

# Investigative Reportage in Vietnamese Literature: Journey between Marginal and Mainstream

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REPORTAGE LITERATURE IS an international literary phenomenon, but the way it is treated in scholarly circles differs between countries. In Vietnamese literature, *ký* (reportage literature) generously embraces many different genres such as *phóng sự* (investigative reportage, which examines a contemporary issue), *ký sự* (reportage which covers a complete event or journey), *du ký* (travelogues), *tùy bút* (casual essays, which may include satirical essays, familiar essays and other variations), *nhật ký* (diary), *hồi ký* (memoir), *truyện ký* (stories about real persons, real events), *thư* (epistolary), and so on. Like other subgenres of *ký*, investigative reportage has experienced many ups and downs, due to its unique characteristics. This article examines the performance and reception of investigative reportage in four historical periods, which are pre-1858 (Vietnamese feudalism and Chinese cultural influence), 1858–1945 (French colony), 1945–1975 (socialist transformation, the Indochina and the Vietnam War) and from 1986 to present.

To analyse the unique journey of investigative reportage between the margins and mainstream of Vietnamese literature, the article takes the example of Vũ Trọng Phụng (1912–1939), one of the greatest 20<sup>th</sup> century Vietnamese writers, who was considered ‘King of Reportage’ during 1930–1945. *Dumb Luck*, the English translation of his novel *Số Đổ* was named by the Los Angeles Times as one of the best books of fiction in 2003. His other works which were translated into English include two reportages: *The Industry of Marrying Europeans* (1934) and *Prostitution and Venereal Disease in Colonial Hanoi* (1937).

## Defining ‘Investigative Reportage’ and ‘Interpretative/Illustrative Reportage’

According to Itule and Anderson, all reporters are investigators who are trained to ask questions, uncover information and write the most complete stories possible. Nevertheless, some reporters concentrate solely on investigations of wrongdoings. They deal with reporter-adversary relationships that are usually not found in beat reporting

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or other in-depth coverage. They aim to ferret out well-guarded information from often hostile sources. This gives them a chance to be creative, to become part of their reader's emotional lives and sometimes to uncover an injustice and correct it. Therefore, investigative reportage has a great potential to move from journalism to literature.<sup>1</sup> It is a democratic and sharp kind of literature.

Curtis MacDougall in his book *Interpretative Reporting* states that a reporter should not be limited to describing to the audience the what, who, when, where and how of a news event. The story reporter should be able to explain the why aspect of the issue being reported as well as the significance of the event in relation to other events. Interpretative reporting therefore is originally not opposed to investigative reporting.<sup>2</sup> But, what happens when all the interpretative reportages are composed or censored under a predetermined political orientation? They will become nothing but illustrative ones. This article looks at the receptions of Vũ Trọng Phụng's investigative reportages over time to examine why investigative reportage and illustrative reportage have kept moving between the margin and mainstream in Vietnamese literature.

## Proto-reportage Before 1858

Works of proto-reportage can be traced back to the 1700s in Vietnamese traditional literature, in such works as Vũ Phương Đề's *Công dư tiếp ký* (*Random Notes Taken When Unoccupied by Public Affairs*, 1755), and Lê Hữu Trác's *Thượng kinh ký sự* (*Record of a Visit to the Royal Palace*, 1782). The former records real social, cultural and historical events and even magical incidents which were believed to have happened around the writer's time, while the latter narrates a journey into the royal life with a scholar's sharp, satirical yet tolerant eyes, providing readers with insights into the corrupt reality of feudal society. While *Công dư tiếp ký*'s form resembles the short story in many ways, *Thượng kinh ký sự*, though different to investigative reportage in modern sense, may be considered as the first investigative reportage in Vietnamese literature. There is a long-term tradition in Vietnamese feudal society to treat poetry and academic essays as superior to story-telling texts. However, since the 1700s, when Vietnamese feudalism reached its climax of corruption, the need to reflect the realities by telling stories increased, reflected in the blossoming of proto-reportage and fiction. They were not appreciated by the supporters of orthodox literature and administration, but spread amongst small literary circles and the ordinary people.

## 1858–1945: Investigative Reportage and the Literary Modernization

Not before the period 1858–1945 did genuine reportage, especially investigative reportage, become an essential part of ordinary life and literature. Since Vietnam became a French colony in 1858, its general culture and literature in particular were deeply

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce Itule and Douglas Anderson, *News Writing and Reporting for Today's Media*, 7th edn. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2007), 397.

<sup>2</sup>Curtis McDougall and Robert Delaware Reid, *Interpretative Reporting*, 9th edn. (New York: MacMillan, 1987), 413–415.

influenced by French culture. As journalism started becoming a profession, Vũ Trọng Phụng and many other writers who were educated in French-style schools brought modern *phóng sự* (investigative reportage) into Vietnamese literary life through newspapers during the 1930s. That Leon Blum's newly-established government (1936) extended more democratic options for French colonies than previously was a factor which helped investigative reportage to prosper in Vietnam. It became one of the chief genres of modern literature, along with the novel and 'New Poetry'.

The first *bona fide* work of investigative reportage was Tam Lang's *I Pulled a Rickshaw* (1932), which offered a unique account of the Hanoi rickshaw trade. Inspired by Tam Lang, many journalist-writers disguised themselves as house servants, playboys, gamblers, businessmen, and so on to investigate the dark corners of society. Among them, Vũ is considered the most skilled, enthusiastic and sharp writer of investigative reportage. During the short time from 1930 to his death in 1939, Vũ produced an incredible amount of work, including more than 30 short stories, 9 novels (which are rich in reportage), 7 plays, 9 collections of investigative reportage and hundreds of critical and political essays. His investigative reportage covers a wide range of social issues: the miserable life of poor officials (*Officials' Life*, 1932), fraud gambling in Hanoi (*Human Traps*, 1933), the life of women who married European soldiers and officials (*The Techniques of Marrying Europeans*, 1934), senators' corruption (*Senators and Senators!*, 1936), miserable servants (*House Servants*, 1936), prostitution (*Prostitution and Venereal Disease in Colonial Hanoi*, 1937), and the corruption of the countryside (*New Year Celebration in A Rural District*, 1938). The period 1930–1945 is considered the golden age of investigative reportage in Vietnamese literature, and Vũ eventually gained fame as the 'King of Reportage.' While investigative pieces by Vũ and many other writers were well received by readers, they, especially Vũ's works, also attracted severe criticism from conservatives as well as romanticist writers such as the Self Strength Group.

Typically, in an article named *Dâm hay không Dâm* (Pornographic or Not) in the Self-Strength Group's newspaper *Ngày Nay*, a writer under the pen name Nhất Chi Mai severely criticized Vũ Trọng Phụng for his 'dirty' writings which, in his opinion, are 'pornographic' and full of 'dark thoughts, mean hatred.' He accused Vũ of never offering readers any hope by describing the world as a hell full of murderers, prostitutes, corrupt officials and lustful people.<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that members of the Self-Strength Group were very famous romanticist writers at that time. Before the article, Vũ showed his opinion against this group a few times. After Vũ knew about it, he immediately answered by a sharp pen-war article which concluded that if a writer keeps being optimistic in this corrupt and evil society, he not only fools himself but also harms readers.<sup>4</sup> In a following interview, he asserted that his writings are not pornographic because when readers read his works, they are disgusted because they reveal to them 'a truth that is truly filthy. And this disgust can turn to bitterness. I believe that the feelings of disgust and bitterness provoked by my writing are strong enough to make readers forget their feelings of arousal.'<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Nhất Chi Mai, 'Dâm hay không Dâm' (Pornographic or Not), *Ngày Nay*, No. 51 (14 March 1937).

<sup>4</sup>Vũ Trọng Phụng, 'Để Đáp Lời Báo *Ngày Nay*' (A Response to *Ngày Nay*: Pornographic or Not), *Báo Tương Lai* (25 March 1937).

<sup>5</sup>Lê Thanh, 'Phỏng vấn Vũ Trọng Phụng về tiểu thuyết *Giông tố* và *Làm đi*' (We Interview Mr. Vũ Trọng Phụng about the Novels *The Storm* and *To Be a Whore*), *Tạp Chí Bắc Hà* (1 April 1937).

To understand why Vũ suffered such severe criticism, it is necessary to point out that Vietnamese society during that time was undergoing a critical change. While conservatives wanted to preserve traditional values such as prenuptial virginity, dignity, obedience and the traditional family, new French-educated scholars and activists embraced the Europeanization of external forms such as the freeing of women from domesticity, the changing of clothing and hair fashions, and attending sport activities. These measures could not solve the serious social problems such as crimes, poverty and diseases. Investigative reportage appeared as a response to flat, plain hard news in newspapers and romanticism in novels and short stories which were very popular at that time. In his response to Nhất Chi Mai's article, Vũ seemed to be well aware that investigative reportage can become an effective weapon to attack wrongdoings:

It is very strange that people have accused V.D. Clinic of being pornographic. This is a work of nonfiction reportage that only records things that are true ... This will demonstrate clearly that the movement for the Europeanization of external forms has given birth within this civilized society to depraved and immoral customs which our history—a history of several thousand years of miserable slavery—has never recorded before.

I sacrifice more than other writers. As you know, I have been in the literary world for six or seven long years. Don't you think I could have found an easier artistic road ... Why have I chosen this dangerous road—a road that so many people dislike, a road on which vulgar people attack me with vulgar methods?<sup>6</sup>

The objective of investigative reportage is to uncover wrongdoings, and its material is believed to be pure fact. Vũ was well aware of that. He seems to be the only reportage writer during his time who gave a clear definition of investigative reportage: 'Investigative reportage is a narrative of what a journalist witnessed himself, or heard from someone else in interviews.' Those are the key characteristics which make this genre a powerful weapon. Sex and politics, two taboo areas (according to Foucault) which are main concerns in Vũ Trọng Phụng's works, are the weapons to fight against such a chaotic society which is tied by both Confucianism and French colonisation (with its inappropriate modernisation). Reflected by the investigative reportage of Vũ and his comrades, the critic Vũ Ngọc Phan in his *Modern Writers* concludes that: 'There is no writing which can support renovations and benefit administrative management better than investigative reportage does.'<sup>7</sup> Investigative reportage puts one foot in literature and the other in journalism, which means it can directly intervene in social reality by examining wrongdoings and then questioning the existing order. Despite many obstacles, investigative reportage quickly moved into the centre of Vietnamese literature during 1930–1945 thanks to that unique ability.

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Trans. Peter Zinoman. [Accessed: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.act2080.0044.117>. 15 December 2012]

<sup>6</sup> Lê Thanh, 'Phỏng vấn Vũ Trọng Phụng' (We Interview Mr. Vũ Trọng Phụng).

<sup>7</sup> Vũ Ngọc Phan, *Nhà văn hiện đại* (Modern Writers), vol. 1 (Hanoi: Khoa học Xã hội, 1989), 504–505

## Disappearance of Investigative Reportage during 1945–1975

The position of investigative reportage and Vũ Trọng Phụng suddenly changed after 1945, especially around 1956–1960. After 1945, socialist realism became orthodoxy for writers in North Vietnam. Vũ and other realist writers of the period 1930–1945 were timidly received as great writers of realism, but not as great as writers of socialist realism because of the limitation in their ideology. During the early period of Vietnamese socialist realism, when socialist writers gathered at a key conference to debate issues of arts and literature in Việt Bắc, the base of the Vietnamese communist force during the Indochina War against the French (October 1949), Vũ's works were brought up as examples of realist writing of the pre-socialist revolution period, which 'were useful' but 'led to nowhere' because they were low on revolutionary qualities.<sup>8</sup> Vũ's works were selected to be a part of the curriculum at schools and university and introduced to Russia and China as the greatest realist writer before 1945. But things changed suddenly in 1957: nearly twenty years after his death, Vũ was accused of dangerous counterrevolutionary tendencies.<sup>9</sup> From 1960 to 1987, all of Vũ's works were removed from the school curriculum, and their printing was banned.

The main reason for Vũ's dismissal was that he was involved in a political incident which happened nearly twenty years after his death. After Vietnam won its independence again from the French army by the victory of the Điện Biên Phủ Battle (1954), some artists started a movement which was later dubbed *Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm* (NVGP, similar to *Hundred Flowers Campaign* in China) to lift the restrictions imposed upon Vietnamese intellectuals and thus grant greater freedom of thought and speech. While criticizing some well-praised contemporary writings as unrealistic and propagandistic, these artists brought Vũ and several writers before the 1945 revolution back to the attention of current readers. They reprinted many of his works. In 1956 and 1957, a criticism volume (*Vũ Trọng Phụng Is With Us*, 1956) and a special magazine volume (1957) about Vũ were published, stating that his great realist writings were still 'with us.' The NVGP movement was suppressed by the Communist Party in 1958. The activists and involved artists were either imprisoned, or isolated and banned from publication. Vũ, though dead, suffered the same punishment. In June 1960, politburo member Hoàng Văn Hoan published an essay entitled *Một Vài Ý Kiến Về Tác Phẩm Vũ Trọng Phụng trong Văn Học Việt Nam* (*Thoughts on the Problem of Vũ Trọng Phụng Within Vietnamese Literature*) which dismissed the literary significance of Vũ's works and raised suspicions about his political orientation. He asserted that NVGP used Vũ:

to prove that only pre-revolutionary literature had value and that after the revolution, under the leadership of the Party, writers were forced to serve politics... Hence, writers lost their freedom and literature lost its soul ...

<sup>8</sup>Nguyễn Huy Tường, 'Hội nghị Tranh luận về Văn nghệ ở Việt Bắc' (Debate Conference Over Arts and Literature Issues in Việt Bắc), *Văn Nghệ*, vol 17 & 18 (November & December 1949). Reprinted in *Vũ Trọng Phụng: Life and Works*, ed. Vương Trí Nhàn et al (Hanoi: Union of Writers Press, 1994), 155–158.

<sup>9</sup>Nguyễn Đình Thi, 'Nhà văn với Quần chúng Lao động' (Writers and the Masses), *Nhân Dân* (1 May 1958).

They said that Vũ Trọng Phụng was a master of the literary world and that he was even more revolutionary than the Party.<sup>10</sup>

Some political articles of Vũ (published before 1939) which show his pessimistic thoughts about Stalinism and the conflict within Soviet regime added to the reasons for his dismissal.

Was Vũ just unlucky, or genuinely guilty? If another writer had been accidentally drawn in by *NVGP*, would he have received the same indifference? It is necessary to understand why works of the ‘King of Reportage’ were removed from schools and publication during 1945–1975 whereas as a genre, reportage played a very important role in Vietnamese socialist realism literature. There are at least three reasons for its prosperity: firstly, it is quick (soldier writers do not have much time to provide long writings or polish them due to the wartime conditions); secondly, it is easy (many writers are self-trained, and so may be limited in literary technique); and lastly, it fits the contemporary orthodox literary method (socialist realism). Stalin’s definition of socialist realism as ‘an exact description of reality in its revolutionary development’ and Mao Tze Dong’s Yenan Talk which put political content higher than artistic values in literature had a tremendous influence on Vietnamese cultural policies during 1945–1975. These propaganda policies gave birth to a vulgar reception of literature: everything in a literary work was considered to exactly reflect what happens in the real world. Therefore, if a writer described the wrongdoings in the socialist transformation, he was accused of opposing the Party and the nation. Writings were expected to focus on demonstrating heroes in battles or factories and farms, or, to describe the enemy forces as monsters or cowards. Personal sufferings and wrongdoings in administrative management were forbidden topics. Reportage writings were warmly appreciated, but they were expected to follow the propaganda. In 1961, *Viết Ký Sự* (*Writing Reportage*) by Boris Polevoy, a top reportage writer of Soviet literature, was translated into Vietnamese and published as a guide book for writers on reportage. That Polevoy showed how socialist reportage should be done was popular in writing camps and schools for writers during 1961-1975:

Soviet reportage writers will always be the pioneers of the socialist construction Nowadays, reportage has become one of the sharpest genres in Soviet journalism. Reportage writings describe the heroes of our time. Their stories are inspiring thousands, millions readers, strengthening their belief in socialism and appreciating their creativeness and working.<sup>11</sup>

Polevoy asserted that reportage has a great educational value, therefore, it needs to be accurate and typical. But he also stated that reportage should be about ‘the heroes of our time.’ These statements are mutually contradictory, just like Stalin’s definition of socialist realism is problematic by itself. How real is a reportage which is all about heroes? How can writers achieve the ‘exact description of reality’ if they

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<sup>10</sup>Hoàng Văn Hoan, ‘Một Vài Ý Kiến Về Tác Phẩm Vũ Trọng Phụng trong Văn Học Việt Nam’(Thoughts on the Problem of Vũ Trọng Phụng Within Vietnamese Literature), *Tạp chí Nghiên Cứu Văn học* (June 1960). Quoted in Peter Zinoman, Introduction to Vũ Trọng Phụng, *Dumb Luck*, trans. by Peter Zinoman (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 22.

<sup>11</sup>Boris Polevoy, *Viết Ký Sự* (Writing Reportage). Trans. Xuân Thương (Hanoi: Văn học, 1961), 12–13

just focus on the revolutionary side and ignore the wrongdoings (which can be happen in any society and regime) and personal sufferings? Trường Chinh, one of the most important theorists of the Communist Party, who remained powerful for nearly forty years (1941–1981) and was in charge of cultural policies, gave writers the following instruction to solve that problem:

The attitude of socialist realism is objective. But how to deal with the objective facts which may not benefit us, but enemies? For example, in a battle which the enemy won and we lost, should we artists be objective? Yes, we can portray a battle in which we lost. But we should help the readers/audience understand why we lost, and what we did not lose. That is: our soldiers still maintained a firm spirit and tried to learn from the loss in order to win the next battles. There are facts that should be told; however, there are facts that should not be told or not be told immediately, or, should be told in an appropriate way.<sup>12</sup>

Those facts explain why during 1945–1975, though reportage literature blossomed and became an essential part of people’s life by providing the latest information about the war and the socialist transformation, investigative reportage disappeared totally. There was no reportage which dared to describe lost battles or a failure of a policy during the transformation. Or, if there were, they might have been censored or banned. Popular reportage during that time seems to be made from the same formula: heroic soldiers or heroic workers in their fights against enemies or nature/counter-revolutionary forces to protect and build up the country. Loss and suffering was depicted, but just to emphasise the heroic side of people. Reportage was no longer investigative but illustrative, in other words, it became a tool of the Party propaganda. In that situation, it is understandable that investigative reportage about wrongdoings such as written by Vũ Trọng Phụng was suppressed. Therefore, to dismiss Vũ’s reputation and works is also to sustain the current literary order, in which illustrative reportage dominated. It is easy to see that there was hardly any writing labelled *phóng sự* (investigative reportage) during 1945–1975. Most reportage was called *ký sự* (event-based reportage), *bút ký* (quick, short, impression-based reportage) or *tùy bút* (casual notes).

It is interesting that reportage’s essential characteristics (truth-carrying, life-interfering) could both drive one of its subgenres (investigative reportage) out of the literature and bolster its fraudulent version (illustrative reportage).

## 1986–Present: Investigative Reportage’s Resurrection

The renovation which started in Vietnam in 1986 introduced more freedom to writers to investigate social problems. Investigative reportage was reborn with Phùng Gia Lộc’s *Cái Đêm Hôm Ấy Hôm Gì* (*What A Night*, 1987), a shocking piece which shows the miserable life of farmers who were exploited by their village authorities. Following

<sup>12</sup>Trường Chinh, ‘Vài Vấn đề Về Văn hóa Văn nghệ’ (Some Specific Problems in Literature and Art) (first published in 1953), in *On Culture and Art*, 4 edn. (Hanoi: Culture Press, 1976), 166.

Phùng's brave reportage, many journalists focused into other dark corners of society which was in crisis because of the failure of the system of budget subsidies. Vũ's works were reprinted in 1987, followed by several literary conferences devoted to restoring his reputation. Vũ's writings returned to libraries and school curricula as the greatest pieces of Vietnamese realist literature. His investigative reportage once again became the model for current journalism. This situation shows that when democratic needs meet democratic conditions, investigative reportage has the chance to prosper. But in Vietnam, journalistic freedom is still limited to some extent, and so investigative reportage is not able to mention all the sensitive political issues. Therefore, investigative reportage is still on its journey between the mainstream and the marginal area of literature.

The rise and fall of investigative reportage in Vietnamese literature reflects the close relationship between literature and power. Investigative reportage rose in the marginal area of literature due to democratic needs and some democratic conditions. It disappeared and reappeared when the democratic conditions changed. However, those things happened when people still believed in the sincerity and purity of texts. Since Michel Foucault and Hayden White demythologized the reliability of all texts (even historical ones) in the last few decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, every discourse started to be seen differently. How contemporary readers and writers in Vietnam receive investigative reportage should be the topic for further research in the near future.

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