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### SOME FEATURES OF THE “EDUCATED – UNEDUCATED” OPPOSITION IN STORIES BY NGUYEN HUY THIEP

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**Abstract.** A specific artistic feature of stories by Nguen Huy Thiep (1950–2021) is the opposition “town – village”, which often attaches to the opposition “educated – uneducated”, or “intellectuals – common people”. However, the opposition of educated people and uneducated one has a number of peculiarities. Thus, in the stories of the present time we find the opposition “intellectuals – common people”, but in historical stories uneducated common people are opposed by Confucians (*nhà nho*), representatives of educated class typical of traditional Vietnam. At the same time, in a number of stories the “educated – uneducated” opposition has been transformed into the “public person (*con người xã hội*) – natural person” (*con người tự nhiên*) opposition. Once again this confirms the conclusion that hostility to educated people is one of obvious ideological dominants being the conceptual base of the writer’s work.

**Keywords:** Nguyen Huy Thiep, town and village in stories by Nguyen Huy Thiep, “educated – uneducated” opposition.

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## Introduction

One of specific artistic features of stories by Nguyen Hui Thiep (1950–2021), perhaps, the greatest Vietnamese writer of the last quarter of the 20th century, is the “town – village” opposition. My article “Town and Village in stories by Nguyen Huy Thiep” [Filimonova 2018: 184–195] discusses this opposition. The article shows that this opposition often attaches to the “educated – uneducated” one, or to the opposition of “intellectuals – common people”. I pronounced the idea of the “educated – uneducated” opposition in Nguyen Huy Thiep’s work as long ago as 1996, in my article “The Meaning of “My Last Blood” Story by Nguyen Huy Thiep” [Filimonova 1996: 286–294]. It appears that nobody has examined the writer’s work in this aspect, at least either in Russia or in Vietnam.

Both the oppositions and their linkage are clearly seen in such stories on Vietnam of the late 20th century as “Rural Lessons” (“*Những bài học nông thôn*”), “The Memories of the Native Fields” (“*Thương nhớ đồng quê*”), “A River Nymph” (“*Con gái thủy thần*”), “With no King” (“*Không có vua*”), “The General Retired” (“*Tướng về hưu*”). It is obvious that the writer dislikes town, but he sincerely sympathizes with village. The same to be said about educated and uneducated people; the writer is in antipathy with educated persons and in sympathy with uneducated ones, as the former are spoiled, hypocritical and profit-seeking, while the latter are ordinary, sincere and humane. There are some more examples of this. In the story “Woodcutters” (“*Những người thợ xẻ*”) Ngoc, the protagonist, who tells the story, is a student of a pedagogical institute. He failed at his final examination due to his unhappy love affair and had to wait for the examination a year later. On the invitation of his cousin Buong, who had been imprisoned for theft and continued to earn a living like a rogue, Ngoc went to mountains to cut wood.

The essence of the story is his adventure. The story begins with Ngoc’s words: “I have many brothers and sisters. My parents have given birth to nine children altogether. All my brothers and sisters work on land and they are decent folk, but I am not like my family” [Nguyễn Huy Thiệp 2003: 136]. He means that he went to town to learn at an institute. This is not only his self-esteem, but also the attitude of his milieu to him. His father seems to dislike his son, and Buong reproaches him now and then for his belonging to intellectuals, and calls him “a riff-raff intellectual”, while an intellectual is a rascal and a cheat for him.

The protagonist in the story “To make hay, to graze buffalos” (“*Chăn trâu cắt cỏ*”) is Nang, a young 18-years old peasant; he is in accord with his existence, with his simple, though hard, life in the village. His mother asks him, if he is going to town to enter an institute, and he answers: “Give it up, Mummy. I fear to learn. And I don’t want to leave you” [Ibid.: 539]. His “I fear” may be understood that Nang instinctively fears to leave the village for town, because having got high education he will lose the peace of mind and the “Buddhist” serenity of his life. When Nang’s mother says: “Enter life, learn about life!”, his father interrupts her: “Damn that learning! Let him be a peasant. Leave him alone” [Ibid.] The attitude to education is well shown in the discourse of Hoi, the teacher, another character of the story. In his conversation with the prior of a local pagoda he says that if he were Ngoc, he would not read books and newspapers, because “they are drugs”. Visiting Nang’s house for a while, and being a little drunk he tells that while talking to the prior he shuddered at the thought that for many years he “taught nonsense to children” and that is why he will for sure go to hell. So, the next day he will give up teaching and come back to peasant labor.

In his story “At the Crossing” (“*Sang song*”) Nguyen Huy Thiep reduces the “educated – uneducated” opposition to the extremity. The characters of the story, a Buddhist monk, a poet, a teacher, two antique dealers, a woman and a child, a loving couple and, as one can see, a robber, meet by chance at a river crossing. The action of the story develops on a ferry while crossing from one bank to the other. The antique dealers are carrying an expensive old Chinese vase, most likely a stolen one. While the intellectuals, the poet, the teacher and the Buddhist monk, are busy with serious discourse on literature, Buddhism, history, the small boy being curious, puts his hand into the neck of the vase, and his hand is stuck in it. The dealers begin to threaten his mother with cutting off the child’s hand. Everybody is confused, but the robber breaks the vase with nunchucks saying “Stop it. Children are our future! Also, kindness is the chief thing in every business!” [Ibid.: 248]. Everybody is heaving a sigh of relief. So, it turns out that in the critical situation the only man who was able to do this decisive, noble and dangerous act was a robber, the worst among them. It was he who gained a victory over the intellectuals, his fellow-travelers. The end of the story is as follows: the monk who was also helpless and useless, whispers a Buddhist mantra: «Gate Gate Paragate Para Parasamgate» [Ibid.: 251].

Nguyen Huy Thiep does not decipher the mantra, but this is a citation of a mantra from “The Heart Sutra”, one of the most famous sutras of the Buddhist Mahayana, pronounced by Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, who once during a deep meditation “got rid of all the sufferings, having crossed to the other bank”, i.e., to Nirvana [Torchinov: 01.04.2007]. It is to propose that the mantra is the key to the story. The full text of the mantra is “Gate Gate Paragate, Parasamgate Bodhi Svaha”. The book of prophetic works («Finding Peace») by Nhat Hanh, a famous Buddhist teacher, gives the text of the mantra from the following English translation: “Gone gone, gone beyond, gone utterly beyond. Enlightenment hail!” [Thich Nhat Hanh 1993: 265]. In other words, this is the appeal to enlightenment. But at the same time the mantra may be interpreted as the appeal to overcome oneself morally, to become better, more perfect. In the story “the moral river” only was crossed by a robber, who made a good act. Neither the intellectuals nor the Buddhist monk (he knows this) could make such an act.

### Some features of the “educated – uneducated” opposition

The opposition of educated and uneducated is obvious, but at the same time one can see that it is somewhat different from the “town – village” opposition. Nguyen Huy Thiep uses the “educated – uneducated” opposition not only in his stories of the present time, but also in those of the past. However, in the latter this opposition is transformed: in the stories of the present time there is the “intellectuals – common people” opposition, while in historical stories there is the “common people – Confucians” (*nhà nho*) opposition; Confucians being representatives of the educated class typical of traditional Vietnam. It is well known that the mass of educated people consisted mainly of them in traditional Vietnam, that is, up to the early 20th century. Their education was the ability to read and write Chinese and the knowledge of the Four Books and Five Classics. Then, having passed one of the three grades of competitive examinations they could aspire to the official career. In other words, educated persons were executives along the feudal power vertical who, unlike uneducated persons, were vouched not only for a higher social status, but also for a sheltered life depending on the occupied position. Thus, in medieval Vietnam education was a kind of a springboard which allowed any person (even of humble origin) every chance of a high rise.

This is very well shown with the following episode from “My Last Blood” (“*Giọt máu*”) story. Its action takes place in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century. A simple peasant Da, the father of a boy, who wants his son to get an education has the following conversation with a famous teacher. The teacher asks why the father wants his son to be educated. The father answers:

“I believe, there is something of Truth in the education. That is why I want my son to be your pupil”.

“But there are many kinds of education – those to serve and earn one’s living; those to improve oneself, those to conceal oneself from the life, to avoid labor. And there are those to sow discord”.

“I see. I am a butcher. I know that there is fillet, head, fat, or breast. But it is meat, all the same”.

“Yes. But what education do you want your son to get?”

“I think, breast is good enough. It is well sold, never lies long. Is there any education like that? That would be a proper education for my son”.

“I see. So, to serve”.

Da clapped his hands.

“Exactly!” [Nguyễn Huy Thiệp 2003: 369-370].

When the boy had finished school, and passed his competitive examinations, he was appointed head of a rich district and began living in accordance with the principle his teacher had taught: “Official service is a profession to get money. It is foolish not to take bribes!” [Ibid.: 372]. It is noteworthy, that in the story “Rural Lessons” about the village at the end of the 20th century, i.e., nearly a hundred years later, the protagonist’s educated urban mother says: “Education makes life easier, sonny” [Ibid.: 170].

Belonging to the educated class of Confucians assumed a special, moreover, strict enough “code of honor” which ought to be formally conformed. The perfect Confucian, so called “gentleman” (Chinese *junzi*, Vietnamese *quân tử*) ought to possess such merits as humaneness, loyalty etc.

In Confucianism the way to perfection, to the ideal, to becoming “a gentleman” led through learning. So, it is noteworthy, that in the story “Gold and Fire” (“*Vàng lửa*”), its action taking place in Vietnam at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, Perrier, a French adventurer, writes about Emperor Gia Long (1762–1820), who ruled at the very beginning of the subjugation of Vietnam by French: “He did not believe that learning could improve the nation” [Ibid.: 214]. Emperor Gia Long is especially hostile to educated persons. In the story “The Sharp Sword” (“*Kiếm sắc*”) he says to one of his subjects: “I hate but the educated class. But you are a soldier and you must not fear anything. And those are rotten stuff, dung-beetles, clever, shrewd phrasemongers. But I am not afraid of them. They are all degenerates, nothingness” [Ibid.: 204].

The three-part story “Xuan Huong’s Shadow” (“*Chút thoáng Xuân Hương*”) is dedicated to Ho Xuan Huong, one of Vietnam’s greatest classical poets, who lived at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, but the facts of her life are difficult to verify. In “Story One” the protagonist, her husband, head of a *tong* (an administrative unit in old Vietnam), nicknamed Toad, is a real historical figure. One of her poems, “Mourning over Toad, Head of a Tong”, was dedicated to him [Ho Xuan Huong

1968: 48]. Nguyen Huy Thiep describes him so: “His carriage was never refined. Never. By nature, he was rude, clumsy and unattractive. He was funny in his own way, and in his own way was he noble. Toad was hostile to clean persons. He could not stand them. He preferred powerful onslaught to real, true life.

He knew that he is low-educated <...> Those learned Confucians, those officials’ sons and scribblers frightened him very much. They trapped him into respectability, weakening his natural cold rationality” [Nguyễn Huy Thiệp 2003: 408].

Thus, here also we see the theme of “educated”, i.e., “learned Confucian gentlemen, officials’ sons and scribblers” who, in the opinion of the tong’s head, hide themselves behind high words of ethics, kindness and honesty, but in reality, they are far from those qualities. But the tong’s head with his natural imperfection shows himself humane and kind, when he had mercy for a rural whore, who “had to support her parents but had no smallest plot of land” [Nguyễn Huy Thiệp 2003: 411].

The statement of moral superiority of uneducated people over the educated class is the crucial idea of Nguyen Huy Thiep’s story “My Last Blood” having already been mentioned<sup>2</sup>. This is a story of a Vietnamese family during about a hundred years. Its characters are the elder representatives of four generations of the family through the male line. They are: Pham Ngoc Lien, Pham Ngoc Da, Pham Ngoc Tieu and Pham Ngoc Phong. The story begins with the biography of Pham Ngoc Lien, who left this world on December 24, 1840, and ends with the death of Pham Ngoc Phong on March 13, 1940. After him Phong left his second son, not the first one, especially precious son according to Vietnamese tradition, “the last blood” of the Phams.

The story opens with an episode from Pham Ngoc Lien’s life, which serves the opening, or “the question”, which the story “answers”: “In the first half of last century in a tiny place of Noi of Tu Liem district there lived a well-to-do peasant Pham Ngoc Lien. He desired to build a house at the outskirts of the village, on an even plot of land measuring 3 *saos* and 2 *thuocs*. Once a passer-by said:

“This is a fine place, like a feather; it means the disposition to learning and literature. Thus, due to the shortage of water, plants will fade; also, sons will be few”.

Having heard this, Lien seized the passer-by by his sleeve and said:

“I am born a simple ploughman, but I want my children and grandchildren to be somewhat more educated and make their ways in the world. It does not matter, if the children are few; they must be good and respected by everybody”.

“Does education mean repletion?” the passer-by asked.

“No”.

“Then why do you need education?”

“Well, to be educated is better than to plough land”.

“And is an educated person always a good one?”

“Sure”.

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<sup>2</sup> In details see: [Filimonova 1996].

The passer-by laughed; he did not answer any questions more, waved the skirt of his clothes and went away. Lien got angry and said: “A crazy man!” [Nguyễn Huy Thiệp 2003: 365–366].

The passer-by asks the key-question of the story: “Is an educated person always a good one?” In the original “good” means “moral (có đức)”. In other words, the question may be formulated in this way: does education mean ethics?

The analysis of the story shows that Pham Ngoc Lien’s desire to see his sons educated and making their ways in the world is the beginning of his family’s moral degradation. In the story, he, an uneducated peasant, as well as his elder son Da, are moral men blessed by God, as it is approved with the fact that they have sons, their successors. Moral degradation begins with Tieu, a son of Da, and goes on till the last years of Phong’s life. Both, everyone in one’s own way and in one’s own time get education and through it make their ways in the world: the father learned Chinese, passed Confucian examinations, became a state official and sinned as used to do many representatives of the service class in traditional Vietnam; the son having got new colonial education, is both a journalist and a smuggler sinning as a representative of the new colonial Vietnam. Thus, the education in the Pham family leads to amorality and is the cause of their dying down.

When returning to the significant episode opening the story, the author’s answer to the question of correlation of education and ethics is obvious: education does not suppose ethics, but is contrary to it.

The “educated – uneducated” opposition finds a curious development in the historical and literary story “The Vietnamese Lesson” (“*Bài học tiếng Việt*”). It narrates of one evening and one night in the life of Vu Trong Phung (1912–1939), a famous Vietnamese writer. At the opening of the story the writer goes from Hanoi suburbs to the center of the city, when a friend of his invited him to a house-warming party, and ends in the morning, when he comes back home and begins to write his new story “The Vietnamese Lesson”. The sequence of events in the story is very simple: a tram ride, the party, where the protagonist gets acquainted with the guests, speaks with his friend’s wife and her sister and having left on his way home drops in an opium den. That is why the story contains mainly Vu Trong Phung’s thoughts and conversations. Both the characters’ conversations and the writer’s thoughts always turn on several themes, such as the role of literature and the essence of the writer’s labor, the writer’s place in Vietnamese society, the Vietnamese language, women and soul, but at the same time the concepts of “honesty” (*luong thiện*), “a natural person” (*con người tự nhiên*) and “a public person” (*con người xã hội*).

As it follows from the story, it was honesty that Vu Trong Phung sought in literature when he started his way as a writer: “At that time he was an innocent and clean youth. He thought that literature is fraught with honesty and also with something elevated, supernatural, capable to help people. He became delighted with the beauty of words, with the beauty of the Vietnamese language. His soul was overfilled with plenty of sounds. Sometimes they were clear, sometimes indistinct, but always clean and honest” [Nguyễn Huy Thiệp 2003: 698].

But what is the meaning of “being honest” to him? It means to concentrate not on the external, but on the internal: “We pay too much attention to the external and prefer to turn to the public person, not to the natural one. Being “educated”, “experienced”, brought up with false ethics, we take pains to close our eyes to the fact that the natural person is the most sincere and honest, though at the same time, the most stubborn and rebellious” [Ibid.: 692].



However, following Vu's thoughts, society tries to suppress the natural person with "moral regulations, domestic restrictions, various rules and duties", but they only show "the feebleness of education in front of the wild essence of the natural person. The natural person is without ethics, he is free" [Ibid.: 694].

In the story Vu Trong Phung was like that. At the party his behavior was scandalous, but he explained his conduct in this way: "I just wanted to say that nature has its own reasons, unlike ours" [Ibid.: 703].

However, such people are alien to so called "polite society", having different, often incompatible desires. Thence, Vu Trong Phung felt being misunderstood and out of place at the party. The opposition the writer – the milieu is double: he – the host and he – the guests. Vu knew his host Hoang since school years, and though their paths have diverged, they are still friends. Hoang, intelligent by nature, learned in France, married well, and got rich, due (according to rumors) to drugs and weapons smuggle; in a word, he has success in life. Comparing himself and his friend, Vu mentions that his friend used to be more sociable; a man of the world, he knew "the rules of the game". So, he asks: "Is he stronger or dirtier than I?" [Ibid.: 695]. When the guests (officials of high rank, rich men, distinguished artists) express their false delight to the author, who had been introduced as a Vietnamese Victor Hugo, and say that "compared with us your profession is much nobler" [Ibid.: 700], he feels hurt, a laughing stock, because that idle society has different interests, such as the prices of gold, a new cottage, education abroad etc. And he thinks: "They are people of action, full of enthusiasm, active and vain... They are in the eternal whirl... Life is fight... Life is theatre... One is either a hammer or an anvil in it...<...> Or are they right? And am I wrong?" [Ibid.].

The concepts of "the natural person", i.e., unspoiled with education, sincere and honest by nature, and "the public man" brought up by "civilized" society and embedded in it, take a definite place in the work of Nguyen Huy Thiep. Thus, in a small narrative, which the writer called a novel, "Marks in Exchange for Love" ("*Gạ tình lấy điểm*"), the protagonist Do Thu Cong, an ordinary teacher of a provincial technical college, and a kind of a philosopher, talks about the animality of a human being and about negative influence of principles of civilization on him: "The man is an animal by nature and will be such forever. The animal is natural; it is outside ethics, training but its intuition, not intellect. It is the desire "to become a man" that makes a human being unhappy, urges him on perfidy and every recklessness. Human society becomes still more severe; the most natural human feelings are despised, criticized, brutally nipped in the bud. Those human beings who preserve their human essence are few and pass for weirdos and crazies. We live in the rational world, with hundreds of rules which bind us, define our duties and boundaries. People knew no rules a thousand years ago, and yet they used to live and die" [Nguyễn Huy Thiệp 2007: 69].

The writer's thoughts of "the natural person" and "the public man" can be found in his publications in journals and newspapers collected in his book "To Set Nets, to Catch Birds" ("*Giăng lưới bắt chim*"). Thus, the text of his speech at an exhibition opening entitled "Back to Nature" ("*Trở lại tự nhiên*") reads: "We are reassured with the thought that we are educated, too much educated: by our family, laws, religion, art. <...> We are real public people. But where is the natural person? I do not see him. But meanwhile in art "back to nature" means nothing else but the true description of attraction to the opposite gender, joy, weariness or trouble and numerous transformations of these conditions" [Nguyễn Huy Thiệp 2010: 260].

To some degree, everything also approves Nguyen Huy Thiep's "educated – uneducated" opposition and his preference for the latter. To tell the truth, there are rare exclusions, such as Trieu, the teacher from "Rural Lessons" story, an educated urban dweller from a decent educated family; Chi, the teacher from the story "It is very Easy to Live" ("*Sống dễ lắm*"), whose life, in fact, was very hard in some uncultured backwater; or a married couple from "Woodcutters" story, where the husband was a doctor, and the wife was a teacher. But the thing is that those people, intellectuals by social status, left town for village and therefore, they share all the hardships of common peasants' life.

### Conclusion

Summing up, since early times Vietnam experienced a strong influence of Confucianism. Historically, the cult of education and educated individuals is typical of the country. Therefore, the obvious anti-intellectualism in Nguyen Huy Thiep's stories expressed as dislike for educated people, the statement of moral superiority of uneducated people are striking. This requires their further comprehension in the context of Vietnamese literature as a whole.

It cannot be said that prior to Nguyen Huy Thiep Vietnamese literature was free of such an attitude. Ho Xuan Huong derided Confucians in her poems. In "The Lucky Man" ("*Số đờ*", 1936), a well-known satirical novel by Vu Trong Phung, devoted to colonial Vietnam of the 1930-es, the protagonist, an illiterate rootless orphan and scoundrel, is the most moral in comparison with the other characters, the representatives of so called "polite society". Nguyen Viet Ha touches the problem of ethics in his novel "The Time of God" ("*Cơ hội của Chúa*", 1999), describing the changes in Vietnamese society at the turn of the 1980-es and 1990-es, in the early period of the Renovation policy. And so on. However, it is hardly possible to argue that these opinions serve a conceptual foundation prior to Nguyen Huy Thiep of those authors' work. But antipathy to educated people in stories by Nguyen Huy Thiep is one of obvious ideological dominants.

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