

DOAN CAM THI

“*Un moi sans masque*”: *L’Autobiographie au Vietnam (1887–1945)*. Paris: Riveneuve, 2019. 260 pages.

Doan Cam Thi’s “*Un moi sans masque*”: *L’Autobiographie au Vietnam (1887–1945)* is a well-researched and insightful book on the emergence of autobiography in modern Vietnamese literature. The author opens the volume with a comprehensive overview of the social, historical, and literary context in which this phenomenon occurs, tracing the birth of self-writing [*tự truyện*] in major classical works in Hán and Nôm. In discussing how the concept of *cái tôi* [the self] is articulated through the dualism of *thân* [body/person] and *tâm* [heart/mind], she calls for the need to go beyond the Western notion of self and subjectivity in the study of autobiography in Confucian cultures.

Focusing on the growing interest that this literary genre has gained among Vietnamese scholars and critics in the post-Renovation era, Doan Cam Thi reminds the reader that, during the war and postwar years, when national and class ideology was dominant, writing about the self was viewed as reactionary in Vietnam. In addition, the lack of a rigorous definition of “autobiography” has been a stumbling block for researchers. Drawing on her use of Philippe Lejeune’s seminal theory of the autobiographical pact as a way to tackle the genre issue, she identifies three foundational autobiographies in *quốc ngữ* that span most of the first half of the twentieth century: Tản Đà’s *Great Dream* [*Giấc mộng lớn*] (1928), Nguyễn Hồng’s *Childhood Days* [*Những ngày thơ ấu*] (1944), and Tô Hoài’s *Wild Grass* [*Cỏ dại*] (1948). These emerging works, she argues, are not only indicative of the authors’ written styles and approaches to the act of self-writing and

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self-exploration but also reveal a deep sociohistorical change in Vietnam from the impact of French colonization and, later, the opening to other Asian countries.

In order to account for the birth of the autobiography in the fast-changing, transnational sphere of influence in which these authors lived and wrote, Doan Cam Thi investigates their life trajectories in the three chapters following the introduction. Based on the premise that the development of the autobiographical genre in Vietnam was directly related to the national project of decolonization and modernization, she postulates that autobiography has its place in the historical continuity that connects transitional authors like Tấn Đà (1889–1939)—whose classical education was nourished by the teachings of Confucius, Zhuangzi, and Rousseau, to name a few—to Nguyễn Hồng (1918–1982) and Tô Hoài (1920–2014), the new generation of readers of modern Western writers, such as Gide, Dostoevsky, Freud, and Marx.

Chapter 1 showcases a profound reading of Tấn Đà's autobiography, which includes three volumes, *Small Dream 1* [*Giấc mộng con 1*], *Small Dream 2* [*Giấc mộng con 2*], and *Great Dream*. Doan Cam Thi's study charts the journey of self-discovery of a Confucian scholar who, despite his distress at seeing his familiar world and his dream for a traditional mandarin career crumble around him, also realized the freedom this brings for self-invention. It is in this ambivalent context that Tấn Đà's autobiography reveals the writer's identity crisis and self-transformation, as he struggles to make sense of who he is as an individual, a poet, and a social subject in a modernized Vietnam. If, in his first two volumes, the scholar takes on the fantasist identity of a fallen immortal to explore and mourn his former Confucian self, in *Great Dream*, Tấn Đà narrates in minute detail the real-life experiences that account for the modern writer he has become. His metaphorical rebirth through the act of self-writing in *quốc ngữ* can be read in the narration of his convalescence from a long illness that leaves him plagued with indigestion. As Doan Cam Thi brilliantly surmises, Tấn Đà's particular choice of the term *minh* [body/I] rather than the commonly used first-person subject pronoun *tôi* reveals how the autobiographer's sense of self is expressed primarily through his own body and its corporeal function. Tấn Đà's unabashed expressions of self-exaltation and his self-exploration

through dreams and fantasies constitute the novelty and audacity of what is deemed the first modern autobiography in Vietnam that both continues and breaks away from the Vietnamese classical tradition of self-writing.

In the following chapters, Doan turns to two popular writers, Nguyễn Hồng and Tô Hoài. Born some thirty years after Tản Đà, these writers belong to the generation of young Vietnamese intellectuals who were among the first beneficiaries of a French-indigenous education that brought them into closer contact with Western novelists, such as Gide, Trotsky, Gorki, and Husserl, rather than with Vietnamese classical poets. Their trajectories share many similarities, including a childhood of deprivation and an active engagement in the communist anti-colonial resistance. For both writers, self-consciousness goes hand in hand with class awareness, and their quests for self-identity are closely related to the larger project of social reform and national liberation led by the Việt Minh.

Starting with Nguyễn Hồng, the young writer who rose to fame at the young age of nineteen with his debut novel, *Bỉ Vỏ*, in 1937, Doan Cam Thi postulates that his autobiography, *Childhood Days*, published a year later, marks a turning point in Vietnamese literature in terms of genre and theme. Evidence of the strong influence of Western literature can be seen not just in reference to the Freudian psychoanalytic theory of sexuality, but also to a number of well-known French children's stories. Spread over a short time span of seven years in the author's life, between the ages of seven and fourteen, *Childhood Days* is not only the first childhood autobiography in Vietnam, but also the most subversive at the time of its publication, owing to its daring exploration of child sexuality and Oedipean desire through the mother-son relationship. As Doan Cam Thi's close reading of several passages of the novel argues, Nguyễn Hồng's evocative and sensual description of his mother's body and her touch expose the incestuous undertones of his love. This thematic subversion is the impetus behind his dual objective: by relating his maladaptive childhood memories, he seeks to understand himself as a desiring subject and denounce the social injustice and gender inequality perpetuated by Confucian family values.

From 1945 onward, as Vietnam entered the communist era and socialist realism became the sanctioned method of Vietnamese writing, *Childhood*

*Days* fell victim to its own groundbreaking exploration of childhood sexual desire and subjectivity. Nguyễn Hồng, after becoming an executive member of the Vietnamese Writers Association, had to, in turn, revert to various strategies to downplay the subversive aspects of his autobiography. In casting himself as a defender of victims, women, and children, Nguyễn Hồng contributed to the reductive reading tradition, for his book serves moreover as a hymn to the mother's devotion and sacrifice.

Doan Cam Thi's final chapter sets out to shed light on Tô Hoài's first autobiography, *Wild Grass* (1944). Although another four autobiographical books were subsequently published, Doan Cam Thi points out that none bears the same fresh mark of the author's artistic and self-exploration found in *Wild Grass*, where the twenty-three-year-old Tô Hoài turns his childhood self into a research object and his writing into an experiment. What is most intriguing is how his search for a new form of self-expression centers on his fascination with photographs. In particular, a family photo of himself, his mother, and his two sisters plays a central role in his autobiography and holds the key to the development of his homosexual identity. Considering Barthes's reflection on photography and his definition of the *punctum* as a wounding effect of a photograph on the viewer, Doan Cam Thi posits that for Tô Hoài, the abandonment of the father, evidenced in the father's glaring absence from the family photo, is the author's secret wound. For Doan Cam Thi, Tô Hoài's childhood autobiography, which explores the young boy's affective attachment to other men, can be interpreted as a double attempt to recall, through these male substitute figures, memories of his father and to close the puncture wound left by his desertion.

While the modernity of Tô Hoài's memoir lies in his experimental self-narrative, it is this very aspect that may explain why *Wild Grass* was subjected to four intriguing editorial revisions in the turning-point years of 1944, 1978, 1997, and 2004. Based on her deep knowledge of the cultural, historical, and ideological context in Vietnam during those years, Doan Cam Thi's comparative reading of the four variants offer some compelling hypotheses on their rewritings. Most significantly, the removal of many long passages—particularly those pertaining to Tô Hoài's daydreams, his self-questioning, and his sexual orientation that initially reflect the uncertain path he has taken in his self-discovery journey—betrays an act of

self-censorship as the author attempts to circumvent state censorship and maintain his place as a major proletarian and social writer in Vietnam.

Doan Cam Thi's thought-provoking research on the self-narratives by Tấn Đà, Nguyễn Hồng, and Tô Hoài constitutes a timely introduction of these pioneering Vietnamese autobiographers to a wider French-speaking audience and stands as a much-needed contribution to the study of autobiography in non-European literatures. As Doan Cam Thi states in her conclusion, "*Un moi sans masque*" is an open door to further research on the evolution of the autobiography in Vietnam. In a globalized, post-modern world, the arrival on the literary scene of a new generation of female writers whose self-quest challenges the notion of identity cohesion and reality in the classical autobiography signals the rise of autofiction as the new life-writing genre in Vietnam today.

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