

Themes, Topics, and Structure of Chivalrous Detective Novels in Southern Vietnam during the Early 20th Century

Truong Thi Linh¹

Abstract

This study examines the distinctive features of theme, content, and narrative structure in early 20th-century South Vietnamese knightly detective novels. The question posed is: how are theme, content, and narrative structure expressed? The study primarily employs a careful reading of texts, combined with systematic classification and analysis of relevant texts. Furthermore, a synthetic analysis method is applied to generalize key patterns and identify specific structural and thematic characteristics of the genre. The results show that South Vietnamese knightly detective novels exhibit a unique convergence of Western detective novel models and indigenous moral traditions, particularly the chivalrous and generous spirit of the South Vietnamese people in the early 20th century. Their themes and content often revolve around justice, morality, and social order, while the narrative structure integrates both traditional and modern elements. In short, this genre represents a fusion of indigenous and Western traditional genres and cultures. This demonstrates that the spirit of learning without hesitation is a recurring spirit throughout the Vietnamese tradition.

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Introduction

In the process of modernizing Vietnamese literature, the emergence and development of novels written in the national script marked a significant shift in narrative thinking and genre form. Within this trend, the chivalrous detective novel of Southern Vietnam stands out as a noteworthy phenomenon, both reflecting continuity in the evolution of modern literature and clearly showcasing regional characteristics. The cultural landscape of Southern Vietnam, with its tradition of valuing righteousness, chivalry, and a strong spirit of action, has nurtured a unique type of chivalrous character – reminiscent of the figure of Luc Van Tien in Nguyen Dinh Chieu's work, representing the moral principle of "to see justice and not act is cowardice." This cultural and moral foundation has provided the conditions for the formation of a distinct form of detective novel.

The chivalrous detective novels of Southern Vietnam, in essence, are products of the process of "imitation" and "adaptation" of foreign literature (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2016, p. 71), reflecting the intersection between the Western detective novel model and the Eastern chivalrous tradition in the Vietnamese context. However, this adaptation is not merely copying but is deeply localized, creating unique characteristics in content and form, especially in terms of themes, topics, and narrative structure.

¹ Faculty of Education, Thu Dau Mot University, Vietnam. Email: linhtt@tdmu.edu.vn

To date, the research gap on novels of Southern Vietnam, although has been almost gap-filled, issues concerning the genre of the novel, especially the chivalrous detective novels, have yet to be properly studied. Most studies have only focused on individual authors or a few representative works and have not systematically addressed this genre as a whole with regional specificities. Some typical approaches include research on Phu Duc's detective novels (Diep, 2018); an examination of the structure of detective novels through the case of Nguyen Chanh Sat (Nguyen, 2014); or an exploration of the works of Nam Dinh Nguyen the Phuong (Nguyen Q. T, 2016). In addition, there are general works such as "The Structure of Southern Novels in the Early Twentieth Century" (Truong, 2023), "Action Novels in the Early 20th Century in Southern Vietnam" (Vo, 2011), or studies on Vietnamese detective stories in the early 20th century (Nguyen. T. K, 2016; Nguyen & Nguyen Thanh Khanh, 2016). However, specialised studies on the themes, subjects, and structure of chivalrous detective novels as a system of poetics remain a gap.

In terms of content and artistry, the chivalrous detective novels of Southern Vietnam during this period bear the imprint of traditional morality (influenced by Confucian thought) while also expressing a modern, individualistic spirit of chivalry. This combination creates works that are both deeply rooted in Eastern ideals of righteousness and captivating in their Western-style elements of adventure, drama, and mystery. This hybrid characteristic contributes to the genre's unique appeal.

Based on the issues mentioned above, this article focuses on examining three fundamental aspects: subject matter, themes, and structure of chivalrous detective novels of Southern Vietnam in the first half of the 20th century. Through this, the article aims to clarify the intermingling nature and the process of localization of this genre, as evidence of the flexible adaptation of Southern Vietnamese literature in the context of modernization.

Materials and Methods

This article employs a meticulous reading method to qualitatively and statistically classify the manifestations and characteristics of the themes, topics, and structure of chivalrous detective novels. Furthermore, the article also uses an analytical-synthetic method to connect and analyse the characteristic manifestations of chivalrous novels in Southern Vietnam during the first half of the 20th century.

Results

Concept

The Britannica Dictionary defines detective story (n.d) as follows:

"Detective story, type of popular literature in which a crime is introduced and investigated and the culprit is revealed. The traditional elements of the detective story are: (1) the seemingly perfect crime; (2) the wrongly accused suspect at whom circumstantial evidence points; (3) the bungling of dim-witted police; (4) the greater powers of observation and superior mind of the detective; and (5) the startling and unexpected denouement, in which the detective reveals how the identity of the culprit was ascertained."

Based on the above conception of detective novels, we believe that Southern Vietnamese detective novels have not yet reached the level of sophistication as defined by the Britannica dictionary above. Author Nguyen Thanh Khanh (2016) argues that Southern Vietnamese detective novels in the early 20th century have the characteristics of "romance-chivalry-action detective stories" (Nguyen, T. K., 2016, p. 46) and this type of story has a blend of "influences of traditional Vietnamese literature, Chinese crime stories, and Western detective stories" as shown in the

novels of Le Hoang Muu, Buu Dinh, Bien Ngu Nhi, Phu Duc... (Nguyen, T. K., 2016, p. 46). From the analysis of the characteristics of detective stories, Nguyen Thanh Khanh (2016) defines the Vietnamese detective genre as "narrative works, written about the investigation process of a case by a detective character. The process of solving the case is based on logical thinking to clarify the case at the end of the story." (p. 30). Author Vo Van Nhon (2011) argues that detective novels and martial arts novels are two forms of action novels, and he defines "Action novel as a type of novel with an emotional plot, thrilling events, and characters with strong personalities (Vo, 2011, p. 28). In addition, the "multi-aesthetic, genre-synthesis, focus on expressing heroic inspiration, and glorifying chivalry" (Nguyen, 2014, p. 18) nature is evident in many works. Nguyen Thanh Thi (2014) observes:

"Ba Lau - rong nghe dao tac (Bien Ngu Nhi), is both a detective and a chivalrous hero. The ideal character here often combines the roles of knight and detective, possessing outstanding qualities in both intelligence and courage, and more importantly, righteousness. Mot doi hiep khach (Nguyen Chanh Sat) is a chivalrous novel but strongly imbued with elements of a social novel: "borrowing the form of chivalrous novels," "exposing the social reality of our country at the time." Chau Ve Hiep Pho, Lua Long (Phu Duc) also have similar characteristics." (Nguyen, 2014, p. 19).

Through studying and researching chivalrous detective novels of this period, we believe that chivalrous detective novels begin with a case: that case could be a murder, a theft, a robbery, a case of theft with a stealing dragon exchanging phoenix. From there, through the investigation of detectives, police officers, and chivalrous young men (young men with ambition, talent, and determination) who pursue the case to the end... In the end, the case is solved. For example: The Ba Lau case (Kim Thoi Di Su (Ba Lau rong nghe dao tac, Ch no bat nhon) (Bien Ngu Nhi, 1921); Hoan Ngoc An and Do Hieu Liem in Chau Ve Hiep Pho (Phu Duc, 1926); Bach Si Ma discovering and taking revenge on Ho Ky Phuoc when he killed his entire family to seize their property in Lua Long novel (Phu Duc, 1929); Tran Ly Trai and Minh Duong uncovering the wrongful conviction of Kieu Tien in Manh Trang Thu (Buu Dinh, 1931) and simultaneously uncovering the "stealing the dragon and replacing the phoenix" case of Nguyen Viet Sung; Cau Tam Lo discovering the theft of Minh Duong's mother's ring, with Kieu Tien falsely accused in Cau Tam Lo (the work of the same name by writer Buu Dinh, 1932); the case of Hung Minh being murdered in Toi Co Toi (Phu Duc, 1935)... In addition, one cannot fail to mention stories with a chivalrous and heroic like as: Tran Trong Nghia rescuing Chang Ca Mum in Nghia Hiep Ky Duyen (Nguyen Chanh Sat, 1920); the courage and bravery of Bach Phi Yen and Tran Nguon Kiet in Mot Doi Hiep Khach (Nguyen Chanh Sat, 1929).

Starting from the above concept, we believe that Southern Vietnamese chivalrous detective novels of the early 20th century are a genre that begins with a case featuring thrilling and captivating plot twists, alongside a deep and enduring love story between the main characters. In addition, the detectives demonstrate their talent in uncovering the truth through unexpected clues. The villain often disguises himself as a harmless person, gradually revealing his true nature (e.g., "Chau Ve Hiep Pho" by Phu Duc; "Tuy Hoa Dinh" by Nam Dinh Nguyen the Phuong...). Furthermore, Southern Vietnamese detective novels of this period have a chivalrous and righteous character, like Robin Hood (a character in English folklore), robbing the rich to give to the poor (e.g., "Ba Lau rong nghe dao tac" by Bien Ngu Nhi...).

Themes

The themes of chivalrous detective novels focus on exploring and discovering the diversity of life through the secrets behind criminal cases.

Firstly, the themes of most chivalrous detective stories in Southern Vietnam at the beginning of the 20th century begin with a crime. These could be a robbery in "Kim Thoi Di Su" (Bien Ngu Nhi, 1921); a family separation/ mysterious disappearance in "Nghia hiep ky duyen" (Nguyen Chanh Sat, 1920); gunshots in "Truong Tinh Bi Mat" (Duong Minh Dat, 1926); a wrongful conviction in "Manh trang Thu" (Buu Dinh, 1931); a murder in "Toi co toi" (Phu Duc, 1935), "Cu Kinh" (Ho Bieu Chanh, 1941)... This demonstrates the writers' profound observation of the times, and their ability reflects the diversity and complexity of life...

Secondly, the theme reflects the author's spirit of resistance to the West. The emergence of this resistance is "the emergence of nationalism (...) is the concept of national identity" (Duong, 2013, p. 27) of colonial peoples.

"In their efforts to build national identity, colonial peoples often struggle between resistance to the pressure of colonial culture and the allure of modernity associated with that culture, between indigenous reality and the seemingly sophisticated and universal values of the West." (Duong, 2013, p. 27)

We can see this spirit of resistance present in all genres of novels, even short stories from Southern Vietnam in the early 20th century, not to mention other genres such as poetry, editorials, political and social commentary, and literary criticism... prevalent in newspapers everywhere. Such as "Who Left the Bomb in the Middle of the Road?" "Midnight..." (Tran Quang Nghiep), "The Unemployed's Bland Rice Bowl", "White Silver, Black Heart..." (Son Vuong). This spirit of resistance also exists in socio-psychological novels, historical novels, novels about customs, ethics, and morality, and especially in chivalrous detective novels, where this spirit of resistance is further enhanced by its distinctive characteristics. This is shown through characters such as: Ba Lau, originally a chivalrous young man, becomes a notorious robber in "Kim thoi di su" (Bien Ngu Nhi, 1921); Ky Dong, originally a young man full of ambition, becomes a ruthless bandit and murderer in "Tinh trung huyet le" (Phu Duc, 1930); Even, due to circumstances, Lo Tri Tham and Xich Dau Tu... became notorious bandits whose names struck fear into everyone's hearts. Later, because of their lovers, they became gentle, kind men who loved their wives and family, as depicted in "Dem rot cua nguoi toi tu hinh" (The last night of a condemned man) (Le Hoang Muu, 1929).

Thirdly, the theme extols heroic figures who value righteousness and loyalty, embodying the spirit of "to see justice and not act is cowardice" in chivalrous/martial arts-themed detective novels, such as: Tran Trong Nghia rescuing Chang Ca Mum in "Nghia Hiep Ky Duyen" (Nguyen Chanh Sat, 1920); Tran Nguon Kiet and Bach Phi Yen helping those in distress and punishing corrupt individuals in "Moi Doi Hiep Khach" (Nguyen Chanh Sat, 1929)... These heroic characters, embodying the chivalrous spirit and the concept and actions of "to see justice and not act is cowardice," are like modern-day Luc Van Tien. They are skilled in martial arts, possess supernatural abilities... and especially possess the Southern Vietnamese spirit of valuing righteousness, doing favors without expecting anything in return.

They might be detectives with a Western education, like Detective Anh-be Huynh ("Toi co toi" - Phu Duc). Being human, they sometimes make mistakes in determining guilt because clues in a case often divert the investigation. However, they remain level-headed, correct their

mistakes, and ultimately uncover the truth. They might act as detectives for the sake of justice, like Vuong Cong ("Tinh truong huyet le" - Phu Duc), who voluntarily apprehends the Black Devil bandits and hands them over to the authorities. They might also sacrifice themselves to bring the guilty to justice, as in Bach Si Ma ("Lua long" - Phu Duc). They might also strive to uncover the truth out of familial affection, like Tran Thanh Trai, Minh Duong, and Tam Lo investigating the murder of Kieu Tien's husband on their wedding night ("Manh trang thu" - Buu Dinh)... This showcases the talent, courage, and strategic thinking of detectives, or of chivalrous heroes who help those in need, adding drama to the story. The plot twist in a work can stem from a misunderstanding where the detective investigates a case. Still, the person under investigation, or all clues leading to the person under investigation, are false or fabricated to mislead the authorities or the detective. This twist is further heightened by the dramatic effect when the person under investigation, initially accused for some reason (such as being threatened, interrogated, or out of love for their child...), confesses, as in the case of the driver Bui Van Cuong in "Toi co toi" (Phu Duc, 1935), or the district magistrate's wife confessing to murder in place of her son in "Cu Kinh" (Ho Bieu Chanh, 1941)... The case, seemingly at a dead end, is eventually solved, as in the wrongful conviction of Kieu Tien for murdering her husband ("Manh trang thu" - Buu Dinh)... The true cause of the case is finally revealed, surprising the reader and thus creating curiosity and intrigue.

Fourth, the theme praises chivalrous heroes and brilliant detectives. They are people who "have good health, courage, perseverance, strong nerves, and remain calm in all situations." (Nguyen, T. K, 2016, p. 32). In addition, they need to possess a personality trait of "a keen sense of judgment, adaptability to all conditions, environments, and circumstances." (Nguyen, T. K., 2016, p. 32). They are also people who enjoy adventure, have decisive personalities, and act independently (Nguyen, T. K., 2016, p. 32). Most of the detective characters are individuals with sharp judgment and deductive skills... and most of them are Western-educated intellectuals, using modern tools in apprehending criminals, employing their intellect in outsmarting cunning criminals... They exemplify chivalrous young men – doing good deeds without regard for fame or fortune.

However, in the early 20th century, the detective genre with a chivalrous and martial spirit dominated, so detective/heroic characters were not the main characters of chivalrous detective novels (except for a few novels leaning towards chivalry, such as "Mot doi hiep khach" (Nguyen Chanh Sat...)). In most chivalrous detective novels of this period, the detective element was only a part of the overall plot; solving the case was not an essential theme in Southern Vietnamese novels of the early 20th century. It was not until the authors Pham Cao Cung and The Lu that the detective novel matured into a distinct genre, as noted by Nguyen, T. K (2016).

Topics

The topics in chivalrous detective novels reflect the diversity in the portrayal of life by writers of this period. They focus on the following main themes:

Firstly, the theme of praising the chivalrous spirit of chivalrous robbers: robbing the rich to give to the poor, as in Ba Lau ("Kim Thoi Di Su" - Bien Ngu Nhi, 1921).

Secondly, the theme of rescuing the distressed and helping the vulnerable, a characteristic of people in Southern Vietnam, recurs in chivalrous detective novels. They save people because it is necessary and right, not for personal gain. They do what is right, as in the spirit of Luc Van Tien, "To see justice and not act is cowardice," and this is the spirit of mutual assistance and helping the poorer and more unfortunate than themselves, a characteristic of

the people of Southern Vietnam. For example, Tran Nguon Kiet and Bach Phi Yen in "Mot doi hiep khach" (Nguyen Chanh Sat).

Thirdly, it praises the intelligence of a segment of the population who try to uncover the hidden circumstances of wrongful convictions, cases that seem impossible to solve, or cases that begin with a certain event such as: beginning with three gunshots fired in the quiet late night in the house of the District Magistrate's wife ("Truong tinh bi mat" - Duong Minh Dat, 1929); This includes a murder case in "Manh trang thu" (Buu Dinh, 1931), "Toi co toi" (Phu Duc, 1935).

Fourth, the theme highlights the "heroic aspirations, national consciousness, and passionate, sometimes impulsive, attitudes of love and hate" (Nguyen, 2014, p. 18) of the people of Southern Vietnam through some chivalrous novels such as: "Nghia hiep ky duyen" (1920), "Trinh hiep luong my" (1925), "Mot doi hiep khach" (1929) by Nguyen Chanh Sat...

Fifth, the theme reflects the complexity of modern life, full of secrets, hidden feelings, and hidden corners... that need to be discovered and investigated. Whether it is a kidnapping case for love ("Truong tinh bi mat" - Duong Minh Dat, 1929); a fraud case for inheritance ("Nghia hiep ki duyen" - Nguyen Chanh Sat, 1920); A case of theft involving the swapping of dragons and phoenixes, murder for inheritance in "Cay đàng mui doi" (Ho Bieu Chanh, 1923), "Manh trang thu" (Buu Dinh, 1931); a case of murder for love ("Toi co toi" - Phu Duc, 1935), "Cu Kinh" (Ho Bieu Chanh, 1941); a case of murder due to misconceptions about values ("Nguoi that chi" - Ho Bieu Chanh, 1938)... All of these create a diverse and complex society of true values: between good and evil, right and wrong, noble and base, benevolent and unjust... the boundaries cannot be clearly defined. This is a very valuable theme in literature because of its complexity.

Structure

Besides the traditional linear chronological structure and circular structure, chivalrous detective novels of this period also utilize modern structural styles to experiment with the authors' exploration, learning, and imitation in the process of modernizing the national literature.

Firstly, the universal structural style mentioned by author Nguyen Thanh Thi (2014) when studying chivalrous detective novels of Southern Vietnam in the early 20th century includes three important elements: "I. Specific situational context; II. Plot framework - cause-and-effect events; and III. Character's motivation - viewed from the narrator's perspective." (Nguyen, 2014, p. 21). This can be considered a typical structural style for chivalrous detective novels of Southern Vietnam in the early 20th century.

Secondly, the "twisted" structural pattern (to use Nguyen Hue Chi's term) was also frequently used in detective novels, and even socio-psychological novels in the early 20th century in Southern Vietnam. This structural pattern reflects the interplay between good and evil, right and wrong, in each character. A character in the work who leans towards one side is considered good, and vice versa, such as: Ba Lau ("Kim Thoi Di Su" - Bien Ngu Nhi, 1921); Hoan Ngoc An ("Chau Ve Hiep Pho" - Phu Duc, 1926); Kì Dông ("Lua long" - Phú Đức, 1930), Bách Sĩ Ma, Vương Công ("Tinh trung huyết lệ" - Phú Đức, 1929)... Regarding the character Hoan Ngoc An, some authors say:

"The handsome, chivalrous young man Hoàn Ngọc Ẩn in Châu về hiệp phố possesses both the deductive reasoning and judgment reminiscent of Sherlock

Holmes, and the intelligence, quick wit, and extraordinary talent of the bandit Arsène Lupin in Maurice Leblanc's detective stories." (Diep, 2018).

In addition, "He lives two contrasting lives: one playing the role of "the handsome, romantic medical student Hoan Ngoc An"; the other playing the role of "the clever, cunning bandit Hiep Liec" (Diep, 2018).

Thirdly, the contrasting structure, accepting randomness and predetermined fate (Nguyen, T. T., 2016, p. 28), was also extensively used in chivalrous detective novels of this period. This structure is common in chivalrous detective novels such as: "Kim Thoi Di Su" (Bien Ngu Nhi, 1921), "Trinh Hiep Luong My", "Nghia Hiep Ky Duyen", "Mot Doi Hiep Khach"... (Nguyen Chanh Sat); "Chau Ve Hiep Pho", "Lua Long", "Tinh Truong Huyet Le"... (Phu Duc); "Manh Trang Thu", "Cau Tam Lo"... (Buu Dinh); "Tuy Hoa Dinh", "Vo Oan Trai", "Lua Phien Chay Gan", "Chen Thuoc Doc"... (Nam Dinh Nguyen The Phuong); "Truong Tinh Bi Mat" (Duong Minh Dat)... The characters often meet each other by chance, a random event (the author pre-selects the situation for the characters to meet and make a pact with each other), or even, the discovery of a case is also due to that chance or randomness. For example: Mr. Trinh The Xuong accidentally meets Tran Trong Nghia and Chang Ca Mum ("Nghia Hiep Ky Duyen" - Nguyen Chanh Sat); the chance encounter of the two brothers Di Le and Ky Dong ("Tinh Truong Huyet Le" - Phu Duc); Mr. Truong Cong Duoc meets Di Le, heals her beautiful face, and falls in love with her ("Tinh Truong Huyet Le" - Phu Duc); the accidental discovery of the robbery that led to the wrongful death of Ms. Nam's parents ("Dem rot cua nguoi toi tu hinh" - Le Hoang Muu)... The contrasting structure is a traditional structure, often used by Southern Vietnamese writers in most other genres. In this structure, characters are usually placed on two opposing lines: between good and evil, right and wrong, justice - injustice, humanity - inhumanity - injustice, nobility - baseness, deceit - freedom... For example, in "Lua Long" (Phu Duc), the characters are placed in opposing positions:

Aspect	Protagonist Line	Antagonist Line
Relationships	The Bach Si Ma brothers, Hoan Ngoc An, Hong Son	Ho Ky Phuoc and lawyer Nguyen Thanh My
Motivation	Revenge for family (Bach Si Ma); fighting for honor (Hong Son)	Robbery and murder to cover tracks (Ho Ky Phuoc); stealing love (Nguyen Thanh My)
Methods / Spirit	- Actions driven by righteousness; revenge carried out openly and honorably- Brave, patient, mentally resilient in executing plans- Fearless in the face of danger and hardship when confronting enemies	- Cunning, easily losing composure- Kidnapping even young women to threaten others (Ho Ky Phuoc kidnaps Ho Bach Lien and Hong Suong to threaten the Bach Si Ma brothers)- Forcing love (Ho Ky Phuoc coerces Hong Suong and even Bach Lien when he learns she is not his daughter)- Easily panics when plans or schemes are disrupted

Outcomes (Gain/Loss Effects)	- Enduring brotherhood and friendship: willingness to sacrifice for one another without self-interest; bonds based on emotional ties	- Temporary, easily broken relationships- Driven by immediate gains: once power or benefit is gone, relationships collapse
Ending	- Characters achieve reunion and happiness with family and friends, resolving conflicts	- Characters are punished: suffer tragic deaths or severe consequences

Fourth, the parallel structure between character lines. We can see this in novels such as: "Nghia hiep ky duyen," "Mot doi hiep khach" (Nguyen Chanh Sat); "Chau Ve Hiep Pho," "Lua Long," "Tinh Truong Huyet Le" (Phu Duc)... The character lines appearing in parallel in "Nghia hiep ky duyen" (Nguyen Chanh Sat) include: the line about "Lam Tri Vien - Dao Phi Dang and Trinh The Xuong's deception," the second line "telling about Tran Trong Nghia's act of saving people and the process of his friendship with Chang Ca Mum." (Nguyen, 2014, p. 29). Finally, the two character lines merge into one. The character lines appearing in parallel in "Tinh Truong Huyet Le" (Phu Duc) are: the first line, the family background of Vuong Cong; the second line, the family background of Di Le (the meeting between Di Le and her foster mother and the doctor Truong Cong Duoc, who cured her beauty and illness); the third line is that of Chief Judge Nguyen Hao Sanh. The confluence of three character lines creates a "continuous narrative flow" (Nguyen, 2014, p. 29) for the entire story. We can also see this clearly in "Mot doi hiep khach" (Nguyen Chanh Sat): the two character lines, Bach Phi Yen and Tran Nguon Kiet, initially develop along different paths, ultimately converging into a single story, creating a "continuous narrative flow" (Nguyen, 2014, p. 29). Or the character line of Kieu Tien - Minh Duong - Tran Thanh Trai contrasts with the character line of Nguyen Viet Sung in "Manh trang thu" (Buu Dinh)... All of these create a parallel structure for early 20th-century detective novels in Southern Vietnam.

Fifth, the structure features "dramatic plot twists and turns, a thrilling and mysterious storytelling style, and the portrayal of a bandit with exceptional thieving and disguise skills" (Duong, 2013, p. 28). We can see this through the disguise skills of Bach Si Ma (Lua long - Phu Duc); Kim Thoi Di Su (Bien Ngu Nhi)... This way of twisting and untying keeps the reader curious and interested, following the story from beginning to end.

Sixth, detective stories of this period exhibit a grid-like structure (grid structure) similar to Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories or Maurice Leblanc's Arsène Lupin. According to this structure, the work is divided into many small parts, each part representing a case from beginning to end. For example, in Bien Ngu Nhi's "Kim Thoi Di Su", the author describes quite meticulously the confrontation between Ba Lau – the robber – and the ruthless wealthy – the victims, or the confrontation between the robber and the authorities..." (Duong, 2013, p. 28). "Each part is a relatively independent small plot, but all are connected to a central theme: Ba Lau is a professional thief." (Vo, 2011, p. 30). Or as Nguyen Q. Thang (2016) commented:

"Nam Dinh Nguyen The Phuong's romantic detective novels are a type of 'long novel,' with one book following another, making readers curious to know how

the characters are related and why their actions are so consistent.” (Nguyen, Q. T., p. 9).

Seventh, the structure does not follow the traditional (chapter-style) method but uses Roman numerals in the stories. If there are any remnants of the chapter-style novel, they are shown in the fact that, after using Roman numerals or Arabic numerals, the author adds a phrase that expresses the main content of the chapter. This mainly arouses the reader's curiosity. For example, “I. Using lust to kill people” (Phu Duc, 1999, *Chau ve hiep pho*, p. 250). Who is the person here? Who used lust to kill whom?... This type of chapter title sparks curiosity in the reader about the chapter's content, compelling them to pick up the book and read it to unravel the questions raised in their minds.

Eighth, besides the linear structure, the reverse chronological structure is also frequently used in chivalrous detective novels of this period in Southern Vietnam. Often, an event such as: a robbery (“*Kim Thoi Di Su*” - Bien Ngu Nhi); a murder (“*Toi co toi*” - Phu Duc), (“*Manh trang thu*” - Buu Dinh), “*Mot doi hiep si*” (Nguyen Chanh Sat); a disappearance (“*Manh trang thu*” - Buu Dinh)... occurs right at the beginning of the work. Then, the author begins to guide the reader through the process of the robbery or the reason and origin of the murder or mysterious disappearance. Readers will follow the detectives' progress, based on every detail the case leaves behind: a fingerprint, a missing wallet, a letter... gradually unraveling the final knot, and the mastermind slowly and unexpectedly revealed to the reader.

Furthermore, certain structural patterns, such as the unresolved or unfulfilled ending, were also employed in chivalrous detective novels of this period. This narrative structure can be observed in the novel “*Toi co toi*” by Phu Duc. In this work, Xe Xinh Nguyet, originally portrayed as a gentle and kind-hearted girl, ultimately lives and dies in persistent torment and anguish, unable to comprehend why her lover abandoned her. Similarly, Father Anh Phong Hien spends his entire life in suffering, continuously burdened by remorse and repentance.

In general, chivalrous detective novels reflect the demand to represent socio-political realities, featuring brilliant detectives such as Sherlock Holmes (Arthur Conan Doyle, England) and Arsene Lupin (Maurice Leblanc, France), alongside chivalrous figures who “rob from the rich to give to the poor,” such as Robin Hood. The archetype of the chivalrous hero—one who feels compelled to act upon witnessing injustice—is exemplified by Luc Van Tien, who upholds the principle that “to see injustice and not act is cowardice” (Luc Van Tien – Nguyen Dinh Chieu). It is also reflected in the heroic ideal articulated by Nguyen Cong Tru: “Having been born under heaven and earth, one must achieve a name worthy of the mountains and rivers,” or in the figure of Tu Hai in *Truyen Kieu* by Nguyen Du, who is depicted as “holding the sky high and treading firmly upon the earth... bearing half the burden of mountains and rivers with a single oar.” Collectively, these models contribute to the formation of a rich and dynamic tradition of chivalrous detective fiction.

Accordingly, when commenting on the detective novels of Nam Dinh Nguyen The Phuong, Nguyen Q. Thang (2016) observes:

“The most outstanding feature of the romantic detective novels of Nam Dinh Nguyen the Phuong is that their artistic vision consistently rests upon traditional morality, never transgressing the boundaries of national ethical norms.” (Nguyen Q. T., 2016, p. 11).

Characters in the chivalrous detective novels of this period typically embody a distinct mode of action: “(...) saving the suffering and aiding those in danger, valuing righteousness over

wealth, and upholding honor (...); this may culminate in a virtuous death (...) or in retributive punishment (...)" (Nguyen Q. T., 2016, p. 11). They "live and die in accordance with the traditions of family and social education, even when confronted with evil" (Nguyen Q. T., 2016, p. 11).

In addition, the narrative structure of chivalrous detective novels in this period also exhibits key characteristics of the detective genre: the central mysteries are typically concealed until the conclusion, even though clues are gradually revealed throughout the narrative, often leading to surprising developments up to the final moment. As Nguyen Q. T. (2016) argues, "the structure must ensure that secrets are carefully preserved within each chapter and section of the story; only at the end are readers able to fully perceive the consequences of those events" (p. 11).

Conclusion

Chivalrous detective novels in Southern Vietnam during the first half of the twentieth century constitute a distinctive literary phenomenon, marked by a unique convergence within the broader process of national literary modernization. The themes, subject matter, and narrative structures of this genre remain rooted in the traditions of Eastern literary history, while simultaneously demonstrating clear intersections with Western influences. Notably, the language employed in these works is highly modern, characterized by a prose style that closely resembles everyday speech, gradually moving away from the parallel, symmetrical, and rhetorically patterned expressions typical of medieval literature. This linguistic transformation significantly enhances the genre's appeal. Moreover, the integration of investigative and adventurous elements with a strong chivalrous ethos gives rise to a narrative structure that is at once modern and deeply imbued with Eastern cultural characteristics.

Furthermore, in terms of themes and subject matter, chivalrous detective novels not only reflect issues of society, justice, and order within the colonial context but also articulate ideals and aspirations for fairness, freedom, and even patriotism among the people of Southern Vietnam. These elements are often conveyed in subtle ways, shaped by the strict censorship imposed by the colonial authorities of the time. From a structural perspective, the genre flexibly combines the narrative model of traditional Eastern chivalrous fiction with that of Western detective fiction, resulting in hybrid structures that are both modern and traditional.

Based on the foregoing analysis, it can be affirmed that chivalrous detective novels in Southern Vietnam are not merely works of entertainment but also serve as significant evidence of the adaptive capacity and creative vitality of Vietnamese literature in the context of cultural contact and exchange. The identification and examination of this genre from multiple perspectives contribute to a deeper understanding of its significance and facilitate its clearer conceptualization. However, within the scope of this article, the analysis has been limited to several fundamental aspects. Issues such as character systems, moral discourse, and the relationship between literature and the publishing market remain to be explored more thoroughly in future studies.

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