



## Politics of Southeast Asian Children's Literature: The Case of North Vietnam from 1945 to 1975

Nguyen Thi Thanh Huong\* and Tran Tinh Vy\*\*

### [ *Abstract* ]

This article paid attention to three types of children's characters in Vietnamese children's literature in North Vietnam from 1945 to 1975, including children's characters as young soldiers in the frontlines, young citizens in daily life, and role models. The goal of this body of literature was illustrated as educating young generations on patriotism, the revolutionary spirit, and civic consciousness. Our research suggests that politics in children's literature is universal and that the power discourse of adults is an inevitable factor predominating in children's literature. Besides, juxtaposing Vietnamese children's literature with Southeast Asian literature helps us see that the political orientation and moral concepts in children's literature have created a stagnation in the current pace of Vietnamese children's literature. This paper, therefore, contributes to identifying Vietnamese children's literature in the overall picture of Southeast Asian children's literature in the post-colonial context.

**Keywords:** Children's literature, Southeast Asian literature, post-colonial

---

\* Lecturer, Hanoi National University of Education, Vietnam, huong\_nt@hnue.edu.vn.

\*\* Lecturer, University of Social Sciences and Humanities-Vietnam National University Ho Chi Minh City, tinhvytran@hcmussh.edu.vn.

## **I . Politics of Children’s Literature in Southeast Asia: Unity in Diversity**

For a long time, literature has not only embodied the freedom of the imagination. The absence of the so-called literary innocence is influenced by external forces, including religious, social, political, and even gender forces. Even children’s literature, though supposed to be aimed at younger audiences and promising to open up a world of wonder and creativity, is no exception. Creative writing, in the case of children’s literature, is not simply a one-way street where the writer’s creative talent and the reader’s tastes are the only factors that determine the birth of a work. On the contrary, literature is a historical and cultural product, which reveals how the social and political powers work together in text, and by extension, in society.

Although the works of literature in Southeast Asia countries reflect the diversities and complexities in the cultures and societies of these countries, they all share a few common things. A few studies of Southeast Asian children’s literature suggest that politics is at the expense of imagination and creation. These studies inspired our research on the politics of children’s literature that was represented in child characters in Vietnamese literature. Before delving into the case of Vietnamese children's literature, took a glimpse of literature in some countries in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, and examined how and to what extent the discourses of nation-building were expressed in literature for children.

Through various periods in Indonesian history, discourses of nation-building, which mainly revolved around unity or diversity in the national motto “unity in diversity,” showed how children’s literature can be used as a means of socialization and instruction. Although the motto “unity in diversity” was adopted after the independence of Indonesia in 1945, the rigid focus on unity over diversity was implemented in Indonesian literature and art. During the New Order period in the 1960s, social, cultural, and religious diversity in Indonesia was muted as a result of the implementation of the SARA’s regulation (Hefner 2013). Specifically, publications are

forbidden from producing books related to the following four areas: *suku* (ethnicity), *agama* (religion), *ras* (race), and *antar-golongan* (class) since these themes are considered “censored” that seemed to be harmful to the unity of the nation. The consequences of these restrictions are not only the silenced but also the perverse literature in which children’s literature was merely blatant propaganda. Rather than providing strong and layered narratives, books were overtly didactic and focused on delivering moral lessons. In such a context, nationalism and the values of “ideal” were dominant themes in children’s books published in the authoritarian era of President Suharto, the military general who ruled the archipelago from 1966 to 1998 (Partiningsih 2016).

The politics of Indonesian children’s literature leaves its mark on the fact that, even when the awareness of multiculturalism, ethnicity, and religion among Indonesian communities was aroused and reawakened, the body of children’s literature that reflected this diversity, now known as multicultural children’s literature, can only reach what may be considered larger and safer themes, consisting of family love, folktales, fables, morality, and societal codes (Hakim 2020: 615). Several themes including death, divorce, family structures, lifestyle choices, and sexual education cautiously took their first steps and found a place in contemporary literature even though Indonesia is a vastly diverse country in which children face pluralism in daily life. Although aimed at helping students learn to function effectively in a pluralistic society (Hakim 2020: 620), multicultural children’s literature was closely tied to ideologies of social forces in which the representation of marginalized groups with their cultural authenticity was dependent much on power relations of class, race, and gender.

Likewise, the role of children’s literature in ideological education and aesthetic orientation is also emphasized in the discourse of nation-building of the Singaporean government during the Didactic Period in the 1960s. The role of authorship in relation to the new political status and urgent social needs of the country was emphasized by Singapore Minister for Education Ong Pang Boon. He declared that local authors should have a sense of social awareness and a “real understanding of the various aspects of the

local environment and above all a true appreciation of the national aspirations and strives of the people, and contribute by making appropriate references and allusions to local conditions and factors” (as cited in Girvin 1976: 7). This realistic and pragmatic aim of children’s literature led to the scarcity of fantasy or fictional books while textbooks that aimed at improving English proficiency of Singaporeans in both spoken and written forms grew in number (Chia 2011:25). Didacticism from the previous period was also carried over into the Pioneering Period (1970s). Themes of national campaigns, including the ban on firecrackers during the Lunar New Year, keeping Singapore clean, bilingualism in schools, multiracial and multicultural identity, and so on (Lim 2009) were adopted in children’s books in the 1970s. Books devoted to promoting Singaporean identity such as Chia Hearn Chek’s *The Redhill* (1974) and *The Raja’s Crown* (1975) also reflected the emergence of nationalism and the role of printed media in wide-spreading policymakers’ ideas (Chia 2011:22). Under rigid orientation, books imbued with moral lessons on national independence was a perfect place to demonstrate the attitudes of Singaporean intellectuals towards nation building, the restoration of the state, territorial integrity, and independence.

Like many of those from the Southeast Asian region, traditional Malay folktales reflected the worldview as well as the cosmological order of the Malay world and the ideology of the existing ruling class (Wilson 2020: 393). As a result, most of the stories related to the social relationships between the masses and the rulers, and the inequality between the ruler and the ruled (Selat 2010: 53). However, studies on folktales and legends from Malaysia by Sharifah A. Osman (2020), focusing on the legend of Mahsuri, showed a subversion of disadvantaged groups in society, including middle- and working-class and women, over the privileged ones. Subversions taking place both through folktale stories rooted in oral traditions and the adapted versions of these folktales in the present time demonstrated that children’s literature were not born in a vacuum as well as have never been explicitly told for only children. When they were first composed and collected in the 19th century, folktales were considered a part and parcel of a general civilizing

process by European middle-class editors and collectors. Hence, they used folktales to reinforce dominant religious and patriarchal attitudes about gender, mating, law, and order” (Osman 2020: 541), as well as instruct young audiences on the significance of morality, charity, virtue, and good conduct. The presence of colonial agenda in the production of children’s literature led to the “emphasis on moral lessons and the punishment of villains, especially for “disobedience” and “deviant conduct” (Osman 2020: 542). Consequently, children’s literature was full of “cautionary tales and stories” that were adapted by writers who wrote for children. However, in the contemporary re-appropriations of the legend of Mahsuri, including Lee Su Ann’s *The Curse*, Preeta Samarasan’s *Mahsuri*, and Shireen Zainudin’s *Grey*, the status of the young Malay woman in contemporary Malaysia was highlighted through acts of agency and self-assertion to overcome the remnants of traditional Malay feudalistic society (Osman 2020: 588). Textual adaptations like those by Lee, Samarasan, and Zainudin demonstrated the potential of transforming children’s literature to challenge, rather than simply reproduce, culture and tradition, at the same time to offer a chance for both children and adults to engage in a dialogue to interrogate and construct national identity.

In another vein, the transformation of traditional literary sources into modern versions shows how traditional legacy was adopted to fit young readers’ tastes in the 20th century. The example of children’s literature in Thailand showed the awareness of the importance of traditional sources for the Thai to shape their young readers’ identity. Ruenruthai Sujjapun (2005) showed four ways to create contemporary children’s literature based on traditional sources, consisting of the re-creation of the story with new imaginative touches, the writing of new storylines featuring certain characters from old tales, parodying certain literary conventions and motifs, and transforming traditional literature into picture-books (79-85). These methods were applied to both conserve and destroy traditional sources. However, literary innocence and imagination were interwoven with political forces and orientation in the traditional and modern stories. Therefore, the “tailoring” of tales from the past to their versions in the present showed fewer

children's tastes than adults' experiences and expectations.

In short, considering Southeast Asian children's literature as part of an interactive network of power-political relationships helps us not only to evaluate literary works purely from an aesthetic point of view but also to place them in a common cultural space where any move by any writer in any position can have an impact on the literary field. In general, a common feature in Southeast Asian texts is the way they serve as a crucial tool to convey power dynamics and social justice. Thus, they should be understood as narratives that reveal the imprint of power rather than as cultural products intended solely for children. The didactic nature of Indonesian and Singaporean children's literature is shared by Vietnam. Malaysian children's literature has become an interesting case through the way contemporary reappropriation of children's literature, of which the legend of Mahsuri is an example, reveals a sense of resistance to feudalistic societies. In Vietnamese children's literature, the emphasis on heroic characters does not only convey resistance during the colonial and post-colonial periods. Under the influence of Marxist-Leninist ideology and socialist culture, children's literature in North Vietnam from 1945 to 1975 focused on educational and ideological orientation (Huỳnh 2019), which is more or less similar to Indonesian and Singaporean children's literature. Therefore, works for children were written in an idealized manner, with strong political content. It is worth mentioning here the historical time from 1954 to 1975 when North Vietnam declared Vietnam's independence as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam while South Vietnam was the Republic of Vietnam. Nationalism was emphasized and promoted not only in the relationship between Vietnam and the French (before 1945) but also between Vietnam and the Americans (from 1945 to 1975). On the one hand, such a historical context reveals the complexity of interpreting the concept of nation. On the other hand, it emphasizes the role of children's literature in reinterpreting political tensions and reaffirming national identity.

Our research on children's literature, mainly focusing on children's literature in North Vietnam from 1945 to 1975, can be seen as an example of how the adult agenda presented and governed the production of children's literature in Vietnam. The first

part provides a comprehensive survey of the historical and social context of Vietnam before and since 1945 to show the goals of education and propaganda in children's literature. The second part analyzes three typical character types such as young soldiers in the frontlines, young citizens in daily life, and role models in children's literature in North Vietnam. On the one hand, all three types represent a generation of young Vietnamese who possesses high aspirations and ideals of life. On the other hand, the perfection of these character types shows the voluntariness in the authors' aesthetic thinking and creative techniques; yet, the psychological nuances and subtle complexities of individual personalities were forgotten. These representations show the superiority of the task of educating and propagating political ideas over the aesthetic orientation in children's literature. The body of children's literature in the period 1945-1975, therefore, illustrated its effective role in constituting discourses of nation-building, reflecting the context and atmosphere of the times as well as the ideas of political leaders.

## **II. The Case of Vietnamese Children's Literature from 1945-1975: the Writer's Perspective and Expression of Children**

One of the reasons for using children's literature as one of the tools to foster nationalism in Southeast Asian countries stems mainly from the historical context. Emerging from colonialism, nationalism becomes an effective ideology for general mobilization to fight against foreign invaders. The example from Indonesia is particularly similar to that of Vietnam not only because the milestone of 1945 marked the independence period after the period of colonization of both nations. Both also quickly adopted political principles to consolidate national unity immediately after the declaration of independence. In Indonesia, it was the *Pancasila* (five principles) approach that emphasized nationalism and socialism to show the need to unify the diverse country. In Vietnam, the perception of art for children as an educational tool was planned even before children's literature was shaped.

## **2.1. The Writer's Perspective on Children in Literature**

The period 1945-1975 can be considered a particularly important period in the history of Vietnam. After a long time of being colonized by the French, the early twentieth century witnessed the emergence of early nationalist movements, which led to the establishment of enduring organizations including the Vietnamese Nationalist Party in 1927, the Indochinese Communist Party in 1930, and the League for Vietnamese Independence in 1941. Upon Japan's defeat, Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam to be independent, naming the country the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in 1945.

Before 1945, since there were no professional writers for children, the concept of art for children was only reflected in a few works, in which children participated either as the aim of teaching or as flat characters in works. In some works of realist writers such as Nam Cao, Nguyễn Công Hoan, and Nguyễn Hồng, children's characters appeared so small, and pitiful, or victims of a cruel life. More conscious in writing for children, the group Tự lực Văn đoàn wrote compositions in which children were associated with a fantasy world of fairy tales. However, children have not played the role of the main character. They were portrayed from the model of adults. Therefore, children's behavior in these pages were similar to those of adults, not very innocent.

Since 1945, writers have paid more attention to the psychological characteristics of children's characters. Võ Quảng affirmed: "Children have gone through many ages. At each age, their knowledge is very different. Although the two children are only five years apart, their perceptions are very distinguished from each other, they cannot read the same book together" (Võ Quảng, n.d. as cited in Văn Thanh volume 1 2003: 25) Especially, educating young generation was considered a central task of art for every writer who wrote for children. This has been emphasized in Võ Quảng's article: "Children's literature has the task of awakening kind feelings and noble thoughts, educating children to love, to hate, to distinguish right from wrong, to understand clearly their civil duty and human happiness" (Văn Thanh 2003: 25). Huy Cận also said: "Fulfilling revolutionary enthusiasm and fostering healthy enthusiasm,



excitement, vibrant, and abundant imagination in the hearts of the youth is the mission of art for children" (Huy Cận, n.d. as cited in Văn Thanh volume 1 2003: 274).

After the success of the August Revolution in 1945, building and developing children's literature were paid much attention by the Communist Party led by Hồ Chí Minh. The group of writers who belonged to the Arts and Culture Association, which include Nam Cao, Nguyễn Huy Tường, Nguyễn Hồng, Nguyễn Xuân Sanh, Nguyễn Tuân, and Lưu Hữu Phước, wrote more works for children since 1948. In 1946, the *Thiếu Sinh* newspaper was born with the advice of President Hồ Chí Minh: "Children's newspaper was born—That newspaper is a children's newspaper, so children should help the newspaper, sending pictures and writing news for the newspapers. The newspaper should be read to children who can't read; we should support the newspapers" (Hồ Chí Minh, n.d. as cited Văn Thanh volume 1 2003: 43). In addition to *Thiếu Sinh*, there were other newspapers such as *Xung Phong*, *Măng non* and *Tuổi trẻ*. The mission of these newspapers was to educate the children to become honest, and brave, actively building the country. Compared with children's characters in the *Phong Hoá* newspaper by Tự lực Văn đoàn, those in books published by Kim Đồng and Hoa Kháng chiến have portrayed typical features and partly reflected many heroic children in the Resistance. These compositions have opened up a promising path for Vietnamese children's literature and fostered children's thoughts and feelings.

## 2.2. The Writer's Representation of Children in Literature

A study of Southeast Asian children's fiction by Lai Nam Chen has explored how colonial projects influence the way Southeast Asian children are represented in English-language children's literature. Specifically, Lai's study of children's fiction shows that Southeast Asian children's characters are constructed based on several models, including exotica and white heroism versus native heroes. While the writings of exotica and white heroism show Western ethnocentrism, native heroes are constructed to counter the portrayals of white heroes, where characters are put in complex situations and reflect cultural and social conflicts (Lai 1981: 58).

The above observations on Southeast Asian children's literature are relevant to the case of Vietnamese children's literature in two aspects. While the writings of exotica and white heroism were seen as a discourse that contributes to the construction of national consciousness (although the nation here refers to the *métropole*), the writings of native heroism advocate the establishment of indigenous artistic spaces to convey cultural-related moral lessons and to foster their identity (more or less). However, the case of children's literature in North Vietnam has some differences. The artistic space is both a front and a domestic setting. Even though characters are grounded firmly in realistic settings, this reality is depicted in its revolutionary development. Hence, children's characters are idealized instead of revealing the diversity and complexity of identity and culture.

This article examines three types of children's characters in children's literature in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam 1945-1975, including children's characters as young soldiers in the frontlines, young citizens in daily life, and mirror characters. The classification of character types was based on how the authors focused on prominent characteristics in building characters. This also partly shows the difference in the tendency to depict characters as well as the writer's conception of children in each writing situation.

### **2.2.1. Children's Characters as Young Soldiers in the Frontlines**

This is a specific character type that was found in the literature of countries whose histories were associated with wars against foreigners. In the early period of the resistance, one of the writer's tasks was clearly stated by Ho Chi Minh: "Training the revolutionary generation for the next generation is very important and necessary," and "New people should be taught from birth and at all ages." (Hồ Chí Minh, n.d. as cited in Văn Thanh volume 1 2003: 107-108). Therefore, there were a series of compositions in children's literature that expressed the struggle in the resistance war against the French. Especially, children were built up as young soldiers participating in the struggle for national independence, such as Hoa Sơn and Quốc Toàn in *Hoa Sơn* by Tô Hoài; Giao in *Chú Giao làng Seo* (Uncle Giao in Seo Village) by Nguyễn Tuân, Giang in *Dưới chân*

*cầu mây* (Under the Bridge of Clouds) by Nguyễn Hồng and Tí in *Chiến sĩ ca nô* (Soldiers in a Canoe) by Nguyễn Huy Tường.

For example, Giao in *Chú Giao làng Seo* (Uncle Giao in Seo Village by Nguyễn Tuân) was a liaison who guided the army. Facing the enemy, Giao was brave and fierce like an elder soldier. Although arrested and tortured, Giao in *Dưới chân cầu mây* by Nguyễn Hồng did not give any information. Hoa Sơn (Tô Hoài, 1959) studied and worked in the propaganda team, “going around the village to remind people that our country is fighting the French invaders. Passionate about doing those great things, but he always just says that it is a natural duty for people to do such things during the resistance war” (Tô Hoài 1959: 4). The character Tí in Nguyễn Huy Tường’s story was 15 years old, but he was clever and brave to help a whole village to escape from the encirclement of the enemy” (Nguyễn Huy Tường 1970: 99).

Dialogic language in children’s literature also shows the writer’s purpose in describing actions instead of the psychological developments and inner conflicts of children’s characters. Children’s psychology was assumed to be immature; so, writers often paid attention to their dialogue language, monologue language has been omitted or existed in other forms. Even in works that were considered successful in recreating the image of children in this period such as *Mẹ vắng nhà* (Mother’s Absence), *Chuyện xóm tôi* (Story of My Neighborhood) by Nguyễn Thi or Đoàn Giỏi’s *Đất rừng phương Nam* (Song of the South), the language of the times penetrated the language of children’s characters. For example, in the role-playing game as a teacher and student of Bé’s sisters (Mother’s Absence), a child “spelled out each word: I mò im, tò im tìm huyền tìm, mò y my ngã Mỹ, mò a mà huyền mà, đồ anh đánh sắc đánh... Find the US and fight, find the puppet and destroy it! Get started!” (Nguyễn Thi 1996: 260). In the spelling of children in the anti-American era, there was a material of real life at that time. The language of the times has shown its pervasive power in influencing children’s language and thoughts.

The fact that children’s language was ignored or dominated showed the power of political discourse in children’s stories. This

also demonstrated one of the prominent features in Vietnamese children's literature in the period 1945-1975. Adults always have more power than children who are subject to standards in life as well as in literature. Therefore, the language of children's characters was often suppressed by adults' words; in other words, they were adjusted and changed by the adult writer's voices. Children's characters in Vietnamese children's stories 1945-1975—"non-verbal subjects" (Pankenier: 147)—cannot express themselves through words, by words. Children have been "enchanted" to make them unable to speak their own voice or speak with adults' voices.

Besides, children in Vietnamese children's stories were depicted as a group of heroes such as those in *Đội thiếu niên du kích Đình Bảng* (Guerrilla Youth Team in Đình Bảng) by Xuân Sách, *Đội thiếu niên du kích thành Huế* (Guerrilla Youth Team Intelligence in Hue Citadel) by Văn Tùng, *Đội thiếu niên tình báo Bát Sắt* (Intelligence Youth Team in Bát Sắt) by Phạm Thắng and *Tuổi thơ dữ dội* (Intense Childhood) by Phùng Quán. In terms of the time dimension, the heroic collective characters in the works before and after 1975 can be grouped into one category. But from a chronological perspective, this was a continuing phenomenon that reflected the sense of community in approaching the world of children through the representation of children in groups.

The emergence of the heroic collective character type in children's literature was the result of the shifting of the model of collective characters in literature for adults. The importance of collective characters, a mass or a crowd in literature could be explained by the appreciation of community and collective spirit by communism, a prevalent doctrine in Vietnam. This type of character was often portrayed blurredly compared to that of the community. In these children's works, children were placed in a relationship with the social environment of the adults, not with friends in the classroom or relatives in the family. They were gathered together in youth organizations and were not mindless crowds. For example, the youth guerrilla team Đình Bảng was established in the harsh situation of clinging to the area to protect Hanoi and were assigned tasks by Uncle Nhã (Xuân Sách 2011: 8). It was a collective group that carried the common qualities of Vietnamese children at that

time: intelligence, wisdom, courage, patriotism, and deep hatred of the enemy. They were all children of the working people, suffering from hunger and oppression since childhood. Most of them have their own enmity with colonialists and feudal minions. The children in the Đình Bảng youth team were also politically enlightened soldiers with clear ideals. Lượ, Hoan, Húc, and Thiết all felt that they were “attached to the common destiny of the country with a shining fighting ideal” (Xuân Sách 2011: 46). Although each of them had their way of thinking, depending on their psychologies and personalities, they were all united in their desire to protect the peaceful and free life of their homeland. The children exuded a spirit of enthusiasm for fighting and life: “Everybody was filled with joy. Their eyes only want to see images of the future, they see everything beautiful, even though the village is still sprawling and full of ruins” (Xuân Sách 2011: 299). Their lives were closed to the life of the revolution and the resistance war. Their ideal was the ideal of the whole nation towards freedom and peace: “Châu has entered a real battle. Châu did not know what happened in advance. The city for Châu is now a front that has no boundaries” (Văn Tùng 2012: 36).

It can be said that the model of the hero in battle, which crystallized all the noble qualities of the community in literature for adults in this period, has shifted and refracted into the model of children's characters in children's literature. Therefore, although writers had a sense of composing for children, they inevitably portrayed children's characters who were somewhat old and mature, which was due to the superior orientations and the atmosphere of the times.

After 1954, the building of the characters as young soldiers has more or less changed in literature. Besides continuing to portray brave deeds, writers created children's characters with more childish features. Lâm (*Giữ súng mượn* (Holding a rented gun) by Văn An) distributed leaflets, delivered documents and attacked a Bassac restaurant when he was 14 years old. Being arrested, Lâm was very smart, and clever and especially showed confidence in his teammates. It was the belief of those on the same line, but the greatest of all, perhaps, was the belief in the goodness of a teenager.

Thanks to that belief, Lam saved his teammates and himself. This must be the difference between a soldier-child and a soldier-adult. As people grow older, their belief in good things diminishes. Only children have a lot of faith in the Good and the Kind. Because of that, Lâm gained (instinctive) faith in his comrades even when the comrade's faith of the elder was defeated by the brutality of the enemy.

Võ Quảng's *Quê nội* (Hometown) and *Tăng sáng* (The Dawn) marked a change in the expression of a simple into a complex young soldier character. Two characters, Cục and Cù Lao, appeared with childish features: funny, mischievous, playful, and clumsy. Readers saw them arguing, running, struggling, or hide-and-seek playing just like any child in the real world. These characters were loved because readers saw their childhood in them. However, Võ Quảng's characters were still covered by the vast space of the history of the war years (*Hometown*). Võ Quảng, like other writers before 1975, often placed children's characters in a collective environment or a resistance environment. Family relationships were put into social relations. It was no coincidence that the character Lưôm in *Lưôm* by Tô Hữu expressed: "I prefer to stay at the Mang Cá station than at home" (Tô Hữu 1983: 153). Revolutionary life and the atmosphere of the times with great events and challenges have created an attraction for children, bringing them into historical relationships.

It can be said that when creating the character as a young soldier, writers aimed to build heroic monuments for children. This is reasonable given the actual requirements and characteristics of children's psychology at that time. Maria Nikolajeva, in her research on characters in children's literature, said: "We must realize that understanding characters depends largely on how the work is approached. In children's fiction, our understanding will depend on whether we perceive the text as an educational tool or an aesthetic object" (Nikolajeva 2003: 282). Therefore, it was understandable to see how children were built as soldiers during the period 1945-1975. This type of character was a context-born type when the whole country had to focus on a resistance time. This type of character also met the aesthetic needs and aspirations of the young

generation.

### **2.2.2 Children's Characters as Young Citizens in Daily Life**

The orientation of the Communist Party for children's writing in this period was emphasized: "In the current situation, the focus of ideological and emotional education for children is loving working and studying, even studying and working hard for socialism and national reunification" (Hà Ân, n.d.as cited in Vân Thanh volume 2 2003: 85). Bùi Thanh Ninh, in a recent article *Mấy suy nghĩ về truyện viết về sinh hoạt của thiếu nhi gần đây* (Some thoughts on stories written about children's activities), commented: "In our opinion, the only purpose of life stories in particular and of children's literature, in general, today is to educate communist ideology for children to train them to become builders of socialism and contribute to the struggle for national reunification" (Bùi Thanh Ninh, n.d. as cite in Vân Thanh volume 2 2003: 58). To teach children to work and study diligently, writers have created children's character models with all qualities of an exemplary citizen.

The birth of characters as young citizens in children's works was an inevitable product of history. When North Vietnam had just been liberated and was in the period of socialist construction, one of the central tasks of art for children was to educate children to study and work positively. Therefore, the building of children's characters as young citizens was similar to those of adults, who know how to work and apply science and technology to farming, especially working for the sake of the collective rather than individuals. In short, children were the ideal model for the neo-socialist (young) type of person.

During the period 1945 - 1975, the image of an elite citizen was standardized as the "New Man" model. They were people who had a sense of collective spirit, putting the interests of the collective and the people above the interests of individuals, friendly to the masses, who were not individuals but heroes of the group, living in, being raised and taught by the collective (Nguyễn Văn Long, Nguyễn Thị Bình, Lê Thị Bắc Lý, Mai Thị Nhung, Trần Đăng Xuyên volume 2 2013: 158). Therefore, the "New Man" was appreciated first of all by his performance of tasks and ideas. The "New Man" was not only

reflected in adult literary works but also in children's literature. The new type of character was reflected through the model of a character doing "small plans" to contribute to the construction of innovative rural areas such as Thiều, Tụ, and Lía in *Tổ tâm giao* (Soulmate Team) by Trần Thanh Địch, working together to form a labor team, doing work to assist in agricultural production such as gleaning rice, trapping mice, and catching birds. When adults join cooperative farming, children also enthusiastically want to do the same.

The lessons about common and private properties and friendship were integrated into the stories of young citizens in school. Writing about school was also to advise children about the sense of collective and responsibility. The fact that the character Việt (*Mái trường thân yêu* (Beloved School) submitted the brochure Phú Thọ Screen (*Màn ảnh Phú Thọ*) although he had many other precious books showed his maturity: "Oh, it should be... But why did I insist on refusing the guiding hand of the collective? Those thoughts strained my mind like a string. The sky is still cloudy. A lone star in the new black horizon was trembling as if ashamed of its pale light. From time to time, a breeze passes by, as gentle as a long breath" (Lê Khắc Hoan 1981: 73).

In general, describing characters as young citizens, writers have consciously aimed at educating children through ideal models of moral qualities and responsibilities of a citizen in a socialist society. However, it is also because of the priority of educational purposes, that child characters were built like adult characters without the clumsiness, mischievousness, and innocence of children.

In summary, children's characters as young citizens were depicted as realistic models that were explained by a whole context of the socialist construction of this era. Therefore, literary children are also socialist children. This reflected the fact that reality in children's literature was a creative reality. Therefore, this type of character was not lively, simply representing one voice and one new type of person in the social situation in which they lived.

### **2.2.3 Mirror Characters**

During the period of resistance war and national construction, the



top task of children's literature was educating children in patriotism and national pride, to be ready to fight the enemy to save the country. Besides portraying children as heroes to save the country or exemplary citizens, writers also reflected the reality of history as well as of life. Two role models in this period were mostly reflected in literature. One was historical models such as Trần Quốc Toàn in *Lá cờ thêu sáu chữ vàng* (The Flag Embroidered with Six Golden Letters) by Nguyễn Huy Tường and Bàn A Tồn in *Nghĩa quân sông Đà* (The Rebellion in Đà River-Mai Hanh), and the second was models in real life such as Kim Đồng in *Kim Đồng* by Tô Hoài, Nguyễn Ngọc Ký in *Tôi đi học* (I Went to School), and Nguyễn Ngọc Ký or Hoa Xuân Tứ in *Hoa Xuân Tứ* by Quang Huy.

These children's characters like historical modes appeared in historical stories. During the period 1954-1975, historical stories written for children flourished. Some notable examples were *Kể chuyện Lam Sơn* (Telling Stories about Lam Sơn) by Hoàng Đạo Thúy (1959), *An Dương Vương xây thành Ốc* (An Duong Vuong Building the Oc Citadel, 1957), *Kể chuyện Quang Trung* (Telling Stories about Quang Trung, 1960), *Lá cờ thêu sáu chữ vàng* (The Flag Embroidered with Six Golden Letters, 1960) by Nguyễn Huy Tường, *Cưỡi sóng Bạch Đằng* (Riding Waves at the Bạch Đằng River, 1961), and *Bố cái Đại vương* (The Great King, 1962) by An Cương. There were also historical stories written for children by other authors such as Hà Ân, Thái Hồng, Nguyễn Hiền, Lê Văn, Hoài Anh, Nguyễn Anh and so on. After 1975, when historical stories ceased to be published, authors turned to exploiting new topics. The richness of historical stories in the period 1954-1975 was explained by the changes in contemporary circumstances when the country had to participate in both the war against aggression and the building of a socialist society. Historical heroes such as Bà Triệu, Phùng Hưng, Đinh Bộ Lĩnh, Lê Hoàn, Trần Quốc Toàn, Hoa Xuân Tùng, Hoàng Đổ contributed to raising the spirit of patriotism, the love of independence and freedom for children, making them proud of traditional values of the nation and nourishing their will to fight for the country. The writer Hà Ân said: "In my own opinion, we should not choose to represent, for example, the methods of Hồ Quý Ly, and even more, should not represent the methods to strengthen the

government of Trần Thủ Độ. Instead, we need to set a good example for children to study (Hà Ân n.d. as cited Van Thanh volume 2: 83).

When writing historical stories for children, writers consciously built good examples for them. Hà Ân, a passionate writer for children's historical literature, affirmed: "Historical stories for children should have representative characters of children. I mean we should have young characters in writing. We might construct an entire childhood of a historical character in a book" (Hà Ân n.d. as cited Vân Thanh volume 2 2003: 84). Vân Thanh also shared the same thoughts: "In addition to selecting typical characters, it is also necessary to pay attention to building children's characters to evoke sympathy and understanding among children. This will make educational lessons for children become close and familiar to children. Interestingly, there are many examples of heroic children in our history that have been recorded in historical books." (Vân Thanh volume 2 2003: 61). Thus, in writing and criticizing, it was clear that writers for children's literature have consciously created children's characters as historical examples. These were characters that were prototyped from real historical models. Even more, these characters were fictionalized to highlight the beautiful qualities of the characters and make them consistent with events recorded in historical books. Some illustrations were characters Trần Quốc Toàn (*Lá cờ thêu sáu chữ vàng* – Nguyễn Huy Tường), Bàn A Tồn (*Nghĩa quân sông Đà* – Mai Hanh), Rái Minh in *Nhụy Kiều tướng quân* (Nhụy Kiều General) (Yến Hồng, Hoài Ban), Hoàng Đổ, and Hoa Xuân Tùng in *Trăng nước Chương Dương* (Moon in the country Chương Dương) (Hà Ân) and *Kim Đồng* (Tô Hoài).

The outstanding feature of the character type as a historical model is that the character was not depicted from an ordinary realistic view but was seen from an epic distance. Therefore, even though they were teenagers, they appeared as heroes whose dimensions and stature did not resemble that of a child. This feature was also presented in the character type as a young hero, however, the young heroes in Vietnamese children's stories were mostly fictional characters, while the historical characters as role models were taken from real people that had been recorded in history. The depiction of historical mirror characters by legendizing them was the

highlight of historical stories before 1975 in particular and stories written for children in general. Just like “adult” literature, children’s literature in this period was dominated by epic inspiration and romantic style, so children’s characters were also rendered epic. This also explained why in the period 1945-1975, historical stories written for children were so prolific and the type of historical mirror character became one of the typical character types of children’s literature. The characters were still teenagers, but their mettle, charisma, and actions were described with majesty: “Hoài Văn Hầu wears a red robe, his shoulder carries a bow and arrow, his back is an heirloom sword, sits on a white horse. He has the majesty of a commander” (Nguyễn Huy Trông 2014: 45). Trần Quốc Toàn was an early teenager with a sense of responsibility for the country. Even in his dream, the boy, who was not yet sixteen years old, was burning with the will to fight the enemy and save the country. Not being allowed to join the army of the court, Trần Quốc Toàn trained himself in martial arts through military books, conquered more than six hundred young men, raised an uprising flag with six golden words: “Breaking the enemy’s strength, reporting the emperor’s grace” (Nguyễn Huy Trông 2014: 37).

It can be said that the tradition of fighting the enemy to save the country was deeply ingrained in the flesh and blood of every Vietnamese. From the boy Gióng in Phù Đổng village, who killed the Ân enemy to save the country during the Hùng King’s reign, the indomitable spirit of fighting against foreign invaders persisted in the heart of the Vietnamese people. The younger generations after Trần Quốc Toàn, who grew up during the entire nation’s resistance against the French, continued the patriotic tradition of his predecessors, creating a brilliant historical period. The children’s images have entered into literature as symbols of the innocent and beautiful patriotism of Vietnamese childhood.

Popularly appearing in literature in the period from 1960 to 1975, the type of children’s character as a life example played an important role in encouraging the spirit of Vietnamese children in the anti-American movement and building a socialist society. These were real-life characters; writers only recorded the children’s extraordinary energy, who overcame difficult circumstances such as

Hoa Xuân Tứ, Nguyễn Ngọc Ký, Bùi Thị Tứ, Nguyễn Thị Hồng and Hoàng Văn Hải. Because they were all real people, the stories unfolded in these kinds of works created strong emotions and had a profound educational effect. However, writers just focused on narrating rather than creating stories of these figures.

In short, the children's characters in the period 1945-1975 were created from the inheritance of children's images in the works before 1945. The lowly statuses and holy souls in the stories of the previous period were indirect factors that contributed to creating children's characters in the period 1945-1975. Three types of characters: The young soldier in a front, the exemplary citizen in life, and the role model represented typical images of children before the vicissitudes of history and the cruelty of the war. They appeared to be beautiful, extraordinary, and brave. They represented the young generation with aspirations and ideals of life, with the courage and self-reliance of the nation. They were the glorious continuation of the precious heroic and steadfast characters in the early days of the country. However, in these characters, readers do not really realize many of the childish personality traits. The appearance of children's characters has been integrated into the general picture of the Vietnamese Revolution. This performance showed that, in a special period of the nation's history during the war years, the writer had placed the task of education above the aesthetic need to build the image of children's characters. This is one of the important characteristics that distinguishes literature from 1945 to 1975 from other literary periods. Only, in the period 1945-1975, it became the most prominent feature. The same thing happened with Soviet children's literature. And it's just a difference in the way the image was built.

### **III. Conclusion**

Children's literature is a part of the ideological structure of the world's cultures, so their history is built on ideology (Hunt 2005). In the case of Southeast Asia, both the history and scope of children's literature have an inextricable link with changes in society.

Nevertheless, different approaches and expressions stemming from different historical contexts, religions, and cultures make children's literature in each Southeast Asian country distinguishable. In Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, children's books were combined with moral lessons and religious doctrines that defined Indonesian children's literature's identity. In Malaysia and Singapore, children's literature was utilized as an educational tool to teach or convey concepts, knowledge, and values. These illustrations from Southeast Asia in general and Vietnam in particular showed how religion, politics, or gender were all incorporated into the content of children's literary works and influenced the choice of themes and characters.

This article attended to three types of children's characters in Vietnamese children's literature in North Vietnam from 1945 to 1975. The goal of this body of literature was to educate young generations in patriotism, revolutionary spirit, and civic consciousness. Our research suggests that politics in children's literature is universal and that the power discourse of adults is an inevitable factor predominating in children's literature. Besides, the article discusses the change in Vietnam compared to Southeast Asian countries to show that the political orientation and moral concepts in children's literature have created a stasis in the current pace of Vietnamese children's literature. In Southeast Asia, children's literature in some countries has approached the diversity of politics such as gender, culture, or immigration. While in Vietnam, the approach of politics of national building was prevailing in literature for children despite its development along with Southeast Asian literary trends. This paper, therefore, contributes to identifying Vietnamese children's literature in the overall picture of Southeast Asian children's literature in the post-colonial context.

## References

- Chia, Noel Kok Hwee. 2011. A survey on the growth of imagination in Singapore children's literature in English: 1965-2005. *BiblioAsia*. 7: 20-27.

- Girvin, M. 1976. Planning, production and distribution of children's books: The Singapore situation. *Singapore Book World*, 7: 6–10.
- Hakim, Herdiana. 2020. Seeking “Unity in Diversity”: Contemporary Children's Books in Indonesia. *Asian Children's Literature and Film in a Global Age: Local, National and Transnational Trajectories*. Bernard Wilson and Sharmani P. Gabriel, eds, 245-287. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hefner, R.W. 2013. The Study of Religious Freedom in Indonesia. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 11(2): 18–27.
- Hunt, P. (ed.). 2005. *Understanding Children's Literature* (2nd ed.). London and New York: Routledge.
- Huỳnh Như Phương. 2019. Những vấn đề giảng dạy tiếng Việt và nghiên cứu Việt Nam trong thế giới ngày nay (Issues of Vietnamese language teaching and Vietnamese research in today's world). *Kỷ yếu Hội thảo khoa học quốc tế Việt Nam học lần IV* (Proceedings of the 4th Vietnam International Scientific Conference). Hồ Chí Minh: Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City Press (710-723).
- Lai, Nam Chen. 1981. *Images of Southeast Asia in Children's Fiction*. Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- Lê Khắc Hoan. 1981. *Mái trường thân yêu* (Dear school). Hà Nội: Kim Đồng Publishing House.
- Lim, P.H.L. (Ed.) 2009. *Chronicle of Singapore: Fifty years of headline news 1959–2009*. Singapore: Editions Didier Millet & National Library Board.
- Maria Nikolajeva. 2003. *The rhetoric of character in children's literature*. Lanham, Maryland and Oxford: Scarecrow Press.
- Nguyễn Huy Tường. 1970. *Hai bàn tay chiến sĩ* (two hands of a soldier), (Tập truyện và ký chọn lọc về đề tài kháng chiến chống Pháp 1945-1954), Hà Nội: Kim Đồng Publishing House.
- Nguyễn Huy Tường. 2014. *Lá cờ thêu sáu chữ vàng* (Flag embroidered with six golden letters), (In lần thứ 23), Hà Nội: Kim Đồng Publishing House.
- Nguyễn Thi. 1996. *Truyện ngắn chọn lọc* (Story collection), Writers Association Publishing House.
- Nguyễn Văn Long, Nguyễn Thị Bình, Lã Thị Bắc Lý, Mai Thị Nhung, Trần Đăng Xuyên. 2013. *Giáo trình Văn học Việt Nam hiện*

- đại. tập 2 (Từ sau cách mạng tháng tám 1945)* (Textbook of Modern Vietnamese Literature. Volume 2, Since the August Revolution 1945). University of Education Publishers.
- Osman, S.A. 2020. Folktale Adaptation and Female Agency: Reconfigurations of the Mahsuri Legend in Selected Contemporary Malaysian Young Adult Fiction. *Asian Children's Literature and Film in a Global Age. Asia-Pacific and Literature in English*. In: Wilson, B., Gabriel, S. (eds). Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore.
- Selat, Norazit, Yaacob Harun, and Lynne Khadijah Norazit. 2010. The Folk Literature of Malaysia. In *Anthology of ASEAN Folk Literature*. Vol. 1. Vientiane: ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, 52-54.
- Sujjapun, Ruenruthai. 2005. The legacy of traditional Thai literature and its impact on contemporary children's literature. *MANUSYA: Journal of Humanities* (Special Issues No. 10, 2005), 78-87.
- Sara Pankenier Weld. 2018. Paradoxes of the Russian Empress Catherine the Great's Writings for Children. *International Research in Children's Literature* 11(2):147-159
- Tô Hoài. 1959. *Hoa Sơn*, Nxb Kim Đồng, Hà Nội.
- Tổ Hữu. 1983. *Tuyển tập thơ* (Poetry collection). Literature Publishing House.
- Văn Tùng. 2012. (In lần thứ 8). Đội thiếu niên du kích thành Huế (Intelligence Youth Team in Hue). Hà Nội: Kim Đồng Publishing House.
- Vân Thanh. 1999. Phác thảo văn học thiếu nhi Việt Nam (Review of Vietnam Children's Literature). Hà Nội: Social Science Publishing House.
- Vân Thanh, ed. 2003. Văn học thiếu nhi Việt Nam (Vietnamese children's literature volume 1) tập 1. Hà Nội: Kim Đồng Publishing House.
- Vân Thanh, ed. 2003. Văn học thiếu nhi Việt Nam (Vietnamese children's literature volume 2) tập 2, Hà Nội: Kim Đồng Publishing House.
- Xuân Sách. 2011. (In lần thứ 11). Đội thiếu niên du kích Đình Bảng (Intelligence Youth Team in Dinh Bang). Hà Nội: Kim Đồng Publishing House.

Wilson, Bernard and Gabriel P., Sharmani. 2020. *Asian Children's Literature and Film in a Global Age: Local, National and Transnational Trajectories*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan.

Received: February 17, 2024; Reviewed: June 15, 2024; Accepted: July 1, 2024