cannot reach such number in the whole year. This situation happens in any country including Thailand. (*Vietnam Phaendin Lang Songkhram nai Khwamngam lae Khwammai* ("Vietnam after the Wars, a Land of Beauty and Meaning"), 2014, p.115)

Witnessing the struggle of basket-boats against modern ships in the Vietnam central sea, the writer is empathetic towards local fishing families for having to work



hard every day from early morning to late evening because they cannot afford buying or building bigger boats. The contrast picture reveals how much and deeply economic development has changed the life of Vietnamese people. Apart from new and modern manufacturing factors that industrialization brings, there are many negative consequences in the life and work of common laborers.

Prachakhom goes further by romanticizing the basket-boat as a house that keeps the happiness, hope and worry of the fishermen. Therefore, industrialization not only changes people's way of life but also affects their sustainability and well-being. Prachakhom's romantic thoughts and sympathetic feelings probably originate from his background, as he recalls: "[When I see the basket-boats] I cannot help missing my home town and my life in the past" (ibid, p.116). The author himself has to overcome many life obstacles, including working as a crew member on fishing ships for eight years, before he can finally achieve his dream of becoming a writer. That is why he shares lots of understanding and sympathy with the hardship of Vietnamese fishermen.

Apart from provincial and rural areas, changes to unskilled labor or unadvanced vehicles are clearly observable in big cities. Prachakhom notices a similar situation happening to the "xich lo" or cyclo in Hanoi. This three-wheeled cycling vehicle is no longer used for its initial function – a transport of local people and goods. Life in the city has become too fast and hurried for people to travel with rudimentary vehicles. The Xich lo has now been converted to a service transport for tourists, which aims mainly at making money.

Vietnam is governed by socialist political system but is opening to liberal capitals. Likewise, the cyclos in the streets inherited the original appearance of a vehicle of transportation. On the other hand, the cyclists have been absolutely capitalized. I will not be surprised if the remaining cyclos are no longer moved by humans but mechanized, or the number of cyclos keeps reducing. (ibid, p.49)

In the above extract, the changing function of cyclos proves that leisure and slow life is being replaced by busier and more modern life style. Besides, the nature of the cyclists' service is no longer that of the local way but it has changed into more materialized touristic style. We can see that the Thai writers sometimes utilize two aspects of the same object in order to portray Vietnam as a fast-changing country. While the numerous and unorganized traffic in big cities symbolize modernity and capitalism, more simple transport vehicles like cyclos and basket-boats represent traditionality in the Vietnamese life.

Opposite to the previous examples, in which the country's development in the globalization era imposes a more negative impact on the life of small and closed communities, *Sisan haeng Vietnam* reveals the picture of Ho Chi Minh City comfortable with westernized lifestyle:

Although Ho Chi Minh City is constantly busy every day, tonight it is intensively crowded and bustling because people all go out to celebrate. The city streets are decorated with beautiful lights and Christmas trees. Young people drive motorbikes around for sight-seeing...A number of people in this city worship Buddhism. Still, they consider Christmas a holiday for

celebration like they celebrate Tet or their Vietnamese New year. (*Sisan haeng Vietnam*, 2006, p. 98-99)

The travelogue authors point out that the western holiday is welcome by Vietnamese people. They receive it as a flamboyant joyful cultural festival rather than a religious custom. That reflects a more relaxed society of Ho Chi Minh City that opens to foreign contact.

Fiction books can narrate in detail the transition from simple to more modern ways of life of Vietnamese people through time. In *Khwam Lap thi Sapa* (“Secret at Sapa”) and *Mai Mi Thoe...Mai Mi Tawan* (“There is No Sunshine Without You”), the teacher-writer Thatsanawadi describes Hanoi in the early stages of the reform period. Vietnamese people, represented in his books by Vietnamese students, are described as having a very simple life in general. They focused on their studies, lived their life in ideology and philosophy, and tried their best to reach their targets for a better future. They were born in an age when Vietnam had joined the market economy for a while but new forms of exciting modern entertainment were not popular or affordable for the majority of Vietnamese people. The students, therefore, concentrated on their studies with basic hobbies such as singing songs, reading books or gathering and cooking together, camping and climbing mountains, or spending their free time taking care of the expat teachers.

In general, Vietnamese society was still very much community-oriented. Thatsanawadi observed this from his daily life during one year in Vietnam. His bicycle-keeper and the vendors near his apartment were friendly and liked talking with him. When the teacher visited his student’s house, he was warmly welcome by

the whole family, relatives and even neighbors. When conflicts happened in interpersonal relations, they followed traditions and social conventions — respecting and obeying, giving priority to duties and authorized orders.

Compared to the traditional society portrayed by Thatsanawadi, there are noticeable differences in the ways of life of Vietnamese people in *Rak nai Man Fon* by Prapatson Sevikul. The custom of people gathering for tea and talking by the ancient streets of Hanoi is foreseen by Bao An, the main character, as difficult to exist much longer. When roads are newly built or extended, people in Hanoi might not go out to drink tea leisurely and talk with each other like in present, they will go to luxurious coffee shops or stay lonely in high modern condominiums. In her critique of *Rak nai Man Fon*, Prichapanyakul (2017, p.387) comments “That is a time when Vietnam is preparing the young generation with new thinking and new ways. Meanwhile, the old generations still live their lives in the traditional ways and find difficulty in adapting”.

In the conversations between Bao An and Rain – the contrast between the past and present – the old and the new pops up often, and the former is dimmed by the latter. Both these young people admit the fact that their generation now listens to rock and rap music rather than old songs about green fields and clear rivers; they now talk about trendy appliances like mobile phones and the internet as well as modern lifestyle. Sometimes the rapid and wide effects of globalization is so great that Bao An exclaims in worry “I don’t know how long can Vietnam stand the attack of westernization...We could win in wars against the French and the American but might end up losing in the economic struggle.” (*Rak nai Man Fon*, 2012, p.128)

Anyway, the changes in Vietnam due to capitalism and modernization, in Prapatsorn's perspective, are not so intense as in Thai society. When Rain expresses her surprise about the massive quantity and the tall, slim features of houses in Hanoi, Bao An explains how Vietnamese people buy and have their house built with cash or gold. They do not like the down-payment system or bank loans. Rain tells that Thai people in the past also bought things by cash but nowadays many people are in debt with credit cards. The construction of houses and buildings being carried out in Vietnam proves the increasing economic and civil demands. On the other hand, Vietnamese people still use traditional payment methods while Thai people have changed to more high-tech finance, conveying their highly capitalized way of life.

The difference also exhibits in their views of personal privacy. Rain's lifestyle is typical of modern teenagers, her traveling includes taking pictures and uploading them into social media like Facebook. On the contrary, Bao An prefers to keep them to himself in the computer or photo albums. He finds no need to show personal memories in the public space while Rain thinks sharing moments does no harm her privacy because "The world these days has no border or limitation. It is good actually to know what happens to people in other corners of the globe" (p.73). Solitude versus self-expression, privacy versus publicity, they represent different degrees of the openness to technology and globalized communication of Vietnamese and Thai people. Although Vietnam has opened the country, its extent of international integration seems to lag behind Thailand.

*Changed values, more social varieties and social problems*

In contemporary Thai writings, changes in Vietnamese society happen further than just capitalized and modernized ways of life. Further than observing outward changes, fiction books like novels and short stories with definite strengths of its genre offer a vivid and detailed portrayal of a more complex Vietnamese society. The society's complexity is indicated through changed values, new characters of people, more and deeper social conflicts and problems under the impact of new economic conditions. Changes and conflicts emerge early and increase their seriousness along with the influential flows in capitalism and globalization.

In the collection *Khwam Lap thi Sapa* about the peaceful society of Vietnam around 2000, one short story titled *Yat Nguea khong Mae* (“Mother’s Drops of Sweat”) reveals the conflict between the old and the new, between different demands and targets in life. The mother is the typical traditional Vietnamese woman in life and in literature: suffering from hardship but full of sacrifice. Every day she walks to a garden to buy vegetables and then walks to a market to sell them. She is always slower than other vendors since they have bicycles. Along the way she is tortured by tire, heat, hunger, and most dangerously, municipal police who try to regulate street vending by chasing the vendors away. The only reason for the mother’s brave endurance of hardship is her dear son, his well-being, his studies and his future.

Her son, on the contrary, represents the new generation who has better living conditions and gets access to high education, but which is used to a material lifestyle. He is clever and can pass the entrance exam to university, but spends more money than his family can afford. With higher education, he wants to have better living

conditions by denying his poor background and adopting a material lifestyle. The only target in his life is to live in material comfort. He keeps asking his mother for a new bicycle and fashionable clothes. Worse than anything, he is an ugly picture of merciless and selfish young people who care about their benefits only. His mother, when arrested by the police, happens to hear her own son's comment: "Those preventing development should be arrested all" (p. 89). The tragedy occurs due to the contrast between two generations, not only in terms of ways of living but also different education and worldview, hence, different demands for living conditions.

That the whole collection only mentions opposition only once in the above short story suggests that Vietnamese social structure before 2000 started to change but not fundamentally. *Rak nai Man Fon* written in 2010 portrays a much more complicated society of Vietnam under integration and globalization. Once the common target of unifying the country has been achieved —an opening market economy offers so many opportunities — people no longer stay the same. There is a variety of social groups, objectives, mindsets, practices, and values existing at the same time in society. Prapatsorn Sevikul is successful in portraying vividly Vietnamese complicated society in this transition through two contradictory lines of characters: those who still think and live in the old ways and a new group of people whose minds are very prone to opportunities and eager to better their living conditions.

The character who is the representative of the past, lingering to traditional living and old custom is Uncle Dinh. He is a close friend of Dong, Bao An's father, taking care of the son after his friend died at the front. After the war —and especially

in the opening period —instead of moving forward and improving the living conditions like many other people, Lung Dinh spends his life in the nostalgia of the old days and traditional culture. He likes spending time at ancient places or old houses and is worried for the fate of such old buildings. “He often complained why human beings did not like the darkness of night and yearned for daylight. They forgot that daylight came together with heat and chaos, opposite to the calm and cool atmosphere at night...” (p.34)

More than traditional architecture, what Uncle Dinh finds in places such as Sword Lake or Long Bien Bridge is the glorious past that he used to be part of. Telling Bao An about important historical events that happened there, he is glad that Hanoians can learn history from real sites instead of learning only from books. When Bao An argues that it should be considered unlucky to suffer a thirty-year war, Uncle Dinh replies that there are good things in that suffering, that many valuable traits of Vietnamese people have been formed from the history of protecting the country. He teaches Bao An to feel proud of national history, and respect those who sacrificed something in the wars. Thus, Uncle Dinh represents a Vietnamese generation who has passed the war, is full of nationalist pride of the glorious history, and tries to transfer such spirit to new generations.

Nha Ninh’s parents are supporting characters adding up to the conservative group. They were loyal to their set of values – obeying the laws, trusting in justice, leading their lives in a set “stable” way. When Van Viet caused an accident to Nha Ninh, her parents refused to receive money from Doctor Van as compensation for not



taking his son to court. In other words, they chose righteousness over money. That is why they hate Doctor Van's family very much.

But in the society, there are more and more people like Doctor Van and his son Van Viet. Doctor Van is an ambitious and selfish type of person who tries to get a high position to benefit the most from it, ignoring social criticism against his lack of morals and professional ethics. He is condemned by Nha Ninh's father for his money-thirst and remorselessness: "That place [Doctor Van's clinic] only gives treatment to rich people. They don't care about poor patients like us...Doctors of the old days cared for their patients first, but nowadays doctors like Doctor Van set priority on money over anything else" (p.59). Doctor Van, in return, accuses Nha Ninh's parents of being conservative and preventing social development: "They should all die so that Vietnam can be more developed. Those who stick to Confucian teachings and class revolution are obstacles to social development" (p.165-166). Accordingly, Doctor Van represents a group of materialists who run after new opportunities and benefits, and negate everything blocking their way.

His son, Van Viet is the typical representative of young materialists in Vietnamese society. Born in a rich family, he is satisfied with all material needs and is allowed to do everything he wants. In the eyes of Nha Ninh's family, Van Viet is only interested in having fun by driving motorbikes or flirting with girls and pays no attention to serious things. His life target is wealth, and personal entertainment. Readers can see in Van Viet a duplicate of the son in *Yat Nguea khong Mae*.

On the other hand, Van Viet's point of view about success and happiness is sensible in many ways. While Nha Ninh studies hard and refuses to hang around

according to her parents' wish and expectation, and is satisfied with her simple life, Van Viet tries to persuade her on the importance of the youth's being alert with the new situation and actively searching for opportunities:

Vietnam these days is no longer the same as Vietnam in the past...

Now our country is opening its door to welcome foreign trade, investment and tourism. If you only stay in your house, you cannot catch up with people, you will miss the chance to get rich, and your life will be so quiet and boring as the old generation. (p.99)

The contradiction of Van Viet versus Nha Ninh and between their families proves that the new era and the integrating economy bring about changes in the deep layers of Vietnamese social structures and values. The opposition between two groups of characters in this novel reflect the differences between new opportunists and conservative people who still stick to traditional values; such social conflicts are not easy to compromise.

Travel writing, due to its focus on narrative of places and experiences along the journey, can hardly depict much regarding social inner problems. Nevertheless, travelogue authors do observe some negative sides in opening the country and in people who pay more attention to materialist values. *Vietnam Chitklai Muan klaihang*, for instance, noted illegal and immoral practices in Quang Ninh province when trying to sell to wealthy foreign tourists. A Vietnamese tourist guide told that Halong Bay did not have only cruises in the bay like the majority of tourists often think. A number of Chinese investors and tourists often came on speed boats for entertainment services including prostitution, casinos, and etcetera paying in Chinese and American

currencies. Similar situations in fact occurred in many tourism destinations in Vietnam. The Thai travel writer shared her concern on how globalization came together with monetarism, causing greed in humans and degrading the importance of ethics and morality.

*Changed family and personal values*

In the new era of opening and developing the country, Vietnamese society experiences a fundamental transition from traditionality to modernity with an expanding economy, growing cities, adjustment of social institutions and more complicated social varieties and oppositions. The transition certainly also affects smaller units including the family and the individual. Vietnamese people have better living conditions, new chances of personal fulfillment, a more open worldview, a changed lifestyle and values.

Wanrawi Rungsaeng, the author of *Vietnam Klang Pha-yu Fon*, constructs the image of transitional Vietnam with changing features in respect to population and family structure. Many sections of the books “When a woman has an abortion,” “Matching Café – one must have a couple,” and “Whose child is abandoned by the street?” reflect the problems of Vietnamese people as a result of modernized ways of life and relaxed principles. One issue presented is unwanted pregnancy and healthcare safety when having an abortion in Vietnam. Others give birth but the burden is so much that they abandon the child in a public place. Besides, urban modern life often brings its citizens a very busy job or a more individual lifestyle so they lack opportunities and time to find a match. They are then forced to use match-making

services which organize for them to meet potential partners at cafes, but such acquaintances are usually fleeting and unnatural for a successful personal relationship.

*Vietnam Chitklai Muan Klaihang* by Somlak Wongrat added to the picture of Vietnam in the sphere of integration and materialism with a new phenomenon in marriage culture. The author detects signs of commercial business in an aspect that Vietnamese people pay great importance to. Traditionally, it takes a couple a certain time to get acquainted, form a relationship and pass many traditional customs in order to be married. However, a commercial matching business for Vietnamese men and Taiwanese overweighed girls has now come into being and is flourishing. These girls cannot find Taiwanese boyfriends, and in order to find a good match with a Vietnamese man, they have to pay a certain amount of money as dowry for the groom. Somlak Wongrat considers transnational marriage a matter of course when a country is open to the outside world but expresses a lightly ironic tone upon its materialized manner.

In addition to a changing lifestyle, a more commercial mindset and altered customs of relationship and marriage, Vietnamese values concerning gender also change. First, the typical feminine character of Vietnamese women is challenged by a more modern and open image. Second, the Thai writers also reflect the efforts of Vietnamese women in achieving the right to make decisions and to lead their life and love in their own way.

In general, Thai writers and travelers are all impressed by the feminine beauty of Vietnamese women. Their image has been romanticized for their beautiful appearance and gentle manner. Section 4.1 has analyzed the portrayal of Hue girls,

which in the eyes of Niphatphon and Teeraparb are the most adorably pretty and elegantly sweet. “Girls in Hue are more beautiful than in other regions...They say that Hue girls are romantic, sweet and attractive. Every time they speak, they end their sentence with “da” [pronounced ‘za’], reminding of the nice personality of the northern girls of Thailand.” (*Lao Rueang Mueang Viet*, p.149)

Graceful as it is, the romanticized image of Vietnamese women is challenged by the new version of themselves. Besides the image of elegant appearance, nice conversation manner and social etiquette of Hue girls is the image of more open and modern girls in big cities. The sexy fashion of Ho Chi Minh City girls is mentioned in several books in order to demonstrate the new lifestyle wide open to westernization. Girls seen on the streets have the look of confident employed women in modern brand-name clothing, driving motorbikes. “In the beauty contest Miss Saigon two or three years ago, Vietnamese girls wore much sexier suits than the girls from the Miss Thailand contest” (*Xin chao Vietnam*, p.40). It is interesting that in constructing the image of Vietnamese women as a symbol of Vietnam, the writers use their elegant beauty in ao dai to refer to the traditional value in Vietnamese culture; whereas, their new and more open fashion conveys the changes to the modern life. This brings interesting detail to the Thai picture of Vietnam.

More important changes lie in the improvement of the role of women in Vietnam. Again, fiction books can display the strength in candidly articulating a difficult social issue.

Female characters in the books written in the 2000s by Thatsanawadi are the traditional image of Vietnamese women. The mother in the short story *Yat Nguea*

*khong Mae* (read more in page 173) is like a majority of women of her time – working laboriously to fight against poverty and hardship their whole life. Widowed and with a child, she was poor and had to work hard to earn a living, and whole-heartedly sacrifices herself for her son's wellbeing and his future. This character perpetuates the image of *Mae* [mother] with endless kindness and sacrifice that represents Vietnamese women in Vietnam's folk culture and classic literature. However, in this story, the mother's sacrifice is not recognized when material values are more appreciated.

Young girls in other short stories of the collection *Khwan Lap thi Sapa* as well as the novel *Mai Mi Thoe...Mai Mi Tawan* were reserved, caring girls in accordance with the popular image of romantic Vietnamese ladies. Ma-fuang is the most beautiful and talented among them but has an unhappy relationship with her Thai teacher. She has to face the disagreement of her Vietnamese teacher and friends towards her love from a different race and social status. Her decision to let go of this love shows that Vietnamese girls in the past were not free and independent to live and love for themselves; her life was still very much controlled by more powerful people, by social conventions and duty, by political ideology and organization.

As time goes by, the image of girls in *Rak nai Man Fon* written in 2010 allows more freedom to pursue their personal plans and feelings. If all the other characters in this novel have a clear preference for either renovation or conservation from the beginning, Nha Ninh is the only one that undergoes a dramatic change in her mindset. She comes from Hai Phong City, where girls were famous for their determination and decisiveness. She chose to learn political science in university while Vietnamese girls

would typically pursue arts, humanities and social sciences, or education. At first, nevertheless, her life and will are restricted due to family rules and regulations. She lives a simple life without ambitious targets: going to university every day, staying at home in her free time rather than hanging around, obeying her parents, waiting for her boyfriend and a future with him. Her peaceful life is hit with a serious happening. After Nha Ninh suffers an accident caused by Van Viet, she and Bao An quarrel in misunderstanding. In realizing that her boyfriend does not care and nor love her as much as before, she realizes that settling for her current life is not her character. She decides to be herself, free from her parents' control and go abroad for further study. Her parents are very surprised for they had always wanted her to get married with such a good boy like Bao An.

Nha Ninh is the representation of Vietnamese girls in the modern time (Prichapanyakul, 2017) and a contrast image to the situation of Vietnamese women in the past. Vietnamese society in pre-colonial times was heavily influenced by patriarchal Confucianism, hence, there was low opinion but high discrimination towards women. Women were taught to keep *tam tong* or “three subserviences” to be subservient “to her father before her marriage, to her husband upon becoming his wife, and to her son when she became widowed” (McLeod & Nguyen, 2001). Moreover, women were trained to have *tu duc* or “four virtues” including *cong* or “industry” (she should be good at cooking, embroidering and similar women's tasks), *dung* or “appearance” (she should be beautiful, gracious and reserved), *ngon* or “speech” (she should speak nice words in a soft, polite manner), and *hanh* or “behavior” (she should have kind heart and good conduct) (Le, 2002, p. 4). Such set

values of chastity, obedience, fidelity, self-sacrifice bound the life of women and ensured the perpetuation of a male-dominated society.

Nowadays, the modern gender and family relationships have freed women to a large extent from the obligations of feudal ideology and disagreeable customs (Le, 2002; Tran & Le, 2000). The maturity of Nha Ninh reflects the important development of Vietnamese girls' outlook on life in the new era: They choose their life target on their own; they pursue high education, enter the fields that are traditionally male-dominant and no longer let parents decide their marriage. Now they are aware of their value, get more independent and willing to change for a better future.

One more aspect the novel contributes to the picture of social changes in Vietnam are changing values in child raising and education. In terms of raising and educating children, Nha Ninh's parents are typical of many family oriented and protective Vietnamese parents who plan the future path for their children to follow, expect their daughter to obey and to get married with a good boyfriend for a "stable" life. In contrast, Van Viet's parents please all of their son's wishes and allow him to do as he pleases.

With regard to formal education, Van Viet criticizes Vietnamese schools, which have taught the same outdated knowledge for many generations. When Nha Ninh defends the necessity of learning basic theories, Van Viet argues that experience is more necessary, one needs to open oneself to the larger world; moreover, traditional teaching methods are boring and can no longer meet the requirements of reality. His complain goes in line with (Ratliff, 2008, p. 32), who states "Universities and



institutes [in Vietnam] have lacked close linkages with the business world, training quality and efficiency have been poor, teaching and learning methods are out of date, resources have been limited, and resource utilization has been inefficient.”

The aforementioned extracts disclose a variety of angles that are different from “*phap cham*” [memorized images] of Thai people about a Vietnam in hardship in the past. The multi-dimensional picture of Vietnam from “an outsider’s eyes” of *Rak nai Man Fon* helps Thai people better understand its neighbor. On the one hand, Prapatsorn’s description of Vietnam’s history, culture, economy, society and ways of life “in the middle of cross-cultural currents” provides a new image of the country and people in much better conditions. “People have higher living standards, get better income from tourism and trading; the development and education of human resources is well-planned” (Prichapanyakul, 2017, p.383-4, 386-7). On the other hand, inside such positive results of modernization lays a complicated interaction between conventions and old values versus new values or imported practices. Compared with the simple peaceful society in the books of the early phase, this novel can articulate Vietnam’s changes at many levels including society, family and individual.

The changes in the lifestyle and values of the Vietnamese generation of the year 2000 are also confirmed by international researchers such as McLeod (2001, p.148) regarding global-market awareness in finding jobs; Western ideas and styles newly absorbed about one’s self as an individual rather than as an appendage of a larger entity about love and marriage (at a much later age); the eagerness for material wealth and consumer goods; the fondness for rock and rap bands as well as chart-listed singers; the preference for fashionable clothes and etcetera. Many of the aspects

McLeod points out are in consensus with what has been presented by Prapatsorn in *Rak nai Man Fon*.

The images of Vietnam constructed in contemporary Thai writings can be validated by the picture of Vietnamese society in Vietnamese literature. The book *Vietnamese Literature after 1975: Dynamics and Changes* by Rato (2010) presents many similar aspects of changing Vietnamese society portrayed by Vietnamese writers. The literary works of the “Renovation” or “Doi moi” period (1986-1992) address many social issues concerning women, conflicts among big families in rural areas, or corruption and authoritarian behavior by government officials. They show a return to many viewpoints of a society in the post-war era such as perspectives about social classes, historiography, war and loss, and individual needs. Literature of the post-Renovation period (after 1992) reflects the obvious changes of a society facing globalization with more complicated problems in both rural areas and urban cities, or new phenomena like materialism as well as a different worldview of the young generation born after the war. It seems that Vietnamese and Thai writers share many common observations and perspectives about the changing Vietnam.

#### *4.3.3. Vietnam’s opening views of development and integration*

The previous parts have analyzed how economic development and socio-cultural changes are occurring in Vietnam in contemporary Thai writings. Having addressed the increasing changes in the outlook, living conditions, lifestyle, social conflict, and generational contrast within the country, the writers could further reach the mind and views of Vietnamese people. Such thinking is the source that elevated all the aforementioned fundamental changes during the transition period.

This is known to be the time between “Doi moi” – or Renovation Process of Vietnam in the post-Cold War period – and globalization. After the end of the Vietnam war and the country unification in 1975, the country had an underdeveloped economy which resulted from war damages, trade embargo and a centrally planned economic model. International evolving situations, isolation and backwardness, and inflation crises forced Vietnamese leaders to start a “new thinking”. The transition process is marked by the momentous Sixth Party Congress in 1986, in which the Communist Party of Vietnam (VCP) declared its “Doi Moi” policy, referring to the shift from a command economy to a market economy. It involves a series of reforms in the large scale such as leadership reforms, decentralization of decision making, legal framework and parliamentary development, macroeconomic management, opening for different ownerships, boosting production, etcetera.

The renovation brought dramatic changes to Vietnam. However, the prolonged process of renovation was never smooth. After preliminary success in stabilizing the socio-economic situation, various problems became increasingly complex over time, mainly due to the state’s inconsistent application of policies and intense involvement in the economy. The reforms “caused deep ideological differences to emerge within the VCP leadership” in early party congresses during the period of 1996 to 1999, which is called “uncertain transition” (Elliot, 2012, p.161; Ratliff, 2008, p.13-14). In market-oriented economic reform, an environment of severely limited accountability and high risk for corruption cooled down the initially strong determination to get more autonomy because it was “generally considered too risky” to step “from stable state ownership to uncertain future in the private sector” (Kokko, 2008, p.12). In sociocultural terms, Vietnam holds the standpoint of being open although not entirely.

The policy to build “an advanced culture with strong national identity” announced by the Party Central Committee in 1998 has been adhered to ever since (Bui, 2013).

Under this context, dissimilar views of domestic development and international relations emerged and clashed. The Thai contemporary fiction books do well in displaying these arguments and evolvement of thoughts and practices towards a more open view and direction for Vietnam. Outstanding is the image of a young Vietnamese generation trying to adapt themselves to new chances as well as challenges, and to put aside their nostalgia to catch up with a rapid development pace.

*View towards domestic development: ideology versus economy*

Prapatsorn Sevikul describes how Vietnam has to choose between sticking to the old system with strict state control or give domestic development more autonomy. Being a writer and a diplomat, Prapatsorn Sevikul has long valuable experience from frequent traveling and wide contacts with many groups of people including high-level officials, academics, social leaders, writers, important cultural figures as well as the general public. His abundant data and professional expertise can bring readers a sophisticated portrayal of the life and mind of Vietnamese people (Laohaphan, 2012). His analysis goes deep to the conceptions of Vietnamese people to explain their social transformation.

Bao An, the main character of *Rak nai Man Fon*, plays the role of the spokesman of Vietnam in its important adjustment of political policies, hence, reflects very clearly over the Renovation process of Vietnam. He views how the old way of state-centered governing no longer suits the current situation and needs urgent

reforms. He believes in opening policies, elaborating that economic development and political security could go together, and Vietnam cannot use an ideological frame to block or limit the growth of its economy. He respects pluralism because it is not necessary to follow only one way to reach a target. In other words, Bao An with open political views represents people who support reform policies.

Nevertheless, as Chapter two – the socio-historical background of the writings – has reviewed, reforms bring different reactions and attitudes. Renovation is not a sudden change but a difficult process in order to adopt more ideological openness. Ideas of reform face many obstacles, especially the opposition of a more conservative group. Tan, Bao An's friend, despite being a young man, represents those who strictly follow and protect their political ideology. Tan requests frequent attendance to party meetings; he thinks that one needs to fulfill the tasks assigned by nation and party and that the party's promotion is the most honored way to reach the higher social ladder. Tan sticks to old political ideas in contrast with Bao An's new way of thinking. Their opposite points of view frequently explode into their argument:

If you had attended the meeting, you would have been selected...The most important things to do are those for society; the most important duties are those for our nation... You have been selected to be an outstanding student from junior school to university. If you had been selected this time by the district, you would have had a good opportunity to become a Communist Party member and been sent to the local election. One day in the future you can be a member of the National Assembly...I feel very regretful for you.

(p.113)

“I don’t argue with you...It is ideology which is necessary during wars. But this is a time when we need to push economic development...Each person can do his or her own duty for their own benefit, but in the end, they also contribute to the advancement of our country.”

“If we had been in the past, you would have been accused of being a capitalist," Tan mocked.

“But this time you should be criticized of being outdated”, Bao An shot back. (p.131-133)

Bao An is confident that his support for economic reform is right. At the same time, he is proud to be a tourist guide since he is aware of the role of the private sector as an important drive for the economy:

“Why did the committee rushed to the decision of leaving me out so fast and easily? What does the other candidate have better than me, except that he can attend the meeting regularly? It is because he is a state staff working for formal office hours while I am an employer in a private company? ...Anyway, that I am not selected to be a party member or to be an election candidate is no longer important to me. This time economy, not politics, will lead the country. I am part of the private sector —the main engine of the country’s economic development and prosperity. (p.141-142)

This thought complies with Vietnam’s Renovation feature which was a “two-directional process” – “grassroots upwards” and “central leadership downwards” (Vu,

1995, p. 18), in which private domestic firms pushed the country's total output, exports and employment.

The pride and recognition of the private sector is more than only desire for benefit. It reflects people's reasonable value of wealth and more importantly, their aspirations for individual liberation and development. Bao An, as representatives of the new generation with new ways of thinking and new values, supports the idea of personal fulfillment. He thinks it is not everyone's duty to work for the state sector. Each individual has the right to develop himself to full potential and to follow his aspiration, which in the end will do good to the country's advancement.

As far as we analyze the quoted conversations, readers can figure out the serious conflict between two ways of thinking within society. And as far as his character is revealed, Bao An's personality consists of both sides —love for ideology and a pro-reform character. He has nostalgia and regret for old values sometimes, but mostly he is realistic about unavoidable changes. In both individual and national levels, the tendency towards change is hard to go against, like Bao An confesses to Rain:

“No one can resist the trend of change...If we don't change ourselves, we will be left behind. What we can do is to be aware of the valuable things we have such as history, arts and culture, living style, and preserve them as our roots – inseparable from our present and future” (p.94).

In other words, Vietnam accepts new challenges and considers opening and changing a matter of course. To soothe the social conflict, Vietnam attempts to

balance between the old and the new, to combine both reformation and preservation. For example, Bao An tells about the new generation who are excited about new and appealing changes brought about by globalization, while the old generation are happy with their leisure way of life. Moreover, Bao An proves that Vietnam's solution seems to be effective: "We never thought of changing the world. We have another way – changing people. This method is slow and might take time from one generation to another. But in the end, we will have a new world where everyone can live together in harmony." (p.52)

This section shows the complexity of Vietnamese people's ideas and their reaction towards opening policies. They face difficulties but make great effort to balance the old mindset and traditions versus fully opening to the market economy. In order to lively portray the changes in Vietnamese people's ways of thinking, Prapatsorn employs two young Vietnamese characters to let the insiders voice their own views. The writer constructs their images through their debates with contrasting arguments. This is exactly what Pike (1994, p. 69) wrote in his report about Vietnam in early 1990s:

At root this is a problem of insufficient social consensus...It consists of general agreement among the people of a society as to (a) what does the society stand for, i.e., what kind of people are we? (b) where do we want the society to go, i.e., what is our social vision? (c) how do we get there? ...But the problem goes beyond the economic sector, deep into social relations and political activity; it cannot be solved quickly.



*View towards international integration: caution versus openness*

To complete the picture of Vietnam in transition, Thai novels present the thinking of Vietnam regarding international integration. In the early phase, conservative thinking dominates the scene – in which Mr Hoang, the Vietnamese teacher in the novel *Mai Mi Thoe... Mai Mi Tawan* by Thatsanawadi is a representative. He strongly holds to regulations and conventions, refusing changes and novelty. He does not agree to include new content into the Thai language syllabus, insisting on following his outdated textbook which limits student language development. He is not satisfied to see the students love the Thai teacher more than him. After the Thai teacher goes on a trip to Son La Province with the students, Mr Hoang accuses him of having suspicious activities with ethnic minorities and loving students unequally. Mr Hoang even calls the police to interrogate him and force the students not to be so close to him. On the surface, Mr Hoang still talks with and inquires after the Thai teacher's being; but behind his back, Mr Hoang tries to control all personal and teaching activities of the Thai teacher.

Mr Hoang's character is a hint of Vietnamese authority at that time with the gap between the policy and its implementation. While Vietnam might implement welcoming diplomatic policies towards other countries, it was still very careful and suspicious of foreign elements and foreigners' activities in Vietnam. This is also the reason for the love between the Thai teacher and Ma-fuang, the Vietnamese girl, in a time when getting married to a foreigner received social prejudices and authority discouragement. Different social status between teacher and student, political rules and social expectations were all too big an obstacle to Ma-fuang's love. This portrays

Vietnam in its newly reforming phase, opening-up on the surface but deep down, skeptical and conservative. Vietnam, despite having carried out the “Doi moi” policy for one decade, was still reserved and careful in building relations with countries not from the same ideological system. In regard to this difficult process, Erlarger, a New York Times correspondent in Southeast Asia during those years (in Elliot, 2012, p.70) told the reflection of a Vietnamese figure:

“There is a struggle going on for the soul of Vietnamese socialism,” said a prominent editor in 1989...“I think this period is the hardest time, because it is the transition between the old and the new. But in the last few years we have forced a little light from the coals, and the stagnant ice is melting.”

Worries and skepticism cannot resist the worldwide trend of cooperation and integration, however. Signs of Vietnam’s opening-up to the outside world can be found in the promising image of Vietnam’s new generation in the short story collection *Khwan Lap thi Sapa*. The Vietnamese students were intelligent and eager to learn new things. The appearance of an unpopular language in Vietnam’s tertiary education and the students’ interest in learning Thai language and culture indicate Vietnam’s increasing cooperation with foreign countries, in this case Thailand. The love between Ma-fuang and the Thai teacher is certain proof of the widening international exchange and larger presence of foreigners in Vietnam.

The important shift in Vietnam’s perspective of itself and the world in its later phase of renovation is reflected through Bao An’s talks and friendship with Rain. Bao An tries to introduce Vietnamese cultural values, and at the same time, affirms his

progressive thinking about social and economic development. He is open to exchange his thoughts and views with Rain about changes happening to Vietnam in the present and about Vietnamese lifestyle. This confidence and openness is a new characteristic of Vietnamese people that is not found in the books of the previous period. All of these prove that nowadays Vietnam is ready to shake hands with other countries, welcomes foreigners, proudly presents itself with the outside world, and more openly exchanges its information and ideas.

The image of Vietnam at present [as constructed in *Rak nai Man Fon*] is a combination of its strong and unique culture and foreign ways that enter and push the country's development. In the midst of these currents, the Vietnamese new generation have to adapt themselves, select the new values which suit their root culture and adjust them into a suitable way for their country and people. (Prichapanyakul, 2017, p.389)

For concrete evidence of the broadened international relations of Vietnam – and for the stated objective of the book – Prapatsorn incorporates the current situation and future prospect of Thai-Vietnamese relations. *Rak nai Man Fon* is the second of six novels in the project *Literature for ASEAN* initiated by the Thai Writers' Association to develop the friendship, understanding and knowledge of Thai people about neighboring countries. Invited to carry out the project, Prapatsorn emphasizes this diplomatic frame in every novel for each country in the region and attains the objective successfully. For example, *Cha Fan thueng Thoe thuk Khuen thi Mi Saeng Dao*<sup>35</sup> (2011) about Indonesia, *Rak nai Man Fon* (2012) about Vietnam, and *China*

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<sup>35</sup> “Dreaming of You every Starry Night”

*Moon* (2014) about Singapore are praised by Boonhok (2014), Prichapanyakul (2017) and (Krakornkul, 2017) respectively for accurately portraying the countries during important historical periods, the characteristics of their societies and peoples, and highlight their good relations with Thailand.

The portrayal of Thai-Vietnamese relations is constructed through Rain and Bao An, the main characters of *Rak nai Man Fon* and their friendship. Bao An, a Vietnamese guide for Thai tourists, represents Vietnamese youth as a cultural ambassador who helps enhance the understanding between the two countries; whereas Rain represents Thai people who know little but are interested in learning more about Vietnam. The two share their ideas and thinking openly, and comfortably comment about themselves and one another's countries through conversations. This indicates more open exchanges and friendly atmosphere between two equal and open-minded partners with mutual trust and respect. When Rain and Bao An part, they promise to keep contact and nurture their relationship. It proves that both Thailand and Vietnam appreciate the importance of one another and their good relationship, especially at a people-to-people level. Prapatsorn's message is delivered through Bao An's opinion: "Vietnam and Thailand have similar basic conditions. Although we have a different history, we get the same lesson. And the two countries will have a closely related future." (p.47)

In conclusion, the Thai contemporary novels above depict the growing path of Thai-Vietnamese relations, which develops from initial suspicion and skepticism to openness and efforts to build and maintain mutual friendship. It also reflects the changes of Vietnam's policy in international relations – from a careful and closed

mindset to the opening and a comfortable perspective. Together with another adaptation of views from ideology-directed to market economy mechanism, it explains the dramatic changes of Vietnam in all areas.

#### **4.4. Chapter discussion and conclusion**

To summarize, Chapter four presents the image of Vietnam in transition to modernity and integration as it is constructed in contemporary Thai writings. The selected books show the image of transitional Vietnam in roughly two aspects – romanticized images of beautiful tranquility and traditionality versus the mirror of a modernized and integrating country. Yet, the picture is never static; dynamics show in each aspect of the image and in the change of the image from more traditionality to more modernity.

The Thai writers that travelled to Vietnam in the early days constructed the image of a newly opened Vietnam from two angles and with contrasting emotions. On the one hand, many described the beauty of the idyllic nature, rich sources of plants and animals, indigenous ways of life, traditional culture and ancient towns; the Vietnamese traditionality raised in the Thai writers a nostalgic admiration and concern that one day it would fade away in Vietnam like it did from Thailand. On the other hand, the Thai writers conveyed their strong disfavor for new changes; their portrayal of modernized and capitalized Vietnam displays anger and a mocking tone, and strong criticism towards a materialist society with new Western-oriented values, corruption, and etcetera in its new exposure to capitalism.

Whereas books of the later phase portrayed more comprehensively and neutrally the obvious shift in all spheres of the country, the writers continue to reflect the role of Vietnam's strong unique culture and traditional values. However, they admit the struggle of traditionality in the globalization climate. They accept the speedy and unescapable changes of Vietnamese society, representing this as a dominant image of current Vietnam. The image of the transitional Vietnam is constructed via changes of the country in a variety of aspects including economic development (physical cityscape changes and improved living conditions of people); socio-cultural changes (modernized ways of life, more social variety and problems, changed values regarding family and individuals like love and marriage, female autonomy, etcetera); as well as adjustment of views and policies (regarding domestic development and international integration).

To a certain extent, the images of Vietnam in the Thai books reflect the self-identification of Thailand, that is, the writers see in Vietnam images of Thailand in the past. Their attitude shows that they experienced this transitional process before in Thailand. Their comparisons between the two countries during the journeys indicate a higher level of development and capitalism in Thailand. On the one hand, the writers see in the traditional beauty of Vietnam the good old days of Thailand; on the other, they complain about bad conditions of facilities and services i.e. much less inconvenience than Thailand. Their narrations of new economic expansion in Vietnam and frequent comparison with Thailand generally indicate a younger and newly opened market economy in the country they visit.

Thanks to this body of contemporary texts, the Thais' old perceptions are gradually weakened; their lack of understanding of Vietnam is supplemented with new knowledge of a country in dynamic transition to development and integration. The images of Vietnam in transition are constructed from the Thai writers' first-hand observations and experiences in various fields and dimensions including life in big cities, in small towns and villages, or changes in physical landscape and infrastructure; other times they are based on stereotypical evidence such as business and tourism boom, more open female clothing, busy traffic, and social problems like corruption. It is noticed that in the Thai writer's image construction, personal accounts or people's stories are frequently narrated, presenting new angles of the Vietnamese society. The fiction group, despite being few in quantity, prove their strengths in providing in-depth details of the picture of Vietnam. In particular through the characters and their backgrounds and lives, behaviors and decisions, personalities and conversations, readers can understand more deeply Vietnam's thinking amidst its own internal renovation and external influences.

The image of Vietnam in transition to development and integration constructed by Thai writers is different and independent from what has been portrayed by public sources. At the state level, the Thai government often emphasizes the importance of cooperation in various regional frames as well as bilateral collaborations between Thailand and Vietnam – especially in commerce and investment. Meanwhile, Thai public media i.e. television and newspapers, pay much attention to Vietnam both as a nearby country and as a co-member of ASEAN. According to the *Special Report of the Thai Journalist Association* (2016), despite its power in shaping the understanding, attitude, perception and perspective of the

society and people, Thai media has certain shortcomings in reporting about ASEAN countries. Specifically, the quality and the continuation of news and information are not good enough; they need to be more multi-dimensional and go into more detail. Chabnak's analysis (2016) of *ASEAN Content in Three Newspapers Bangkok Biz, Khao Sod, and Post Today* gives similar conclusions. The research results point out that the newspapers not only focus mostly on economic aspects and less on socio-culture and security, but are also limited to real-time situations and news about state-level relations and leader exchanges. Contemporary Thai writings about Vietnam certainly provide a more comprehensive picture of the country, for example people's attitude and reaction upon new situations rather than the state view; more socio-cultural insights rather than economic information; narrations of changed cityscape and ways of life rather than indexes and indicators; social problems beneath the rapid economic expansion; and etcetera.

Lastly, the constructing of images of Vietnam in contemporary Thai writings validate the improved Thai-Vietnamese relations. It is not only what is claimed in the texts about the writers' journey to discover an unknown acquaintance, or about the warmer attitude towards one another. It is also the efforts of the Thai writers to present in their books new images of Vietnam from their first-hand experiences that supplement the understanding of Thai readers about Vietnam to be more complete and closer to reality.



## Chapter 5

### VIETNAMESE PEOPLE WITH THE TRAIT OF FIGHTERS

People are a vital part of a country. In mentioning a country, the image of its people usually appears at the same time. Chapters three and four report how Vietnam is seen by Thai writers as a country through two images – one related to wars, another with contemporary changes. Vietnamese people can also be found in those two chapters as supplementary strokes to complete the previous pictures of Vietnam. On the other hand, Vietnamese people make quite a distinguished impression on the authors to be seen in a dim supporting role. Chapter five focuses on the outstanding image of “Vietnamese people with the trait of fighters”.

This chapter will take a close look on the image of Vietnamese people in contemporary Thai writings as fighters against circumstances. In the last poem of *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam* (“Writing about the Golden Land – Vietnam”) collection, Naowarat Pongpaiboon concludes about Vietnam and the Vietnamese as follows: In a country which often has to surf rough storms, people’s hearts are as strong as rock-sand.

The place where rough storms roar — free and wild

The place where people’s hearts are hard as sand

(“Two colored sand beach”, p.249)

This image properly captures the spirit of Vietnamese people facing storms, which indicate both natural and historical obstacles. Vietnam is located by the eastern

margin of the Indochina peninsula by the shelf of the South China Sea, which sends into the country at least ten storms per year. Natural disasters including storms, typhoons and floods kill hundreds, even thousands of people, and cause millions of dollars in damages per year. Vietnamese residents by the coastline have to be ready during the rainy season to tackle with storms or evacuate, and then to repair and recover from the aftermath. Vietnam not only faces a challenging nature, but also experiences a history full of ups and downs. The wars in the modern time with the French and later the Americans may capture most of the international attention, but centuries before that Vietnam had to fight against surrounding powers including the Chinese rule since the second century BC – for more than one-one-thousand years – before Vietnam could establish an independent state in 938; or three Mongol invasions in the thirteenth century; and many smaller clashes. A long line of struggles in its rich history and continuous fight with natural conditions up to present, have steeled the Vietnamese to have a bold and strong spirit.

The image of the Vietnamese as fighters against various circumstances is the third important theme of contemporary Thai writings about Vietnam. In the Thai writers' view, this outstanding characteristic of Vietnamese people exhibits both during wartime and in peace in various aspects: Vietnamese people bravely struggle and maintain their artistry through wars and hardship; they are hard-working; they selfishly cheat whenever having a chance; and they should be sympathized for their background. Apart from describing the Vietnamese as a people or a whole generic group, these books also portray heroic or artistic images from some individuals. Paralleling with such aspects are a variety of the writers' tones: neutral depiction, praising admiration, disapproving criticism, and sympathetic understanding.

### 5.1. Vietnamese people as fighters at wars

The brave trait of Vietnamese people is mentioned by the Thai writers, first, in their bravery in the wars. Some authors base their opinion on the facts and figures they are presented with during their travel; others romanticize the data they have. A few write from personal contacts they have with Vietnamese people.

Similar to the constructing of the image of the Vietnam War, the source of the image of the Vietnamese during the war comes from official data presented by Vietnam. Many travelogues like *Chaliang Tawan Ook* (“Eastern Passageway”), *Sisan haeng Vietnam* (“Colors of Vietnam”), *Liap Thin Phaendin Viet* (“Along the Land of Vietnam”), etcetera portray the Vietnamese as a small people that could win super powers. Historical sites in Vietnam such as war museums or underground tunnels again are employed to depict the brave fight of Vietnamese people through the image of a guerrilla war. If Vinh Moc and the Cu Chi tunnels symbolize the war hazard on this country as analyzed in Chapter three, they at the same time highlight the Vietnamese spirit that helps people to survive and win over such circumstances. The first tunnel system proves their effort to survive through the war. The two authors of *Vietnam Thiao Ao Rueang* (“Travel in Vietnam, Get Knowledge”) are astonished that people in Vinh Moc village did not flee despite more than six-hundred-thousand tons of bombs thrown over their heads during eight years since 1965. They respect the will and courage of sixty families that stayed in stiff and dark underground rooms along the tunnels – just enough for minimal life – for such a long time.

Whereas, Cu Chi Tunnel is symbolized for the spirit to fight against the enemy. The second network of tunnels was dug in Cu Chi district by the Vietnamese

guerrilla troops in order to combat the better supplied American and South Vietnamese forces. It runs extensively under the jungle terrain, covering a distance of more than two-hundred kilometers, playing an important role in guerrilla attacks to win Sai Gon. Pitsanu Sup emphasizes on the strategies the Vietnamese used in the war. He explains further that although they might be different from the face-to-face warfare that Thai people consider honorable, Vietnamese people were compelled to take the guerrilla warfare due to the deadly destruction of the war. On the other hand, he thinks it shows their will to conquer the circumstances in their own way.

Meanwhile, Wut and Suthiphong, the authors of *Vietnam Thiao Ao Rueang* (“Travel in Vietnam, Get Knowledge”) (2011), prove this point through a northwest place of Vietnam – Dien Bien Phu. This name is familiar to many people as the front where Viet Nam won the last battle against the French military in 1954. Despite its important role in the country’s history – and except for French soldiers who came to honor past memories – it is not a popular destination for international tourists. It is the intention of the writers to present their readers with little-known historical aspects of Vietnam such as Hoa Lo Prison Museum – where French authorities imprisoned Vietnamese activists during their colonial rule in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – or Dong Hoi zone at the 17th Parallel – which separated the country into north and south Vietnam during the War.

Visiting Dien Bien Phu<sup>36</sup>, the little valley that witnessed the end of the first Indochina War, the two writers acknowledged the people’s efforts to transport all

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<sup>36</sup> Dien Bien Phu is the historic victory of Vietnam over the colonial French in 1954. It was in late 1953 when French forces occupied Dien Bien Phu Valley in an attempt to cut the nationalist supply lines into Laos and established their firm military fortresses there. The French were confident that their position

weapons into Dien Bien Phu battle. They tell about their journey to Dien Bien Phu on increasingly steep and narrow roads with numerous holes and bends that made their hearts jump. Many times their bus had to stop by the edge of mountains. The writers exclaimed that fifty years after the war was over, roads were still in very bad condition; these roads during the Indochina War must have been much worse, which showed the spirit of the Vietnamese people who climbed them at that time.

Apart from such concrete examples of courage given in many travel writings, this trait of Vietnamese people is romanticized in some other travelogues and especially, in poetry. The poet Naowarat Pongpaiboon also selects Vinh Moc and Cu Chi Tunnels to highlight the spirit of the people here. The admiration for the Vietnamese people's will is visible throughout his collection but is most pronounced in the poem about Cu Chi:

Dig heart to find heart

Heart of the Motherland

Dig to hide all hatred

Deep sorrows from the wars

Clean the bleeding land

Burnt, injured, full of pains

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was undefeatable. They were thus taken by surprise when about fifty-thousand Vietnamese soldiers and much more civilians could surround the base, and started to attack them with heavy artillery arm in March 1954. The Vietnamese had quickly cut all the roads into Dien Bien Phu; and now with a large number of anti-aircraft guns secretly set around the area, they could disable the French airstrip as well as make it difficult for the supplies to be dropped by aircrafts and parachutes. In order to do so, the Vietnamese had to build seventy-kilometer paths through forests and streams and pull two-ton-or-more artillery guns up and down many high mountains. In addition, trenches and tunnels were dug to protect artillery and Viet Minh soldiers as well as to organize attacks and counter-attacks. The Vietnamese victory over the French troops in May 1954 ended one-hundred years of the French colonial rule in Indochina.

This blood of Vietnam  
Running wild for homeland

(“Cu Chi Tunnel”, p.238)

He makes two figurative comparisons: no matter how the enemy tries to chase the Vietnamese with bloody bombs and burning fire, their fighting blood never stops running in this land. Because they have dug so deep to bury all the hardship and hatred of the wars; the only thing revealed is their hearts — the heart of the Vietnamese. The two images of strong heart and never-stop-flowing blood are utilized to highlight the intensity and infinity of Vietnamese courage.

Not only praising the character of Vietnamese people in general, Naowarat also portrays the representative of their nationalist struggle – Ho Chi Minh. Visiting the late Vietnamese president’s hometown, the poet honors his heroism in leading his people into beating the wars and enemies.

... Turn soil into stars shining bright

People fight, country stands solidly

Conquering hundreds of enemies

Ho Chi Minh dedicates life and heart

When homeland falls hard, loses heart

Ho Chi Minh builds up new spirit

Saves country, saves people, saves triumph

Ho Chi Minh brings all to Vietnam

(“Uncle Ho’s house”, p.205)

Reading the verses aloud, we can see how the sound and rhythm of these poems are not romantically melodious, nor jubilant or peaceful as many poems about the beauty of nature and culture in this collection. Instead, Naowarat chooses verse forms with fewer words in a line break, and rhymes in shorter chunks with powerful sounds. As a result, literary techniques help highlight the strong soul of the Vietnamese people.

If we look back Chapter three, we will observe a parallel thread between that and this chapters. As Chapter three portrays the image of Vietnam closely associated with wars, we have seen the Thai writers told about how the savage wars damaged Vietnam and what severe pains, both physically and spiritually, were left to the country and its people. Here in Chapter five we find another side of the same situation: the Vietnamese fought with all they had in the wars for their national independence. The author of *Bon Dao Si Thong* (“On the Golden Star”) (2009, p.113) concludes about Vietnamese fighting spirit: “Vietnam is a country that has determination; Vietnamese people are serious and determined. They put all their physical and spiritual efforts to achieve their target, however difficult it is. The history of liberating their country from the French and the American is a persuasive evidence”.

Again, like in Chapter three (refer to page 112), the hidden discourse by the Vietnamese sources should be taken into consideration. Throughout the long history of Vietnam in which its people had to fight many numerous wars against outside invaders, going to the front and fighting for the homeland has been described as the honorable and righteous duty of a Vietnamese citizen. The Vietnam State employs

numerous ways to describe the glory of heroic fight of the Vietnamese people and emphasizes the just cause of their nation's defense such as through movies, documentaries, war memorials, museums, literature and paintings as well as honoring the leaders and brave soldiers as heroes or historical figures (Tai and others, 2001). With the image of brave and sacrificing Vietnamese people by iconic war sites, battles, victories, metaphors, heroic leaders, the Thai writers have reproduced the Vietnamese official narrative of their people in the Vietnam War and brought their Thai readers a different image of Vietnamese people.

Not only they construct the image of Vietnamese fighters during the wars, the Thai writers continued to prove the people's spirit in dealing with the aftermaths of the wars. This aspect is generated from the writers' observation rather than from the Vietnamese mainstream sources. Wut and Suthiphong War went out of the popular tourist routes to find remnants of war in a village in Central Vietnam even after more than thirty years since the Vietnam War ended in 1975. Surprisingly, Vietnamese people can earn a good living from their creative and positive recycling of the war left-overs:

The job that could earn best income in this town after the war was to collect and export hundreds of tons of weapon remnants per year. Even these days there is a whole street with many retail stores selling such iron scraps. Moreover, people could create a variety of appliances and toys from cartridge cases and bombshells. (*Vietnam Thiao Ao Rueang*, p.152)



This proves that not only during wartime do Vietnamese people have to fight, but they continue their struggle against the remaining consequences. However hard the struggle is, they get used to and overcome their circumstances.

Through individual stories, some other contemporary Thai writings portray the enormous effort of Vietnamese people to overcome their psychological and emotional pains from war. The scar of the wars to some individuals seems unbearable, like the story of Kim Phuc, the “napalm girl,” as told in *Liap Thin Phaendin Viet* by Niphatphon (refer to page 108). On the other side, her story also reflects the human aspect of the Vietnam War and proves the prolonged fight the Vietnamese went through even after the war was over. Kim Phuc had to struggle with her physical pain, and above all, with her anguish and anger. In the beginning, she hated the photo that captured her moment of torment and that embarrassed her. And she struggled with the publicity that surrounded her personal sufferings. After a long struggle, she came to realize that the picture that captured her terror also recorded a historic moment and war crime. She stopped escaping it but worked with it to talk about the value of peace. Until in the end, when she had a chance to meet the pilot who bombed her village that day, she could forgive her previous enemy.

Likewise, “forgiveness” is what Vietnamese people in general do after the war. Niphatphon tells that Vietnamese parents nowadays choose to teach the younger generations to remember how hard it was in history to protect their country, not to stress on old hatred.

Vietnamese children are taken to this museum to learn what previous generations had to face. They are taught history to understand how hard their

ancestors fought to protect the country so that they are aware of the need to preserve their land, not to have hatred against anyone. (*Liap Thin Phaendin Viet*, p.75)

According to Somlak Wongrat, this ability to forgive is considered part of the Vietnamese strong spirit. She concludes that the Vietnamese prefer to forgive and move on than to stick with the past. Quoting a moral principle “We never forget, but we forgive,” she asserts that Vietnamese people do not forget the casualties of more than two million five hundred thousand people, but they are willing to forgive those who caused such loss. (*Vietnam Chitklai Muan Klaihang*, (“Vietnam, so Close yet so Far”), 2016, p.158)

Prachakhom Lunachai of *Vietnam Phaendin Lang Songkhram nai Khwamngam lae Khwammai* (“Vietnam after the Wars, a Land of Beauty and Meaning”) (2014) keeps a romantic perspective in viewing the recovery of the Vietnamese after wars. He highlights the Vietnamese attitude of moving forward and the ability to put the past aside and focus on the present. As red is used for the background of the Vietnamese flag as the symbol of the blood that has been shed for the land, he spells out the meaning hidden behind it. Vietnamese people “understand that wars come from conflict; conflict results in insecurity. They learn to overcome all of these. This experience gives them the lesson to unify into one nation in their common love for the country” (p.131). Thus far, we have seen “to forgive” and “to move-on” are considered by Thai authors two aspects of one character – the ability of Vietnamese people to fight and overcome the difficult circumstances after the war.

The short story *Samphanthaphap* (“The relationship”) by Thatsanawadi also chooses a post-war setting to address the spirit of Vietnamese people. A Thai teacher working in Vietnam was invited to a student’s house, where he learnt that her uncle died in the Vietnam War against the Thai troops (read more detail in page 119). His uncomfortable and guilty feelings were much relieved when the student's family still hosted him warmly. This story points out that the Vietnamese people were sensible and did not let the past have an effect on their attitude towards a kind teacher who devoted himself to their children and who displayed his sincere regret for something he did not cause. Thatsanawadi constructs the image of the Vietnamese that are willing to forgive and forget the past; they focus on the good they have. With this ending, the writer wants to propose a hopeful view of the future Thai-Vietnamese relationship in which both sides show their effort to erase their old rivalry, heal the pains and look forward to build the young generations.

These compliments on Vietnamese positiveness and forward-looking ability once again project the way the Thai writers self-identify and construct the image of Thai people. Different from the reflection in economic aspect, in which Thailand is viewed to be more advanced, the Thai praise of Vietnamese people seems to portray Thai people’s problems. In the following extract from *Yon Yuan* (“Watching Vietnam”) (2010), Pisanu Janvitan mentions the pride and love of Vietnamese people for Vietnam to criticize the actions of some Thai groups that did harm to Thailand to achieve their political targets.

I think, first of all, Vietnamese people have strong determination. The fact that they could win over the colonial French and drive away the American

makes them very confident. Nowadays Vietnam is one among only six communist countries in the world and can achieve high economic growth. This confidence becomes the power of their people.

Lastly, Vietnamese people in my view are deeply aware of the value of nation – of country – because they have passed many wars. The unification of north and south Vietnam was paid with enormous difficulty and pain, and the lives of millions of people. I do not think Vietnamese people have a greater love for Vietnam than Thai people have for Thailand; but they treasure their country and nationalism. Although they may hate their political competitors or have personal envy against each other, as far as I know the Vietnamese, I firmly believe they will never shut down the streets, airport or government offices. They will not dishonor their own country by closing down an international summit, leaving a bad impression on foreign guests and the media. The crucial thing is whatever conflict they have against each other, they can still cooperate for the prosperity of their country. (*Yon Yuan*, p.281-282)

The book *Yon Yuan* was written when Pitsanu Janvitan was acting as the Thai Ambassador in Vietnam. His considerable understanding of Vietnam from work experience and direct contacts with Vietnamese people help provide proper explanations about the Vietnamese spirit. At the same time, the comparison and Pitsanu's tone reveal his implicit sadness about the divergence occurring in Thai society, resulting in the unrest that took place between late 2000 and early 2010. From

his elaboration on the Vietnamese solidarity, we can infer much of his worry about the unsettled domestic situation in Thailand.

## 5.2. Vietnamese people as fighters in everyday life

Apart from the image of Vietnamese people as fighters during wartime taken from Vietnam's sources, their fighting spirit is also elicited in their everyday life to be portrayed in Thai books. For example, Surasawat sees a determined will in their daily life, especially in the way vehicles move continually and rapidly on the street with maximum vigor. In his eyes, Vietnamese people have a “‘move on’ lifestyle – heading fast and forward” (*Vietnam Song Rot*, p. 29). The strong spirit of the Vietnamese is described in such aspects as their art creating and being very hard working, as well as its negative manifestation.

*Vietnamese people have artistic soul even in hardship.*

Not only in fighting, winning and overcoming wars is the Vietnamese spirit visible; other fields like literature and arts also reflect their great devotion. Moreover, when describing the Vietnamese in times of peace, the Thai writers seem to focus more on individuals rather than a whole group. The individuals they refer to are certainly those in the fields the writers are interested in. Thus, the Thai poet Naowarat Pongpaiboon pays respect to the Vietnamese poet Han Mac Tu, who was recognized since the age of eighteen for excellent poems. It is a pity that he soon caught leprosy, an infectious disease that causes severe, disfiguring skin sores and nerve damage. Because of the terrifying damaged appearance which was incurable at that time,

leprosy patients were isolated and treated with humiliation and stigmas. Han Mac Tu's tragic life consisted of many conflicts: a young intellectual suffering from endless, bitter physical and emotional pains, a strong character but sensitive soul, the turn from romantic poems in his early creative life into a dark phase, so-called "crazy poetry". Despite the life crisis, ten years from 1930 to 1940 – when he died at the age of twenty-eight years old – was considered his creative "golden" time in which he composed countless beautiful verses about youth, friendship, love and life. Being a talented poet himself, Naowarat was deeply moved by Han's story and his dedication to poetry.



Write world, write love from heart  
 Great values, true love for language  
 Strong heart, grand soul – like dragon  
 Forever ever – goodness and beauty  
 Stringing six sounds together  
 Rhythm with eight words another row  
 Six-Eight rhyme<sup>37</sup>, verse by verse  
 Compose beauty – Vietnamese Poetry

(“Pay respect to a poet”, p.155)

Niphatphon, a professional writer of documentaries and short stories, interested in history, philosophy, humanities and arts, is also impressed by

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<sup>37</sup> The adoration of Vietnamese literature and the poet Han inspires Naowarat to use the Vietnamese “*luc bat*” or “six-eight” verse form. In this identical form of Vietnamese poetic convention, a verse consists of two lines, an upper line of six words and another lower line of eight words. Rhythm is created from a main rhyme between the upper sixth and the lower sixth sounds (and some more complex rules of tones). Although Naowarat's rhymes do not really meet up the Vietnamese rule, this shows his recognition of the noteworthy Vietnamese poetry.

Vietnamese art. She spends most of her second book about Vietnam – *Liap Thin Phaendin Viet* telling about Vietnamese artists. These Vietnamese artists include Nguyen Gia Tri, one of the four greatest painters of Vietnamese modern art, and a couple painters Mr. Viet and Mrs. Nga. The stories about the life and creativity of Master Tri are told by Mr. Viet, his student. The descendant emphasizes on his master's spirit in fighting for freedom and creating art works. Graduating from the French's Indochina College of Fine Arts in 1936, Master Tri succeeded in combining Western techniques and Oriental aestheticism to portray Vietnamese landscape through oil and lacquer painting. At the same time, he also took part in nationalist movements and used his paintings to criticize South Vietnamese government. Arrested and put to jail by the French authority, he kept creating art; his great works were so impressive that a French female prisoner agreed to be his model and the French supervisor stopped torturing him.

Mr Viet remembered keenly all of Master Tri's stories and lessons and applied them well in his life. Being an arts student, he volunteered to go to the fronts to serve his nation. Returning from wars as a veteran, he inherited his teacher's laborious spirit in painting and became a famous lacquer artist of Vietnam. Even more interesting was the case of Mr Viet's wife – Mrs. Nga. She had spent her whole life taking care of her husband and children until her mid fifties when those family responsibilities lessened, then a decision changed her life. At that time, she had also absorbed art long enough from Mr Viet's work, so she decided to become an artist herself. She struggled a lot at first but kept trying until receiving recognition for her silk paintings.

Throughout the book *Liap Thin Phaendin Viet*, Niphatphon openly shows her respect to the three mentioned Vietnamese artists for their continual devotion to art in spite of many life obstacles. It shows the constantly powerful creativity in Vietnamese art whether it is during or after wars.

Another writer, Surasawat, is an arts professor of Chiangmai University with many written books on traveling and art hubs. He was absolutely keen on learning about Vietnamese art during both of his trips, one in 1995 and the other nine years later in 2004. He was impressed by the quality and diversity of Vietnamese fine art, especially in the museums and galleries in Hue and Hanoi. The beautiful royal music and diverse folk songs, as well as high-quality handicrafts and creative art works he had the chance to see in Hue persuaded Surasawat how “Vietnamese society is never weak in terms of arts and culture although Vietnam had to fight the longest wars in Indochina”. His admiration rose more when he came to Hanoi, which he called “the city of art museums and galleries”:

Pictures in the Contemporary Collection of the museum as well as those in the galleries, exhibitions, and independent art studios in Hanoi all reflect the creative energy of Hanoi artists, not a bit less than Hue ones... This again emphasizes the strength of Vietnamese culture that has developed despite countless obstacles through centuries until present. You readers will surely agree with me if you have a chance to see with your own eyes the contemporary art works in the Vietnam Museum of Fine Arts in Hanoi, which seems to offer the miniature of the world art. (*Vietnam Song Rot*, p.75)



Surasawat discovers that painting, poetry, music and indigenous arts helps Vietnamese people stay strong during wars. In other words, creating arts is a kind of weapon contributing to Vietnamese victory over enemies in the war. At the same time, these art works reflect the fighters' spirit in the Vietnamese soul. When the war is over, their continuous attempts are put in social and cultural fields including arts.

Vietnamese art and culture truly reflect the spirit of the fighters. Until these days Vietnamese artists and craftsmen always show their enthusiasm and their freedom in arts through their creation. Vietnamese people might have been defeated in the past if they had lacked their heart-felt poems or melodious folk songs. Those are their heart and soul, part of their love for the country, and an important weapon in their fight. (ibid, p.80)

Surasawat clarifies that their spirit, i.e. the self-sacrifice and art ideology inherited from one generation to another, is a key success factor behind Vietnamese cultural creation. Furthermore, it is the true inspiration and motive for two fights of Vietnamese people: war combats for independence and the endless struggle to achieve a higher social standing. The latter has even truer meaning than the former, remarks Surasawat.

In summary, it has been shown in this section another demonstration of Vietnamese trait as fighters. They not only desire national independence but also have deep love for art and culture, and aspire to personal freedom to develop in full. Their laborious attempts in creation and in their daily life are no less than their struggle through wars.

*Vietnamese people are very hard-working.*

A very outstanding remark that Thai people see in the Vietnamese is them being very hard-working. This is also one thing that all the Thai writers agree with. For evidence they often refer to how early the Vietnamese get to work or open their shops, how many hours they work per day, or how busy and bustling the traffic and people are on the streets. Somlak Wongrat, for example, tells in *Vietnam Chitklai Muan Klaihang* that shops in Hanoi open at cock-crow and only close at about 9-10 pm. Whether it is because of demand for trading, labour, the need of nation-building or any other reason, the diligence of Vietnamese people is definitely obvious. To support her observation that Vietnamese people have more discipline and work harder, she refers to the higher results of Vietnamese students compared with Thai in international English competitions.

Meanwhile, Surasawat is so amazed at the fact that Vietnamese people get up and go to work so early in the morning. Once during his stay in Hue, he and other members of his tourist groups saw streets crowded with people, bicycles and motorcycles since half past five, so early that they thought their watches must be out of order. The author of *Vietnam Song Rot* adds further information that Vietnamese people do not take their rest early in the evening – young people in big cities go to extra classes after work to learn English and other skills.

Prachakhom tells his own experience when he even challenged himself to get up at half past four to capture the image of Vietnamese basket boats at the time they went out fishing. But he failed because those fishermen worked from mid night. The time he thought early enough was still hours later than the start of a working day for

Vietnamese fishermen. The sandbank full of footsteps, ropes and fishing nets indicated their work from midnight. The writer of *Vietnam Phaendin Lang Songkhram nai Khwamngam lae Khwammai* himself has to overcome many life obstacles, including working as a crew member on fishing ships for eight years, before he finally can achieve his dream of becoming a writer. That is why he shares lots of understanding and sympathy with the hardship of Vietnamese fishers. Their industriousness is made vivid with the image of “fishermen soaked to the skin in sea water and sweat – both salty alike” (p.110).

Whereas, Prapatsorn observes the rush in the city after having had rain to point out how Vietnamese people make full use of time and do not wish to waste any minute:

The sky was brightened with sunshine again. Down on the streets, the Old Quarter of Hanoi was brightened with colorful motorbikes from various brands starting their activities again. They rode through rain puddles, paying the least care about the water and mud, dirt and litter from ducts...The City quickly woke up from the quietness after only some minutes. It was now busy and bustling with people and traffic that went out for traveling, shopping or doing activities to compensate for the wasted time during the rain. (*Rak nai Man Fon*, p.19)

Another evidence of Vietnamese practical mind in utilizing their resources is given by Khamsing Srinawak in *Khoam Hanghoen thi yu Tit Rua Ban*. The writer describes how Vietnamese people deploy every piece of land available for vegetable planting near Noi Bai International Airport in Hanoi. Along two sides of runways are

fields of cucumber, beans, lemongrass and many other vegetables. Despite that his comparison with the golf courses surrounding Don Muang Airport is not reasonable enough, in my opinion, what he emphasizes is the laboriousness of the Vietnamese.

Not only Khamsing, some other writers also reflect on Thailand from their observation of hard-working Vietnamese. Wanrawi exclaims “while the diligence index of the Vietnamese is higher than any other Asian country, the national award of the most hard-working should be given to Vietnamese women” (*Vietnam Klang Phayyu Fon*, p. 225). They work so hard that Wanrawi feels lucky to be a Thai woman for not being obliged to be hard-working all the time. Surasawat, after being amazed at how early Vietnamese people wake up and go to work, makes a metaphor to express his worry for his people. Vietnam and Thailand are in the same time zone, hence, at the same time that Thai people are still in their sleep, Vietnamese early birds have begun their new day. As a result, there could be no worms left for the Thais; in other words, slower people might lose good opportunities for the faster.

Apart from travel writings, fiction also depicts this trait of the Vietnamese which are represented by women. Thatsanawadi’s short story *Yat Nguera khong Mae* (“Mother’s Drops of Sweat”) draws a typical picture of traditional Vietnamese women. Similar versions of the mother in this short story can easily be found in reality in Vietnam as well as in Vietnamese literature. Widowed with a child, she was poor and had to work hard to earn a living. Every day she walked to a garden to buy vegetables and then walked to a market to sell them. She was always slower than other vendors since they had bicycles. Along the way she was tortured by tiredness, heat, hunger, and most terrifyingly to street vendors, municipal police, who tried to

regulate street vending by chasing them away. The only reason for the mother's brave endurance of hardship was her dear son. She could sacrifice all she had for his well-being, his study for a better future from their only bicycle to all the money she could earn. The mother represents the old generation of Vietnamese people – having only their labour to fight with poverty and hardship but fighting industriously their whole life. She also represents Vietnamese women who work hard and sacrifice all to her family.

So far we have examined many examples of how the Thai writers look at Vietnamese people as fighters against any circumstances. In the above evidence, these authors point out directly that the Vietnamese are bold and courageous; that they do not surrender to enemies or situations but keep going forward. On the other hand, the Vietnamese fighter trait is also portrayed in other less direct angles, such as they are willing to forgive the past; they work very hard for a better life; they create art works in spite of wars and hardship. Despite occasional concern of the Vietnamese having greater diligence than the Thais, the Thai writers generally express admiration. And whether the Vietnamese spirit is explicitly or implicitly described, its portrayal is constructed with positive attitude from the Thai writers.

However, this characteristic has its negative side, which will be elaborated hereafter.

*Vietnamese people are cheating and benefit-seeking.*

This part will take an insight into the conflict in which Vietnamese people – in the eyes of Thais – on the one hand, work hard to carry on, yet, on the other hand they

cheat a lot as a shortcut to seek personal benefits. It is a popular warning among Thai tourists to be careful when traveling to Vietnam; otherwise they could be cheated easily. The Thai writers give out a lot of evidence, both from their own experience and that of their acquaintances, to prove that it is not just a rumor. The most infamous concerns taxi drivers and drivers of other serviced transportations like cyclos or buses.

The two authors of *Vietnam Thiao Ao Rueang* put it simply “if you are not cheated then you have not really been to Vietnam”. Wut and Suthiphong met a few dishonest drivers during their trip across Vietnam. Once, a cyclo man agreed to five dollars to ride both of them, but at the end of the ride he asked for ten dollars, insisting that five was the fare for each passenger (p.59). In the very first minutes from arriving in Vietnam, the taxi driver that took them from Noi Bai airport to their hotel requested them to pay two-hundred-thousand dong, the equivalent to twelve dollars, although they had already agreed at the fare of ten dollars (p.31). Once more, they had to bitterly pay much more than the fare should be due to the cheating taxi meter. Having to pay a fare of nearly seven kilometers for the actual distance of one and a half kilometers, the two men felt like being “bloodily slashed” (p.48). From their experience, the two writers advise tourists not to take new taxis near tourism sites because those taxis target to deceive the fare from tourists.

Khamsing Srinawk also became a victim of Vietnamese taxis. A taxi driver tried to charge him more than the negotiated price, claiming that the destination hotel was out of the city centre. The writer later came to know that his hotel was, in fact, not farther away from the city centre. In fact, they would need to go some kilometers more from his hotel to reach the city centre. Nevertheless, Khamsing was not too

angry with the driver. The writer thought of it with a sense of humor, comparing him with Sri-Thanonchai in Thai literature – the driver knew how to play a trick by using confusing expressions.

Most of the victims were not that easy going, however, like Sirisak of *Bon Dao Si Thong*, Niphatphon of *Lao Rueang Mueang Viet*, the two authors of *Vietnam Thiao Ao Rueang*. At first, some doubted the validity of the warnings before their trips. When friends and acquaintances, including local Vietnamese, advised them to stay alert all the time and beware of taxi drivers and shop sellers, they thought those must be exaggerated.

Before leaving, Hung warned me over and over again not to trust Vietnamese serviced motor bikers, taxi drivers and shop vendors for they could play many tricks, and advised me to bargain down seventy per cent when shopping. I thought to myself “Are you making it up?” He continued his caution, telling me to make deals clearly before I would use any rent or hire service. If someone on the streets ask me something, I should not reply but fasten my pace and walk away. I listened in confusion thinking “Are you serious, Hung?...We come to travel and have fun.” (*Bon Dao Si Thong*, p.21-22)

Then their own experience of being cheated by serviced drivers changed their mind and attitude.

The tricks (such as using ambiguous and inconsistent deals in regard to currency, the number of passenger or the route) may not be very serious but do annoy

tourists, leaving a bad impression of being taken advantage of. Niphatphon's comparison can illustrate this negative feeling.

Vietnamese people are unyielding, hard-working, responsible people, like the Japanese. But the difference between the two is that while Japanese people in general are honest and strictly obey regulations, Vietnamese people, especially the men working in tourism, are the opposite. They commit fraud by any means – cheating on change, overpricing goods, substituting small banknotes for more valuable similar ones. In short, they take the most advantage of tourists for their personal benefit. (*Lao Rueang Mueang Viet*, p.109)

For some, this kind of profit-seeking and irresponsible service may shadow their whole trip. The author of *Bon Dao Si Thong* told: “We were in a bad mood all the way to Co Loa...The dislike for Vietnamese people started to fill our heart like black smoke. I tried to take deep breaths but could not balance the mood” (p.43). Before that, their taxi driver intentionally took them the wrong way and asked them to pay twice as much as the meter showed, saying that it was in US dollars instead of Vietnam dong. Being cheated and the bad manner of the cheater made them break out into anger and react violently.

For others, the irritation and tediousness was so much that it turned ridiculous and comical. When Niphatphon and her friends took serviced motorbikes from the Minh Mang tomb back to their hotel, they were cheated with the wrong change. They tried to make the matter clear but refused to pay more. In the end, failing to communicate, they walked away from the surrounding crowd of drivers in weariness.



“At last, we cannot avoid being cheated... We feel so tired and irritated but amused at the same time. This is crazy! Do we have to beware every minute here?” (*Lao Rueang Mueang Viet*, p.109)

Adding to this tragicomedy feeling is Wut and Suttipong’s amusing anecdote about a monument in the centre of Hanoi. It is the monument of Lenin, a well-known Soviet communist theorist, whose philosophy was applied to the Vietnamese political model. Both the statue and the small park where it is situated are named after him. The statue is of Lenin in standing posture, his right hand holding the middle edge of his suit while the left hand is clutching the tail of the other flap. This appearance allows the two writers to make an ironic joke that he was carefully protecting his wallet from being stolen by the Vietnamese.

One important fact to consider here is that almost all contact Thai travelers have with Vietnamese people is with those in tourism and services. Who they meet often includes tourist guides – if they bought package tours – and/or in many cases, taxi drivers, hotel receptionists, staff of bus and rail stations, stall sellers and street vendors, etcetera – if they travelled on their own. According to Moeller (2011), in the thesis *Thai Attitudes towards Vietnam as shown in Contemporary Travel Writing*, few authors of these travelogues have in-depth contact with other groups of Vietnamese people. Besides, many factors such as varying degrees in openness to Vietnam, different travel styles and itineraries “are of extreme relevance and can influence attitudes both positively and negatively” (p.81).

Other few admirable individuals that appear in the books are Vietnamese national heroes and heroines that the authors collect information on from museum

exhibitions, books and other secondary sources. Some writers such as Niphatphon or Pitsanu, due to their purpose of doing research or their long stay in Vietnam, have direct and close contacts with Vietnamese painters, professors and teachers. These intellectuals provide the writers with valuable information, stories and explanations that help to create an insightful understanding of and friendly empathy with Vietnamese people.

Many Thai travelers are not that lucky; the Vietnamese in the hospitality service industry are not as hospitable as their job should be. Their cheating and impolite manner confirm what the tourists have heard of before their trips. Anyway, though the image of cheating Vietnamese here applies to many tourism and service personnel, it should not represent the whole of Vietnamese people.

After all, most of the writers try to find out the reasons to explain this bad trait of the Vietnamese. Their answers bring more understanding and sympathy toward the people. Prachakom views that the problem lies in competitiveness. In serviced transportation, for example, they compete with each other without any effective system to manage or control them.

The driver followed us since we got out of the station. He rode his motorbike beside us along the way and tried to persuade us to buy tickets...This situation results from Vietnamese transportation system in which they compete with each other freely, and the fastest ones win more customers. It should not be called a system indeed. Pai told me to beware of them when traveling in Vietnam. "Trust neither an unknown road nor an

unknown person.” (*Vietnam Phaendin Lang Songkhram nai Khwamngam lae Khwammai*, p. 84-85)

Somlak Wongrat (*Vietnam Chitklai Muan Klaihang*, p.95) agrees and explains further that this trait of competing in work and business, as well as their tricks and cheats, is the result of thousands of years of Vietnamese people striving for existence. In the same line is Wanrawi’s opinion. She tries to reason why Vietnamese people are cheating in the part *Thammai Khon Vietnam Khi-kong* (“Why do Vietnamese people cheat?”) of the book *Vietnam Klang Pha-yu Fon* (p. 13-16). She remarks that war experience has taught Vietnamese people not to compromise since in war, victory should be seized exclusively. Consequently, they do not accept mutual benefit but always try to get obtain as much and as fast as possible. In terms of business and trading, the Vietnamese believe in “no commerce, no richness” and “no cheating, no selling”.

Prachakhom, after returning from his journey in Vietnam, also tries to study more about the country’s history and culture. He at last finds out the defense from history for the Vietnamese selfish behavior he witnessed before. His collected data shows Vietnam has experienced many harsh historical periods under the domination of superpowers and imperialist nations that cruelly massacred, exploited and ruined it. In his opinion, as long as Vietnamese people now have full independence on their land, they have the right to obtain benefits for themselves. They should be understood rather than blamed for the consequences of outsiders’ invasions. (*Vietnam Phaendin Lang Songkhram nai Khwamngam lae Khwammai*)

Another writer that later changes his attitude towards Vietnamese people is Teeraparb. He concludes his trip that Vietnam is a good destination for tourists but Vietnamese people's have a tough and harsh manner compared with their neighbors. Having a chance to watch a movie about the tragic fate of a Vietnamese woman in the Vietnam War, he realizes that it is unfair to hastily judge people from a short journey without knowing their background and history. He is regretful for saying so after having the chance to watch the movie *Heaven and Earth* about the fate of a girl in the Vietnam War. He realizes that Vietnamese people have suffered so much to survive until these days. "Today we come just for a while and jump to the conclusion that they don't have a gentle personality – it's a too careless and hasty comment" (*Xin chao Vietnam*, p.206).

It is obvious that the understanding of the Thai writers about Vietnamese people depends a great deal on whether their contact with them is close or brief. When they have a chance to get to know the Vietnamese, or go out of the popular tourist tracks, they discover more about their nature and personality. Sirisak, the author of *Bon Dao Si Thong*, and his friend went to Co Loa, the capital of an ancient kingdom of Vietnam. They were in a bad mood after being cheated by the taxi driver who took them to the bus station. But an old lady in Co Loa and her kindness drove the bad feelings away and moved their hearts.

The authors of *Sisan haeng Vietnam* tell about their encounter with an elderly auntie. They met her on a bus to Hoi An in a data-collecting trip. The auntie invited them home to learn about the ancestor-worshipping ceremony of her family. The whole family welcomed them and invited them for lunch, moving them with their

hospitality. They named the nice experience “friendship from a stranger” (p.133). Being journalists and documentary writers, the two also had the possibility to understand Vietnamese people better than tourists do. Another interesting experience shows how short-stayed tourists might have a false perception of local people. The first day she ate pho, the price was nine-thousand Vietnam dong (about thirty baht at that time), which they realized was higher than what other customers paid. The next day they still came to the same shop for its tasty flavor; surprisingly she was charged only seven-thousand. After that when she became a frequent customer, the shop seller only charged her six-thousand like a local Vietnamese and even taught her to count the change. Similar stories happened with other shops that sold bun, custard cake and minced pork, either with discount price or with more quantity served. She commented “package tourists that fast come fast go could never enjoy this nice treat, and friendship must be built with time” (p.44).

To Niphatphon, her experience did not simply give a good feeling but helped change her old misunderstanding about Vietnamese people. Once during her field work in Central Vietnam, a female rice seller charged her only food but served her rice and cake for free, the reason was that she did not often have Thai customers, and that she and the writer were of “the same [skin] color” and “the same blood”.

What she said was short but could melt the cultural difference between us as well as memories from my childhood about frightening Vietnamese...In that moment I almost cried when thinking of the hatred and bad attitude Thai people have had towards Vietnamese people for a long time...But the Vietnamese woman in front of me was smiling gently and kindly to a Thai...

She, with her kindness and a few words, had overcome the historical border and erased the “otherness” I had felt about Vietnamese people in my heart.

(*Lao Rueang Mueang Viet*, p.136-8).

### 5.3. Chapter discussion and conclusion

This chapter has analyzed the image of Vietnamese people with the spirit of fighters in contemporary Thai writings from the 1990s to 2015. This is a new distinctive image of Vietnamese people in Thai writings resulting from the fact that the writers at present have visited the country and had contact with its people. In Thai writings of the previous periods, geographical distance and political opposition were the obstacles for the writers to get access to primary sources about Vietnamese people in Vietnam. Consequently, Thai writers and researchers studied the Vietnamese migrant communities in Thailand instead (more detail in page 28 and 73). When the context changed and Thai-Vietnamese relations improved, the Vietnamese refugees were gradually accepted as a part of Thai society, Vietnamese people in Vietnam have become the mainstream group for the Thais to learn about the country and its people.

Dynamics also show in the construction of the image of Vietnamese people in contemporary Thai writings. The portrayal of their fighting spirit takes form from images in war time to peace time, from Vietnamese mainstream source to the writers' own observations. Apart from the brave, strong personality displayed in their fight in wartime, the Thai writers can find it in a variety of aspects in the Vietnamese life at peace. It is demonstrated both positively such as their courage and determination,

their artistic and sensitive souls, and their laboriousness, as well as negatively in their selfishness and cheating.

This image fills an essential part to the Thai understanding of Vietnam about Vietnamese people as common individuals with good and bad traits. Except for the fight of Vietnamese people at war which was mainly presented by local mainstream sources, the image of the Vietnamese is constructed from real contacts between the writers and the people they are friends with or meet in their journeys. The constructing of images depends on the length and intimacy of the acquaintance, for example, brief encounters with advantageous taxi or cyclo drivers often cause irritation and anger on the chawed party, interviews and acquaintance with Vietnamese friends give more reflection on their lives, while fictional stories reveal an insightful understanding of their thinking and feeling.

In addition to the outstanding strong spirit they have, several other images of the Vietnamese can be noticed. First, Vietnamese people are seen by some writers as relatives of Thai people when they (like Teeraparb, Sirisak, Khamsing) met Tai ethnic groups such as black and white Thais in the northern provinces of Vietnam. Besides, in general Vietnamese women are praised for their beauty, elegance and kindness while Vietnamese men are described negatively with bad habits and manners. Another image is one of Vietnamese people as a group who easily adapts to new situations and actively develop their life and country like which has been indirectly analyzed in Chapter four.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the images of Vietnam constructed by the Thai writers reveal a reflection of Thailand. In this chapter, in portraying the

Vietnamese people, the Thai writers express their admiration for the Vietnamese trait of being determined and hard-working which Thai people probably have less. Not only reflecting about people, these books also give us some understanding of the social and political issues of Thai society at that time. For example, Somlak Wongrat in mentioning the spirit of Ho Chi Minh, a Vietnamese hero had a reason to complain on the leaders of her country. She wished to have leaders who loved the country and worked devotedly to Thailand. Her wish implied the dissatisfaction with the current Thai leadership.

I visited Ho Chi Minh mausoleum in Ba Dinh Square in Hanoi...  
 During the visit I made a wish: “May my country have more people that truly love our homeland and voluntarily do good to its people like the leader of this country!” (*Vietnam Chitklai Muan Klaihang*, p.159)

Similarly, Prachakhom satirized some senior but immature Thai leaders through the image of the Vietnamese elderly. He respectfully described an old kind-looking woman taking care of her garden, admiring that the elder generation in Vietnam are well aware of what is most suitable to their age, pleased to transfer the leading positions to their descendants. This image was used to contrast with some Thai bureaucrats, or Congress Representatives and Senators who did not let go of power.

The Vietnamese elderly know themselves well. When they get weak, they do not cause bad discourses but are willing to pass their responsibilities to other people who are better suited to manage...In the meantime, chaos is occurring in some government agencies of my beloved country. A senior



official still wants to stay in her position after retirement since she does not think anyone can be good enough to replace her. And not only her, many other officials and senators also have the same crazy thoughts. (*Vietnam Phaendin Lang Songkhram nai Khwamngam lae Khwammai*, p. 60)

Another time, what he witnessed in Vietnam triggered the thought that the materialized lifestyle of his country was all illusion. The scene of Vietnamese fishermen laboriously doing their daily fishing on the beach was full of liveliness and hope in Prachakhom's eyes. Simple labor without any modern tools was actually the essence of life, which his fellow Thais had forgotten when following materialized luxuries. Praising the work of the Vietnamese was the writer's way to emphasize on the life illusions of modernized Thais that might cause serious domestic misunderstanding and conflict.

I feel the smells of sweat, life and hope very clearly at the fishing pier. It is the beauty full of good meaning. In an uncapitalized society, Vietnamese people live with tangible things that can serve their daily life. Vietnam is different from countries that are fascinated with luxury and materialism. When people are driven for untrue values such fame and money like illusory fog, they can end up in killing each other before realizing its fallacy. (ibid, p.113)

It is interesting that Thai self-reflection from constructing the image of Vietnamese people conveys sympathy and respect to the Vietnamese. At the same time, it gives a hint of the fear and insecurity of Thai people about themselves in comparison with the potentials of Vietnamese people.

## Chapter 6

### CONCLUSION

This dissertation *The Construction of Images of Vietnam in Contemporary Thai Writings* has made an analysis of the images of Vietnam and the process of constructing such images in the scope of contemporary Thai books from the 1990s to 2015. Nineteen writings subjected to this study include five fiction books and fourteen travelogues. Close reading figures out the blurring line between the fiction, poems and the travel writings as they all reflect, explicitly or implicitly, on a journey to discover a neighboring country and to understand more its people. Although the texts differ in detail due to the particular characteristics of their genres, they agree in major images. In other words, fiction and non-fiction supplement one another in constructing a complete picture of Vietnam. Textual analysis brings out the following significant findings:

#### **Images of Vietnam in contemporary Thai writings**

Reality-based portrayal of Vietnam consists of a system of images about the country and its people which include a review of the Vietnam War, construction of the open and changing Vietnam from traditionality to modernity, and recognition of the Vietnamese as fighters in any circumstances. Each of these three major images is comprised from the complex process of construction from many angles and aspects.

The first outstanding image of Vietnam is that of a country of wars. It is initially constructed from old memories and past impressions of the Thai writers about

the Vietnam War. The recall unveils negative images of a war mediated by western media, of a close-by communist threat demonized in the polarized context of the Cold War era, and some scarce personal experience of Vietnam and Vietnamese people. They are soon replaced by the writer's first-hand experience in Vietnam with first, the image of a tough war of national defense that has caused severe material damages and intangible losses. This aspect is constructed from statistics, iconic war sites, war remnants and people's stories from the Vietnamese mainstream display. In effort of adding more dimensions to the picture, the Thai writers also tell individual stories highlighting war and post-war emotions of the Vietnamese people, employ literary techniques to construct romanticized images of a brave fight for peace, and use the image of the Vietnam War as a civil war to warn Thai people about domestic conflict.

From the past, the Thai writers move on to portray the second image of Vietnam at present – a country in transition to modernity and integration. The Thai books written in the early days of Vietnam's opening emphasize the beauty of idyllic nature, rich sources of plants and animals, indigenous ways of life, traditional culture and ancient towns and by contrast, signs of approaching capitalism. The attitudes displayed together with the portrayal are nostalgia of romanticized traditionality and strong criticism against a materialized society. More recent books portray the active transition process of Vietnam to modernity and integration through a variety of aspects, like vigorous economic, infrastructure and tourism development, socio-cultural changes regarding lifestyles and values, adjustment of views and policies toward domestic development and outward integration. This image of Vietnam changing and opening is accepted as a matter of course. The dynamics of the image

and the writers' attitude in constructing it reflect the active transitional process of the country.

If the first two images portray Vietnam from the past to its present, the last picture focuses on a substantial part of the country — its people. In the eyes of Thai people, Vietnamese people are fighters that can keep their spirit strong in any circumstances. In reflecting their fighting spirit, the writers also go from its manifestations in war time to their present life such as the guerrilla fight, art creation, forgiveness and positive outlook to a better future, hard work to improve their living conditions, as well as their bad habit of cheating tourists. This major image and several aspects of the previous two provide Thai readers with better understanding of the people of Vietnam as individuals rather than part of a general entity. Many travelogues construct the image of Vietnamese people from the writers' observations of the people they briefly meet and talk to during their trips; some can tell life stories of their Vietnamese acquaintances and friends; fiction through their plots and characters can go further to reveal Vietnamese personal views and feelings.

The three above images have systematically constructed a multi-dimensional picture of Vietnam and Vietnamese people. It results from a complicated and dynamic interplay between a variety of factors from the past to the present as to be concluded hereafter.

### **Development of Thai portrayal of Vietnam through time**

These images of Vietnam and Vietnamese people as the result of a complex process of image construction in recent years are part of a longer course of

development. Based on the images of Vietnam which emerged in Thai literature and which reflect the Thai-Vietnamese relations through history, the corpus of Thai writings about Vietnam can be divided in three periods: (1) the Early Rattanakosin Era, (2) the Cold War Era, and (3) the Contemporary period. The pictures of Vietnam in the books of the first two periods are heavily affected by the nationalist mindset of either the feudal royal courts or the military governments. Therefore, Vietnam was seen as a patronized inferior, a troublesome competitor for power, an ideological enemy and a communist threat. This mainstream perspective dominated despite other voices about different aspects other than politics and ideology.

The new conditions of this era facilitate the Thai writers to adopt a new, positive and reality-based perception toward Vietnam as summarized previously. Certainly, some impressions in the past do not completely disappear; and some images are still manipulated by mainstream discourses (though the manipulator changed and often without the writers' awareness). However, to the most extent and on a general basis, the images of present Vietnam are much more updated and comprehensive than the old narratives. This tendency will prevail and continue in the future.

### **Factors on Thai construction of images of Vietnam**

There are a number of factors that influence the construction of images of Vietnam in contemporary Thai writings. (1) The first and most determinant is the context. As history evolves, unfavorable conditions of the polarized world in the Cold War Era improved to a better atmosphere of normalization and development of international relations. The tendency of interdependence, cooperation as well as

regional and bilateral integration in economic, socio-cultural and security domains has closed the curtains on Thailand and Vietnam's conflicts in the past and opened up a new page of more effective partnership.

(2) Secondly, the stakeholders of the image construction have changed. While in the past, the knowledge and perception of Thai society on neighboring countries almost depended on the only source which was the mainstream top-down data and perspectives, the present situation of open mass communication and connectivity enables more social groups to take part in the process. The media no longer limits their viewpoints to those of the government and reproduce what the state claim as they used to do. The media nowadays perform independently and powerfully in shaping the understanding and perception of the mass. However, their shortcoming is containing many stereotypes, often general overviews and reports of real-time happenings, hence do not provide adequate and in-depth understanding of the country. More long-term works by documentary producers and writers, novelists as well as poets help diversify and reconstruct the images of Vietnam from a variety of perceptions and perspectives.

It is also noticeable that Thai stakeholders have taken a role in deciding what perspectives on their neighboring countries they should hold instead of adopting the worldview of the West. Western media and academic sources are still important references but the Thais' effort to get access to local sources count more. Considering more carefully, it is the source of data that reveals better the true stakeholders of the construction of Vietnam's images. What the Thai writers tell from their own observations on Vietnamese nature, infrastructure, economic conditions or ways of

life, from their contact with Vietnamese people shows the Thai reflection from first-hand experience of reality. Many other times, they only reproduce the Vietnamese data, i.e. Vietnam's mainstream exhibitions in visiting sites as well as information by their Vietnamese tourist guides and reference sources.

(3) The contemporary Thai writers are one of the new stakeholders mentioned above. As the authors of the writings, they should be treated separately for their fundamental importance. They share one common writing feature, in which all the writers travelled to Vietnam before creating their works, but many other factors matter. Firstly, the length of their stay, the number of trips to Vietnam so far and the style of traveling (as group or individual travelers) decide whether their writing can offer a thorough study of the country, a keen observation of the people or simply a light description of Vietnam. Secondly, their varied background and writing motivations add to the diversity of their portrayals and attitudes toward the country. A writer who also acts as Thai ambassador in Vietnam or who has had direct experience of Vietnam through stages of his life will have more substances adding to his reflection. The writers who are motivated by the establishment of ASEAN Community in composing their works will portray Vietnam from the perspective of mutual cooperation and friendship. Each individual perceives the world uniquely, thus, their various narratives and perspectives offer different dimensions to help readers better grasp the complexities of one country and its people.

### **Images of Vietnam as a reflection of Thailand**

The three analysis chapters have pointed out many times the Thai writers compare Thailand with Vietnam or reflect their home country from their description of the visiting country. Witnessing the remaining and consequences of the Vietnam War, they found a lesson for Thai people about domestic conflict. Observing the modernization and capitalization of Vietnam with their own eyes, they reflect on the reality that despite its rapid changes, Vietnam's level of development is still behind Thailand. However, when discussing the Vietnamese people's potential and spirit, the Thai writers admit having less diligence and reveal worries of being surpassed. Through this, readers can feel the Thai writers' implicit insecure feeling about Thailand's economic development and political instability. Moreover, several characters of Thai people are disclosed in their comparison with or projection of Vietnamese people such as Thais keeping a more composed manner in public places or being more cosmopolitan in their lifestyle.

According to Hall, Evans and Nixon (2013, p. 132-133) this is the popular process of "othering" in travel writings (which applies to all the books in this study for the reason explained in the remarks about genre). "In a weaker, more general sense, 'othering' simply denotes the process by which the members of one culture identify and highlight the differences between themselves and the members of another culture. In a stronger sense, however, it has come to refer more specifically to the processes and strategies by which one culture depicts another culture as not only different but also inferior to itself." Considering the Thai attitudes, we find more sympathy and respect than competition. Nationalist sentiments pop up at times but in



general, the Thai writers try to keep neutral and friendly views. The “othering” process in contemporary books seems to take a weak form compared with the strong sense of the writings of the previous periods.

In conclusion, this dissertation has analyzed the constructing of new images of Vietnam in contemporary Thai writings as a result of the interaction of various factors. The fact that Vietnam and Vietnamese people appear in a number of Thai books indicates positive Thai-Vietnamese relations, especially at the people-to-people level, and is a basis to build better mutual understanding between the two peoples. At the regional level, we see the ASEAN Community, established at the end of 2015, facing new challenges on its way. Looking into the future, the portrayal of one country by another country might have more dynamics that are worth studying.

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