From Print Texts to Online Gaming: The Cross-Cultural History of Wuxia Fictions in Vietnam

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Abstract

The popularization of online gaming in Vietnam, including PC and mobile gaming, has witnessed the contribution of *wuxia* fictions as an essential aspect of digital content production. This article shows an attempt in tracing the cultural history of *wuxia* works in Vietnam. East-West differences have also been taken into consideration as a way to explain reading and playing preferences. By using life course approach along with the concepts of nostalgia and cultural proximity, this study tries to historically portray the *wuxia* readership in Vietnam and its vestige found in *wuxia* online games. The findings indicate that *wuxia* novels serve as a crucial factor representing the literary relationship between the Sinosphere and Vietnam. Its presence has enriched the content of Vietnamese literature, adding a new genre that has been widely accepted by many generations of Vietnamese readers. Because *wuxia* online games could be seen as the digital continuation of *wuxia* fictions, the author argues that prior experience drawn from interacting with *wuxia* novels affects the game selection-making process of players, and gaming companies in Vietnam also acknowledge that and deploy appropriate business strategies.

Introduction

Wuxia (*wu*: martial arts, *xia*: heroism) is a subgenre of quasi-fantasy and martial arts genres found in literature, theater, and cinema, which portrays the adventures of martial artists in ancient China (Chen, 2009). This genre plays an important role in the popular culture of Chinese-speaking communities around the world. For most of the 20th century, *wuxia* fictions were considered a threat to morality in China and were banned by the government, being accused of ruining the process of nation-building and promoting superstition. Since the 1930s, the main platform for *wuxia* was based in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and the revival of *wuxia* in China was only successful after the Reform in China starting in 1978.

Wuxia fictions were introduced to Vietnam in the early 20th century and have gone through a few fluctuating periods during the two Indochina Wars and even after that. In Vietnam, it is usually called *kiếm hiệp* (Chinese: *jianxia*, *jian*: the sword) or *truyện chưởng* (*truyện*: fiction, *chưởng*: the palm- a regular kung-fu maneuver found in *wuxia* novels). During the Vietnam War, Chinese martial art-themed novels appeared regularly in newspapers and magazines of Southern Vietnam, where the majority of Chinese Vietnamese live (L. H. T. Tran, 2009). Although being influenced by the Cultural Revolution in China during the 70s that made the

communist state list this genre as heart-corrupting cultural products, as well as the tension between the two countries escalated after the border struggle in 1979, the penetration of this genre along with Hong Kong drama in VHS tapes continued to rise as an undergrounded stream. When the diplomatic relationship was normalized in the late 80s, the intrusion of Chinese cultural products was then unavoidable (Ge, 2017). The predestined relation between the two countries has built the pathway for *wuxia* fictions, detective literature, and motion picture to enter the Vietnamese people's minds. As a result, Chinese celebrities become more "near and dear."

The impact of *wuxia* fictions on popular culture in Vietnam is recognizable, ranging from the consumption of novels, film adaptations, *manhua* (Chinese comics) to online games. Besides the emergence of eSports games, for example, *Dota 2, League of Legends, CS: GO*, or *StarCraft 2*, various gaming news sites in Vietnam such as GameK (2016), Xemgame (2016), 2game (2016), and so on commented that Vietnamese

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players have shown a tendency of choosing *wuxia* games to play. These games mostly include multiplayer role-playing online games (requiring the use of PC and client software, or handheld devices like mobile phone) and various derivative browser games inspired by classical themes like *The Three Kingdoms* or *Journey to the West*, or *wuxia* fiction-based games like *The Smiling, Proud Wanderer* or *The Legend of the Condor Heroes*, not to mention a myriad of other *wuxia* games that are not necessarily based on well-known fictions. Some of the first online games in Vietnam were *The Swordsman*, or known in Vietnam since 2005 as *Võ Lâm Truyền Kỳ*, and *9Dragons*, or known as *Cửu Long Tranh Bá* since 2006, are all *wuxia* games. *Wuxia* novels serve as the main plot or the inspiration for the scenario of those games, in which players are supposed to act out the story and join the expanded gaming world built upon the story. Unlike fighting games which are more about close combats on a stage within fixed boundaries of time and place, martial arts and actions in *wuxia* games are more liberated with the participation of more than two players.

While there is considerable research on *wuxia* games in the context of the Korean and Taiwanese gaming industry (D. Chan, 2006; Chen, 2009; Yoon & Cheon, 2014), the case of Vietnam has so far not been examined. The recently released list of licensed games (Ministry of Information and Communications [MIC], 2019a) also confirmed that the period 2015 to 2018 witnessed the entrance of 308 online games to Vietnam, either PC or mobile, among which 95% are *wuxia* games. In the first half of 2019, among 106 newly imported games, 90% of them also contain *wuxia* concepts (MIC, 2019b). Therefore, this article presents an effort to shed light on the influence of *wuxia* fictions on popular culture in Vietnam in general and the online gaming industry particularly. By recruiting qualitative research methods, including documentary review and interview, and using life course approach along with the concepts of nostalgia and cultural proximity, this study wants to trace the cultural history of *wuxia* novels in Vietnam. This article also looks at its continuity by linking it with online gaming—a rising digital entertainment form in this country, unfolding whether the popularity of *wuxia* games in Vietnam is solely based on the preference of players, which is fuelled by *wuxia*-related emotion and memories, or there is also the intervention of other parties, such as from the distributing companies.

Theoretical Framework

Nostalgia and Memory

The concept of nostalgia is widely used across media research. Bolin (2014, 2015) used focus group interviews to analyze Swedish and Estonian media consumers with a range of four generations. The results show that nostalgia is a product that is closely related to childhood memories and shared intergenerational experience, and it has an undeniable impact

on the process of media consumption. Nguyen-Thu (2018) employed the cultural studies approach to analyze several TV series and TV shows in Vietnam, arguing that nostalgia forms a sense of belonging to the glory (and sufferings) of the past, an intense attachment to the loss in both spatial and temporal identification. Nostalgia is a part of modernity because this term was only coined in the late 17th century, playing the role of a companion to the modern sense of progress and serving as a mental counterpoise when facing changes or disruptions brought by modern ways of living. Appadurai (1996) once noted that nostalgia has become a favorite theme and a constant mental status because people are offered a chance to relive and justify the present in the name of some memorial milestones.

Naturally, memory is an important technology of the self when mentioning nostalgia. Memory is not only the result of a recalling process of what is stored in the human bio-database, that is, the brain, but also an asset that provides individuals with the chance to converse with oneself and with others (Foucault, 1997). The memory associated with *wuxia* is then a part of the subjectivity that connects people of the past to the current self in the present through the projection brought by online games.

In case we need to give an identification to the role *wuxia* plays in this nostalgic process, the term memory dispositif seems to match the description. Basu (2011) touched upon an aspect of the term dispositif (or apparatus) that was coined by Foucault by suggesting the idea of memory dispositif. Dispositif refers to the various institutional, physical, and administrative mechanisms and knowledge structures that which empower and maintain the exercise of power within the social body. In the context of memory, a dispositif would turn the past into an object or a utility of interference, creating the connection between an individual's past and its current self, and immerging the memory of oneself to a broader pool of memory of the crowd. In my case, *wuxia* is the dispositif of escapism, the avoidance per se of unpleasant, boring, precarious, and trivial aspects of daily life.

Life Course Approach and the Concept of Generation

This study employs the life course theory to analyze the preference of Vietnamese players toward *wuxia*-themed games. This approach refers to a multidisciplinary paradigm that is mainly based on the concept of the life course for the study of people's lives, structural contexts, and social change (Pulkkinen & Caspi, 2002). Most of the previous models that deal with the human behavior tried to touch upon life cycle stages and the life span, which is more about the duration of life and scattered characteristics that are closely related to age, such as skills and knowledge acquisition, challenges, or transitional phases in human life. The revolutionary feature of the life course approach is that it puts emphasis on the

importance of time, context, process, and meaning on human development and family life (Bengtson & Allen, 1993), reflecting the intersection of social and historical factors with the development of individuals and the decision-making process in later stages of life (Elder, 1985; Hareven, 1996; Moschis, 2007, 2019; Moschis et al., 2011).

Another concept that media researchers pay attention to is generation (e.g., Alanen, 2001; Bolin, 2014, 2015; Buckingham, 2006). Westlund and Weibull (2013), when dissecting the news media use in Sweden after 1986, recorded that people born at a specific time and place develop a collective consciousness. By using the ideas of Mannheim (1952) about generations, the two authors realized that specific cultural and geographical contexts are elements that help develop binding characteristics and even mutual bonds that tie them with a retrospective consciousness caused by major societal events and processes. Korsvold (2017), through analyzing the media consumption experiences in Norway, also argued that each generation has and shares its narratives. The exchange of these narratives is a process that different generations interdependently construct each other (Alanen, 2001). Experiences collected in a previous generation have built the premises for the actions of a later generation. Thus, by listening to the stories shared by the adults, we can depict the childhood time with children seen as media users; and vice versa, when interacting with children or adolescents' account of their experiences, we could also imagine how these experiences could influence their media use in later stages of life.

Cultural Proximity

The reception of *wuxia* culture in general and *wuxia* novels and games particularly in Vietnam could also be explained by the concept of cultural proximity. Straubhaar (1991, p. 51) defines this term as "nationally or locally produced material that is closer to and more reinforcing of traditional identities, based in regional, ethnic, dialect/language, religious, and other elements." This concept has been used to dissect the success of national and regional media products, and the influence of one country on the other neighboring nations seen from various perspectives, including media, tourism, and business (Carrère & Masood, 2018; Egger & Toubal, 2016; Suna, 2018; Yoo et al., 2014).

In terms of video games, (D. Chan, 2006a; Chen, 2009), as well as Yoon and Cheon (2014) all agreed that cultural proximity plays a salient role as the integral factor in the popularization process of online gaming within the intra-Asian sphere. These authors indicated that cultural orientation suggested by the idea of proximity is the initial point that forms the playing taste recorded in various scenarios, in which Chinese players are fond of Korean online games, Taiwanese players show interest in playing Chinese *wuxia* games, or Korean players like joining fantasy-themed Japanese games. In the case of Vietnam, due to a millennium

of Chinese dominance, Vietnam was heavily influenced by Chinese culture in terms of politics, government, Confucian social and moral ethics, and art, making Vietnam a part of the East Asian cultural sphere. The mutuality continues in the modern time because two countries both pursue the ideology of communism and keep maintaining a complicated relationship in which alliance and hostility have been going abreast. The proximity both in terms of distance and culture has made the introduction of *wuxia* fictions and other related media products to Vietnam a smoothly and inherently acceptable process.

The anti-China sentiment has lately been reheated due to the remembrance of a series of Sino-Vietnamese wars in the history and recent territorial disputes in the Paracel and Spratly Islands, spiking in 2007 after China formed an administration in the disputed islands and lasting until now with numerous situations that make the tension escalate. Nonetheless, Kinh Hoa (2018) realized that Vietnamese people have drawn a trenchant line of demarcation that separates the perception of Chinese culture from the attitude toward the Chinese political agenda. Reading *wuxia* fictions, watching Chinese TV series/shows, or listening to Chinese music, thus, are neither manifestations of Sinophilia nor an announcement that Vietnamese people step back in the movement against the Chinese hegemony. Therefore, the contemplation given to Chinese cultural products is not a conflict of interest.

Wuxia as the Prior Experience: The Role of Wuxia Novels in Vietnam

In China, the modern *wuxia* genre gained its prominence in the early 20th century after the May Fourth Movement of 1919. In Vietnam, the infiltration of *wuxia* works could be traced back to the time before World War II (L. H. T. Tran, 2009). Before modern Vietnam gained its independence status from France in 1945, Vietnamese readers already knew and showed their interest in *wuxia* novels written by Chinese authors of the Old School (the term used to call the style of writing of Chinese authors under the Republic of China regime from 1912 to 1949 [Hamm, 2005]). Even Vietnamese authors were influenced by this new genre and tried to catch up with Chinese writers by publishing their own Vietnamese martial arts–themed novels or short stories. These "made in Vietnam" fictions were divided into many volumes with each volume, containing from 16 to 20 pages, being published weekly and sold for a price of 2 or 3 *xu* (the smallest currency subunit of Vietnam at that time) per volume. Unlike Chinese *wuxia* novels written by authors of the Old School that usually carry a heavy martial/military tone and promote the code of honor, Vietnamese fictions were found to be less serious. Thanks to the influence of French literature during that time, love stories with cliché details were included (N. Phan, 1998). To create a Vietnamese ambience for these fictions, *lục bát*—a traditional verse form using the alternating lines of six and eight syllables, which has been well-known among

people of all classes—was largely embedded in the content for narrative, argumentative, or descriptive purposes (both in dialogues and the main text; Le, 2016). The rise of this new genre in Vietnam was up to the level that Vietnamese fictions even outranked Chinese books, although this glorious period did not last long as the writing style gradually fell to the loophole of superstition or overadmiration, absurd heroism or overfictional. The establishment of a new country that chose to follow communism did not allow it to be featured in the cultural market and then, *wuxia*-themed novels vanished from North Vietnam.

Wuxia Fictions During the Vietnam War: A One-Sided Story

The blooming period of *wuxia* novels was after 1954 when Vietnam was divided into two parts, and *wuxia* novels attracted readers in South Vietnam (D. S. B. Vu, 2015); 1954 also happened to be the year that gave birth to the New School of *wuxia* genre, which proliferated in Hong Kong and Taiwan after *wuxia* novels were banned in Mainland China. The milestone that marked this start was the release of *Longhu Dou Jinghua*, the first *wuxia* novel written by Liang Yusheng (the pen name of Chen Wutong [1924–2009], a Chinese writer of *wuxia* genre). Along with Jin Yong (1924–2018; the pen name of Louis Cha Leung-yung, the most successful Chinese *wuxia* writer with more than 100 million copies sold worldwide) and Gu Long (1938–1985; the pen name used by Xiong Yaohua, the most successful Taiwanese *wuxia* novelist), Liang Yusheng spearheaded the founding of a new school that departed from the traditional way of writing *wuxia* novels usually seen in Old School's works. In Vietnam, although wuxia novels came into vogue during 1959 to 1960 with the presence of two translated novels, namely *Lam Y Nữ Hiệp* and *Lã Mai Nương* in *Dân Nguyện* newspaper, the heyday of *wuxia* fictions seemed to begin in 1961 when Từ Khánh Phụng released his translated version of *The Heaven Sword and Dragon Saber (Yǐ Tiān Tú Lóng Jì)* of Jin Yong in Đồng Nai newspaper (Luong, 2018, p. 516). The release of this version also brought up several issues which were mostly attached to the Vietnamese name of the title that Từ Khánh Phụng gave to his translation, which is *Cô Gái Đồ Long* (The Dragon-Slaying Girl). This act of localization became the topic of a polemic to decide who was de facto that girl in the novel, although Từ Khánh Phụng explained later that the reason he came up with this name originated in a fact that most of *wuxia* novels are embraced with violence and politics, and thus, the use of a woman in the name might help "soften" it (Duong, 2018). In 1963, 44 newspapers were allowed to publish in South Vietnam, and all of them published Jin Yong's novels in their feuilletons. To have more audience, they divided a novel into numerous parts which fit half the page of a newspaper. The wave of *wuxia* was strong to the degree that more than 30 publishing houses printed Jin Yong's novels,

many translators like Từ Khánh Phụng or Hàn Giang Nhạn made their names by translating Jin Yong or Gu Long's novels, and even a lot of novels which were not written by both writers were labeled with them as authors to gain more audiences (L. H. T. Tran, 2009). Because copyrights were not treated as seriously as nowadays, many newspapers published the same novel. However, to gain more attention, each newspaper employed a distinctive sale tactic, ranging from issuing a new, nonidentical name to that novel when released (which is similar to the way Từ Khánh Phụng did when releasing his translation in 1961) to dividing the novel into two parts with the first part had one name and the second part still owned its original name (e.g., *Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils [Tiān Lóng Bā Bù]* of Jin Yong was divided into *Lục Mạch Thần Kiếm* and *Thiên Long Bát Bộ*).

Wuxia novels became a part of the popular culture in South Vietnam from 1965 to 1973. L. V. Do (1968) had to confirm that "almost every class of the society read them regardless of their age, gender, or social position," translators could even buy houses or cars using their reimbursement received from translating *wuxia* novels, and even publishing houses which almost declared bankruptcy found the life buoy, thanks to the publication of *wuxia* novels. Although there were still some oppositions from some critics who thought that *wuxia* novels were not qualified to be called literature (H. Chan, 1967; V. K. Nguyen, 1968), those comments drowned into an ocean of compliments toward *wuxia* novels published in South Vietnam.

L. T. Do (2018) explained that because *wuxia* novels have been considered a genre of paraliterature, these written works always relegate to the margins of recognized literature. Angenot (1974) asserted that adventure novels, crime novels, romance novels, and science fictions, those whose corpus of texts and its literary status are made uncertain by the absence of recognition without being fully identifiable to another writing regime such as history or journalism, are seen as paraliterature. Because *wuxia* novels do not aim to achieve the primary objective of realizing the aesthetic function that the so-called literary works are supposed to carry out dominantly, and display instead the literary ambition of providing readers with the immediate pleasure or the lure of gain that this pleasure allows to consider, *wuxia* works do not move beyond the boundaries of paraliterature, being dismissed as subliterary. Nonetheless, paraliterature might be an initial point, a background that is attached to *wuxia* novels, but it should not play the role of a branding iron, that is, a fixed literary stigma. The demarcation line separating paraliterature from literature is obscure, and *wuxia* novels could cross that line because it creates a literary world characterized by boundaries and rules, in which the Chinese philosophy plays the supreme role. The actions found in *wuxia* novels may be seen as a tool to satisfy some dimensions of human beings such as curiosity, amusement, and imagination, but *wuxia* works do comply with the Sino-values to conform a consistency in the message that the authors want

to convey. The Chinese heroism is rolled into one energetic, little package that readers, the targeted group of consumers, cannot help but love and enjoy (Manalo, 2010).

It is worth noting that *wuxia* novels were not meant to be the sole cultural product for a particular social class in South Vietnam. Until 1974, 30% of South Vietnamese were still illiterate (T. L. Nguyen, 2006). Nonetheless, illiteracy did not completely prevent people of the working class from approaching *wuxia* novels because they still could ask educated people to read for them, and the adaptation of *wuxia* novels to various plays of *cải lương* (a form of modern folk opera in Vietnam which is a mixture of southern Vietnamese folk songs, classical music, classical theater form based on Chinese opera, and modern spoken drama) also allowed them to know about *wuxia* fictions.

There are five reasons why *wuxia* novels have become "a daily meal" in the everyday life of Vietnamese people in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. First, *wuxia* novels that were published after 1954 belonged to the New School in *wuxia* novels. This new style of writing led by Jin Yong allowed people to approach *wuxia* novels on a regular basis because it was published first in the feuilleton of daily newspapers before being combined and printed as books later (Huss & Liu, 2007). Bai (2014) described that Ming-Qing novels represent a neutral form that links chronicle and modern fiction. The narrative mode and narrative perspective of these classic novels often follow a temporally unidirectional structure (what happens first is described first, then next activities will be described thereafter), whereas modern novels employ the idea of following characters' psychological development. In terms of the portrayal of characters, the characteristics of characters are gradually manifested through their actions and dialogues, and the authors rarely add additional analysis of these characteristics. Besides, the writing style of Chinese novels under the Ming and Qing dynasties is conventional with chapters, additional poems in the content, motives of love stories, and classic heroism or principles of Confucianism being set in a prestructured form that is omnipresent. However, these rigid standards were slightly replaced in New School's wuxia fictions with more trivial images of heroes as these heroes also have their own wildness. D. S. B. Vu (2015) stated that the classical virtues of Confucianism were challenged by the promotion of personal freedom and the rejection of the Chinese hierarchy concerning family order. Xeno-factors of outside-China cultures were also employed as Gu Long incorporated the detective genre into his works, making it more intriguing. Thus, Vietnamese readers accepted it as a new genre of literature instead of seeing it as similar to the works of the Old School.

Second, the translation and readership were facilitated by the *Hoa* people in South Vietnam who are Vietnamese of Chinese origin. Following the Manchu conquest in the 17th century that helped establish the Qing dynasty in China, Chinese refugees from the Ming dynasty sought asylum in Dai Viet (the country name of Vietnam between the 15th and 19th centuries). Nguyen Lords allowed them to move to the southern part of Vietnam and freely resettle there (K. Tran, 1993). The presence of the Chinese diaspora whose foundation is guaranteed by a semi-autonomous administrative system in Vietnam at that time encouraged more Chinese refugees to move to the South, in addition to the intermarriage between Vietnamese women and Chinese refugees that helped tighten the bond and naturalize these refugees. The new groups were called *Minh Hương*, which is a way to recall their allegiance to the Ming dynasty, and along with their descendants from the intermarriage, they became permanent Vietnamese citizens of Chinese ethnic groups. The tide of Chinese immigration was still high during the time of French colonization of Vietnam from 1858 onwards. This wave reached its peak during the Chinese Civil War from 1927 to 1949, during which around 600,000 Chinese relocated to Vietnam (K. Tran, 1993). The chaotic political situation in China and the unstable economy caused by the war compelled Chinese people to move away. Thanks to the foundation that was solid built since the 17th century, the Chinese diaspora adapted rapidly to the new living environment in Vietnam, actively playing the leading role in the business private section and even controlling the market in South Vietnam during the Vietnam War (Evans & Rowley, 1990). Although considering themselves Vietnamese, they still preserved and honored the Chinese culture and their descendants are still capable of using Mandarin or other vernaculars of Chinese origin. Therefore, *wuxia* fictions were popular among *Hoa* people (literally means Chinese), which is a significant starting point that helped bring *wuxia* fictions into vogue.

Third, Jin Yong or Gu Long, the two most famous authors, are indeed good writers as they do know how to create characters and plot for long-run novels (most of Jin Yong's novels have more than 1,000 pages) in which people can find a *jianghu* world filled "with love and action, with occurrences that are not identical, and even historical events and the philosophy behind that make people think deeply after closing the book" (L. H. T. Tran, 2009; *jianghu* in wuxia novels is a term that refers to the community of martial artists in wuxia stories; it could also be understood as a term used to depict outlaw societies). The writing style of Jin Yong, which combines fluent traditional Chinese prose narrative with a vividly modern cinematic touch of the West (Minford, 2018), had a huge impact on Vietnamese writers who tried to imitate and write their own *wuxia* novels. Earnshaw (2018), who translated Jin Yong's *The Book and The Sword (Shū Jiàn Ēn Chóu Lù)*, indicated that Jin's writing was a huge leap in the direction of Western literary methodology compared with his forebears, which is understandable because Jin himself was an admirer of Alexandre Dumas the Father and Robert Louis Stevenson.

In terms of storytelling, Jin Yong's writing contains well-structured sentences that serve the descriptive purpose reasonably. Instead of following the old style of Chinese

literature in which several standards are applied and inherently approved without question, Jin Yong fearlessly added more details and even went beyond those standards by going upstream. For example, he created Trinket as the protagonist of *The Deer and The Cauldron (Lù Dǐng Jì)*, who is an uneducated antihero. Minford (2018), who translated *The Deer and the Cauldron*, commented that Trinket is indeed an unconventional character because he is an incorrigible scamp, the opportunistic, lazy, amoral, sadistic hero that relies mainly on trickery rather than valor and true, methodical martial arts to win. Thanks to this character, the fierce nature of *wuxia* novels and the seriousness of the historical background are merged with humor, making the readers feel that they are released from the unease and could contemplate for a moment, which is an epic motive that could not be usually found in the classical Chinese works, including Old School's *wuxia* novels.

In terms of details, the conversations are described sophisticatedly. A dialogue will be provided with a clear backdrop, appropriate thoughts, manners, and a suitable scenario that help illustrate what is actually happening. The characters, although they still represent a great amount of respect and approval for traditional Chinese values, are more realistic, ordinary, and even banal than standardized characters of other previous Chinese written works. Besides, Jin Yong conducted a broad and deep historical research for each of his novels that was used to orient the plot, making the story credible and not letting the fantasy be overused to a degree of totally unconvincingly fictional. Unlike Gu Long who normally left his stories open-ended, Jin Yong normally allowed the readers to acquire a sense of closure, even when reading sad stories, which resembles most English novels—that is, a proper narrative of events.

The writing style of Jin Yong could be detected in works of Vietnamese authors like Trần Đại Sỹ, Từ Khánh Phụng, Lã Phi Khanh, Phan Cảnh Trung, and Ưu Đàm Hoa, those who tried to discover a distinctive trail for Vietnamese *wuxia* novels. Because readers could identify the similarities easily, none of those works could be evaluated as masterpieces and only be rated as acceptable. Even novels of the most highly praised Vietnamese author Hoàng Ly also displayed nuances that were influenced by Jin Yong's works, although he tried to utilize the minority ethnic groups in Vietnam as main characters and combine *wuxia* novels with adventure elements. The writing style imitation even escalated to the level that before 1975, the number of Vietnamese authors who impersonated Jin Yong and Gu Long is uncountable (Duong, 2018). The works written by these authors usually either take the form of unauthorized prequels or sequels to well-known works, or completely novel works, but the writing style was plausible enough to convince readers that those works were authentically composed by either Jin Yong or Gu Long.

Vietnamese authors, surprisingly, have not learned after the writing style of Taiwanese author Gu Long, although he was also considered one of the three pioneers of the New

School alongside Jin Yong and Liang Yusheng (Zhang & Luo, 2018). In the case of Liang Yusheng, it is understandable that his influence in Vietnam was not remarkable due to the fact that his works were not translated as much as Jin Yong and Gu Long's novels. But the shortage of Vietnamese *wuxia* works that imitate the style of Gu Long is questionable. The reason lies in the fact that Gu Long employed the detective genre to embed in his *wuxia* stories, which is not the strength of Vietnamese writers. The distinctive patterns in Gu Long works are short sentences and paragraphs, as well as chains of conversation between characters that make his works look like a collection of play scripts rather than a conventional novel (Liu & Xiao, 2020). The simplicity that Gu Long promoted was not easy to replicate because it conveys a volume of unusual mannerism of human life, idyllic ways of thinking, thrilling plots, and logical detective quality deduction features that were not found in Vietnamese novels, especially when the number of works that belong to the detective genre in Vietnam is negligible.

Fourth, the idea of escapism and existentialism was widespread as at that time the Vietnam War was at its peak. Multiple political events ranging from the division of Korea and Germany, the Cold War, the Cuban missile crisis, the student movement in France in 1968, to name but a few, made Vietnamese plain folks in the South feel uncomfortable and do not have a clear vision of how this war would end. L. V. Do (1968) commented that at that time "*wuxia* novels are an exit for the youth where they can find the remained aesthetics and life values." Ly (1965) or Luu (1965) also admitted that instead of facing the complicated situations of South Vietnam at that time as they are either not ready or do not want to deal with, reading *wuxia* novels was chosen by the youth as a compassionate way.

Wuxia novels written by Jin Yong succeeded in portraying a fantasized golden feudal era of China before the arrival of the West (Manalo, 2010). In that fantasy world, the novel celebrates a Sino-centric, nationalistic ideal that Chinese people are proud of and hold for themselves, which turns out that it becomes a remedy for the Chinese readers who were pulled into the political vortex of the 20th century, in which the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 caused severe damages to the Chinese's faith in socialist idealism. Jin Yong's patriotic fantasy complied with the virtues and values set by Confucianism while perfectly preserving the idea of respecting the individual liberalism praised by Taoism (Nguyen Giang, 2018). These features are plausible enough to draw the attention of Asian readers, especially in countries where the Chinese influence still remains. Motives like Chinese heroism or loves layered with many twists and turns, dilemmas of choosing between lovers or family, nation or personal relationships interweaved and helped create a system of circumstances that transfers the concept of Asian cliché romance, which seems to be the spiritual antidote that the youth in South Vietnam during that chaotic time was seeking.

Last but not least, the publishing system and the press had an effective propaganda agenda by recruiting a lot of translators, the releasing procedure was carried out at an unbelievable speed, and advertising was thoroughly used in every medium. All these reasons made *wuxia* novels an unforgettable cultural product in South Vietnam, not only during the war but its echo has been passed down to the next generation of readers (L. H. T. Tran, 2009). During the peak time of *wuxia* novels in South Vietnam, when the wet season hit Hong Kong with heavy rains and storms, causing the cancelation of flights that carried newspapers printed in Hong Kong in which chapters of *wuxia* novels were originally published, the press in Saigon also suffered from the precipitous drops in circulation because readers only purchased newspapers to read *wuxia* stories (D. S. B. Vu, 2015). The bright side of this story is that the publication process of newspaper companies in the 60s and 70s in South Vietnam almost matched the speed of their counterparts in Hong Kong, allowing Vietnamese readers to enjoy *wuxia* novels no later than readers of the place where *wuxia* novels were compiled.

D. S. B. Vu (2015) also cited a story shared by the secretary of the well-known translator cum author Hàn Giang Nhạn, according to which on the day that a new issue of newspapers from Hong Kong like *Ming Pao* (the newspaper founded by Jin Yong which also served as the main distributing channel of his *wuxia* novels) arrived, around 20 representatives from different newspapers would come to Hàn's house, queuing up until they could acquire the translated version. To satisfy 20 newspapers at the same time, Hàn Giang Nhạn needed to perform a simultaneous translation while his secretary had to use 20 pelure papers with each of them layered with a carbon paper on top to quickly write down the translated version. Because the secretary needed to put pressure on the pen to make sure that the ink could go through a stack of 20 sheets, only the first few sheets that were placed on top are readable, which means those who stood at the end of the waiting line had to obtain a low-quality, blurry translated version. That led to a fact that although all newspapers that published *wuxia* stories in South Vietnam released their new issue almost at the same time, the translated versions printed were not the same because the editors of newspapers that did not receive the clear version could only guess the true meaning and needed to improvise.

The improvisation did not just stop at that level because the peer pressure of securing the reader's loyalty and the shortage of original works due to the war forced either translators or editors to push the idea of improvisation to an unforeseen limit. For instance, well-known translator Thương Lan decided to combine the two inherently unrelated series, namely *Chu Liuxiang Series (Chǔ Liúxiāng Chuánqí xìliè)* and *Little Li's Flying Dagger Series (Xiǎolǐ Fēidāo xìliè)* of Gu Long, creating a new profile for A Fei of *Little Li Series* and making him become Chu Liuxiang in another literary universe. The new combination, which was actually the first three volumes of the Chu Liuxiang Series, was granted a new name, *Dragon and Tiger, Wind and Cloud*, offering Vietnamese readers a totally different portrait of a character with whom Chinese readers were familiar. That could be explained by the fact that *Little Li's Flying Dagger Series* was a big hit before, and thus, by creating a sense of continuity, the new series would be more easily accepted. This misled and misinterpreted version was only clarified when *wuxia* novels are widely accepted after the Reform in 1986, and especially when the internet services were introduced to Vietnam in 1997, Vietnamese readers had more chances to approach this genre, compare, and figure out that the Vietnamese version had been modified.

Wuxia Novels in the Postwar Period: The Vicissitudes

In North Vietnam, as the communist government considered *wuxia* novels a xeno-product that triggered the dumbing-down process and could downgrade the moral system of the Vietnamese youth, it was banned even until the time after the Reform in 1986. Most of the extreme communist critiques were collected in a book in 1977, according to which *wuxia* novels were accused as a tool to mentally enslave and ruin the Vietnamese youth. The reason why there were such severe comments lies in the popularization of this genre in South Vietnam during the war, and thus, they equated it with the idea of capitalism and the living style of the "withered Western" (Linh et al., 1977). That led to a reality that Thong Nguyen (2018) called "a lost generation of not knowing Jin Yong," implying that the preference of people in North Vietnam before 1986 did not have a chance to go abreast with the *wuxia* stream. Yen and Tu (2018) noted that only a minor group of Northern intellectuals had the chance to approach this genre, and usually the way to do that was considered illegal because reading and storing *wuxia* novels during that period were acts that go against the law. That led to an ironic fact that Northern readers at that time could not tell authors apart because they mostly acquired *wuxia* novels that were close to hand. The version that they possessed was separated, disconnected volumes of one title; different volumes of two or more titles; or even different volumes of different authors; thus, the writing identity of Jin Yong, Gu Long, or other authors was likely unrecognizable. In the late 80s, thanks to people who traveled to the South, then collected and brought back to the North fully printed collection of well-known *wuxia* authors, Northern readers were given the chance to be brought into contact with the precise writing style of each author instead of perceiving a fragmented illustration like in the past. Inherently, among the works that were brought to the North, there were also works written by authors who impersonated Jin Yong or Gu Long, but the limited options at that time tolerated the presence of these novels, and these novels were even categorized as a derivative genre, namely *Jin Yong-based* or *Gu Long-based* (Yen & Tu, 2018).

Only after 1986 and especially after 1994 (when the post-Vietnam War embargo on Vietnam was lifted in February), the one-sided view that considered *wuxia* novels a moral issue has gradually faded away. The most striking feature is that the more serious the prohibition of the state was, the more curiosity the youth in North Vietnam had. Nguyen Giang (2018) asserted that Jin Yong's novels highlighted the unconquerable spirit possessed by Chinese patriots. This indomitable spirit proved them in the field of battle, and their everlasting hatred toward foreign invaders resonated with the red revolutionary spirit held by the youth in North Vietnam, in addition to the willingness of knowing more about the sense of excitement brought by fantasy-themed plots of these novels—a "prestigious" right that they have been deprived. D. S. B. Vu (2015) and Nguyen Giang (2018) agreed that the context in Jin Yong's novels was mainly set in the period that the Mainland China was invaded and/or reigned by either the Mongol Empire (those who found the Yuan dynasty) or the Manchu State (those who found the Qing dynasty). The principal message in those novels shows that the author was talking about settling problems between patriotic individuals and keeping the supposed-to-be-Han-solely nation clean of alien unrepentant evildoers. Historically speaking, Han people lost in both endeavors of resistance; thus, the content of Jin Yong's novels served the purpose of a spiritual elixir with which the protagonist sought for happiness by acquiring unachievable levels of mythical martial arts' maneuvers and protecting their philosophy of superiority by depicting all kung-fu that came from outside Mainland China as evil arts. The talent of Jin Yong lies in the ability to create an imaginary world that was built upon the foundation of history in which Chinese values and standards seized the victory against the invasion of Northern tribes, that is, a mental victory that could help rectify the spirit of a torn country.

Illegal prints of *wuxia* novels printed by publishers in North Vietnam could easily be found in any book rental shops in North Vietnam after 1986, and after a long time being quarantined within the ethical prison set by the ideology and the state, the exposure to *wuxia* novels happened naturally as a form of liberalization. At the beginning of the 90s, along with the presence of *wuxia* films and TV series from Hong Kong, Northern readers were reintroduced to *wuxia* novels, thanks to the efforts of several publishers who dared to evade the censorship imposed on this genre. Nonetheless, the legalistic loopholes regarding copyrights at that time allowed these publishing houses to releases these works under different names (e.g., *Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils* written by Jin Yong was renamed to *Four Golden Arrows)*, which is an unconventional method that these publishers used to bypass the censorship barriers raised by the government. In some extreme cases, the context of these novels was even modified to occur in Vietnamese contexts, and the characters' name was also changed to make it sound more Vietnamese, partially transforming them into Vietnam-related pseudo-historical novels (Yen & Tu, 2018). Most of these novels, unfortunately, were not fully published because the publishers often canceled midway. The still-leaky system of intellectual property laws at that time also pandered to the idea of plagiarism as readers could easily recognize that many scenes in historical novels written by Vietnamese author Phan Cảnh Trung were extracted and modified from similar scenes found in novels composed by Jin Yong.

The turning point was marked in 1993 when Quảng Ngãi Publishing House became the first provincial publisher that printed and released *wuxia* novels with the name of the original authors remained intact and the content was not modified. The socialist-oriented open market also entailed a more open mindset, allowing *wuxia* novels in the Northern part of Vietnam in particular and in Vietnam generally to be accepted and approved. This approval was concretized by the presence of the translation of *Fox Volant of the Snowy Mountain (Xuě Shān Fēi Hú)*—a work of Jin Yong, on the *Magazine of Foreign Literature* published by Vietnam Writer's Association in 1998, which is a state-funded organization (Yen & Tu, 2018). Phuong Nam Corporation (PNC) was the first publishing company in Vietnam that bought the copyright to translate and publish Jin Yong and Gu Long's works in a new "open-minded" Vietnam in 1999, 5 years after the embargo lift. Since 2001, after 2 years of preparation and edition, PNC has released and reprinted these novels, which were well-received by Vietnamese readers who had to wait for a long time until the day that *wuxia* novels could receive a more empathic attitude from the government. On the internet, along with the development of basic services like emails or websites, forums have become a platform that helps connect and bond people together. Before the official release of PNC, forums and personal websites were also used to be the channel that unofficial translation of *wuxia* novels could be circulated among the youth. There were three notable forums which were seen as "the premium vaults" in storing, translating, retyping old novels of other well-known authors, and posting critical reviews: Mai Hoa Trang, Nhạn Môn Quan, and Việt Kiếm; each had tens of thousands of members. With the birth of Facebook and other social networks, these forums were defunct but the movement of fan-translation is still maintained by other successor websites until today, such as Bàn Long or Tàng Thư Viện, that provide not only the translation of *wuxia* novels but also other genres of Chinese web novels.

Nonetheless, there has been a decreasing trend in publishing and reading *wuxia* novels in recent years. After the death of Gu Long in 1985 and the early retirement of Jin Yong and Liang Yusheng in 1972 and 1984, respectively, the golden era of writing and publishing *wuxia* novels also ended. The New School of writing novels with martial arts employed as the main theme after the 80s in China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan is now coated with a layer of fairy fantasy rather than preserving the classical core, giving birth to the *xianxia* genre.

This new genre has stirred the book market in Vietnam for a short period starting with *Zhu Xian*, a series written by Chinese author Xiaoding in 2003 and published in Vietnam in 2007. Nonetheless, works that belong to this genre, which could be read online for free on various websites in Vietnam like sstruyen.com, truyenyy.com, truyenfull.vn, and so on, have rapidly been out of the interest because new novels have not shown any unearthing motives but followed the same, obsolete process in creating plot and characters.

Another reason to explain the shrunken popularity of *wuxia* novels came from the presence of other genres that are more appealing. The endeavors of integration that Vietnam is pursuing have shown that the book market in Vietnam is vibrant more than ever with the participation of many private companies who broke the monopoly status of state-owned publishing houses. The new interface of the book market in Vietnam has entailed the introduction of new genres and foreign authors to Vietnam, allowing the readers' taste to be filled with new samples. Besides Western novels, Chinese literature still plays an important role in satisfying Vietnamese readers, flooding the market with new fictions that are more than capable to fade out the influencing power of *wuxia* novels. A typical example is that the recent years in Vietnam have witnessed the rise of *yanqing* novels. *Yanqing* (romance), as a genre of literature and entertainment, is characterized largely by a thematic focus on love relations and a principal concern over aesthetics that include multilevel, complicated plots, and a myriad of sentimental and emotional expressions (Jiang, 2007). Politics are not the main focus in *yanqing* works; if available, it only serves for narrative purposes without interfering with the poetics of *qing* (feelings). Although the major focus of this genre is put on love relations, *yanqing* works do not exclude plots that are related to mundane relationships among friends and siblings or between parents and children (Jiang, 2007, p. 239). *Xianxia* novels in China also know how to exist in the market by combining with the romance theme of *yanqing*, allowing *xianxia-yanqing* works and their movie/series adaptations to spread out and reach the zenith not only in China but also among overseas Chinese communities in North America (Phuong & Trung, 2017). Because every character, standard, and detail in *yanqing* works is overportrayed, Hai Quynh (2017) asserted that it has blown a "fresh gale of youth and positivity," a sense of relaxing and release to the Vietnamese young readers who no longer need the breath-taking feeling brought by fierce fights. This genre quickly seized the throne which was previously held by *wuxia* novels when speaking of Chinese literature in Vietnam, encouraging Vietnamese publishers to buy more copyrights from China and abandon *wuxia* novels which no longer produce the equivalent profits. As Nguyen Giang (2018) commented, the virtual environment of online gaming, ironically, which seems to be the last location that he could think of when mentioning *wuxia* novels, turns out to be the current vault that helps store the legacy.

In addition, in recent years, readily available alternatives in entertainment such as DVDs, game consoles, and streaming services have caused the decimation of the genre's readership. Fortunately, *wuxia* still survives, thanks to the proliferation of *wuxia*-themed *manhua* in places like Hong Kong and Taiwan, being published on weekly basis. Vietnam readers were exposed to *manhua* in the past through numerous unauthorized publications before 2004, but the rise of the Chinese comics only came in the 2000s when Tre Publishing House bought the copyrights and released well-known series such as *The Four, The Ravages of Time, Dragon Tiger Gate, Monkey King*, and so on. Nonetheless, the availability of fan-made scanning, translation, and editing of comics on the internet has made the number of sales decrease dramatically. Besides, most of the original manhua are colored comics, which increases the production cost when reprinting; thus, the Vietnamese version was printed only in black and white, being not catchy in the eyes of readers. Currently, no publishing houses in Vietnam intend to publish *wuxia* comics, especially when the practice of scanlation is still widespread. On the bright side, fan-made translation seemingly helps attract young readers to *wuxia* theme in the digital era because the reading culture of the youth in Vietnam has suffered a setback as books are no longer as appealing as other entertainment formats (T. T. H. Vu, 2013).

Nonetheless, from a more positive and retrospective viewpoint, along with the introduction of Hong Kong's TV series, which were dubbed by Vietnamese groups in South Vietnam, *wuxia* novels and *wuxia*-themed motion pictures have become a part of the Vietnamese popular culture in terms of cultural product consumption in the 90s and 2000s. Therefore, when it comes to the selection process, the rank of *wuxia*-themed games has been prioritized. As asserted by D. Chan (2006) and Yoon and Cheon (2014), as cultural proximity is one of the factors that lure people to play online games produced by other countries that have shared the same cultural traits, the idea of transnationalization is manifested through the attachment of Vietnamese gamers to *wuxia*-themed cultural products.

How the Legacy Still Sounds: Situating *Wuxia* Fictions in the Online Gaming Context

To obtain a more practical perspective, I conducted in-depth interviews with 12 company leaders and game experts in Vietnam. This was a part of a long-run research project on the online gaming industry in Vietnam with various findings that have been presented in several publications (Q. A. Phan, 2019a, 2019b).

Director of Product Development of one company that belongs to the top 4 in Vietnam shared that wuxia-themed games are still the first choice when deciding which game titles to import because it matches the demand of players; most of them come from China, and thus, the copyright cost

is affordable, and Vietnamese companies have a long time of experience in localizing and operating this genre of game:

> MOBA games are largely played now but they are distributed by foreign websites like Steam or Origin, so that isn't our playground. Gamers like wuxia. Who didn't watch TVB series or read wuxia novels, not even once, you tell me?

A professional translator working in the Department of Localization as the Head of the Translation team in another company that also belongs to the top 4 commented that the influence of cổ trang movies and TV series (indicating motion pictures with the Chinese historical theme, cổ trang means ancient clothes) and Chinese wuxia or fantasy martial arts novels on the Vietnamese audience is strong, which has the root that could be traced back to the last century. The cultural proximity found between two the countries would guarantee that these movies and novels are still inspirations for online games that would be played by Vietnamese gamers:

> The gamers are under the influence of martial arts films imported to Vietnam in the 80s and 90s, and Chinese films are still popular. They grew up with that, it is a part of their childhood, of our childhood, and when it comes to online games, it is like you live your time again with characters that you once dreamed of.

From another perspective, a programmer that works for a game studio that imports and localizes games from China to distribute in Vietnam noted that as a gamer when he first encountered online games, he did not know which one to choose as there were a lot of them in the market. Then choosing *wuxia*-themed games was a safe choice because as he already knows about the topic and a part of the content (because it is an adaptation from *wuxia* novels), he can engage with the playing activities with ease:

> When online games were introduced to Vietnam, I didn't know which one is the best. Then I chose Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils, it is a work of *Jin Yong, so at least I know how it looks, I know which character I should choose, which skills I should acquire, like knowing something rather than being lost.*

Vietnam has a gaming population of 32.8 million (Newzoo, 2017), largely found within the age range from 16 to 34 years (72%; Pokkt, 2018). Players who were born in the 1980s and 1990s were introduced to *wuxia* novels mainly through either reading illegally printed versions at rental shops (and they could purchase books with copyright after 2001) or watching adaptations (movies, TV series), whereas the millennials have mostly been exposed to *wuxia* concepts through reading *wuxia* novels converted to web fictions, watching TV series, and reading *wuxia*-inspired Chinese comics scanned and translated by fan groups on various websites. The company leaders and game experts with whom I conducted in-depth interviews showed an attitude that their decision of importing and localizing *wuxia* games was simply based on the fact that *wuxia* novels were popular among Vietnamese players; thus,

choosing online games with *wuxia* as the main theme is the most rational option, securing the possibility of attracting players. Nonetheless, it is arguable that at the dawn of the online gaming industry in Vietnam, even if these companies picked games of other genres whose game plots do not employ *wuxia* as the primary influence, Vietnamese players, those who were eager to experience a new entertainment format, would still play any games that they were offered. That means, the consumption behavior of Vietnamese players that is related to *wuxia*-themed games, besides the possibility that gamers themselves are drawn to the comfort of familiar brought by *wuxia* novels, has been shaped by the conscious intervention of Vietnamese game companies. In terms of marketing, this intervention of molding consumer habits is indeed a well-considered strategy that also applies the life course approach to impress and attract players.

Moschis (2007) suggested that the life course approach should be highlighted because this approach focuses on examining gradual or abrupt changes in the behavior of a unit (e.g., individual, family, organization) that take place over time. These changes are attached to prior life experiences and analyzed as multiple time- and context-dependent events, changes, or transitions within historical and sociocultural contexts by considering their timing, spacing, order, and duration. The consumer behavior in the future is thus predictable because it is viewed as the product of responses to earlier life conditions and the way that individuals consult to adapt to new circumstances. From this viewpoint, the presence and the popularization of *wuxia* novels could be seen as an event shaping the reading behavior of Vietnamese people, and later, ideas about *wuxia* serve as human capital, that is, a nostalgic hint, which encourages players to select *wuxia*-themed games to play. By considering the bond set between *wuxia* novels and Vietnamese players, game companies in Vietnam could target the criteria regarding the development, stability, and changes of consumption habits. *Wuxia* novels are seen as the inspiration that creates needs and demand for specific products and services bundles (Kotler, 1992), which are online games in this situation.

Another factor that should be taken into consideration is that the Asian game market in general and the Vietnamese market in particular have presented different preferences in terms of game selection and consumption. The Western gaming culture is dominated by the idea of militarized masculinity that incorporates numerous elements of fantasy and brutality used to maintain gender differences and honor the patriarch doctrine (Chen, 2009). This idea is justified by the number of shooting, fighting, strategy, as well as tactical war games holding top chart positions in the Western market. Even seem-to-be-feminine games like *Barbie* or *Tomb Raider* are also the pool of stereotypes (Chen, 2014). Images of girls with dolls and clothes, dreaming to become princesses, while boys with guns and cars, being righteous knights by default, are not uncommon in the *Barbie* series, while the success of the heroine Lara Croft is mainly contributed by the support of

male buyers. The cuteness (*kawaii*) culture found in Japanese games somehow eradicates the gender prejudice because the colorful design of those games neutralizes the difference to the point that everything is ordinary; the appearance difference, if available, between heroes (either male or females) and other characters is small (Chen, 2014). Besides, the content of Asian games does not suggest the Western hegemony like the way the US and European games strongly proceed. Western strategic games often deal with the topic like space exploration or wars, which are either loosely or closely based on the concept of colonization (Kline et al., 2003). The game subtexts, thus, represent conquest and imperialism, which are not really welcomed by Asian distributors and players because many Asian countries used to be the victim of colonization in the past.

In the case of *wuxia* games, the West-East differences also contribute to the popularity of those games in Asia (including Vietnam). The subculture of *wuxia* in the Western market is still in its infancy, and the games were not successfully acclimated to the local markets due to cultural differences (Lu, 2016). Besides, there are other roadblocks as well, including late updates for the Western markets; the security level of Asian games is low, allowing more hacking activities and bots; and the difference of time zone would prevent Western players from joining some events and getting rewards. In contrast to that situation, the Vietnamese market found no barrier in receiving those products.

Besides, from a literacy perspective, it is hard for Western readers to understand the *wuxia* world. First, as mentioned above, the motives of *wuxia* fiction display some similarities with the knight-errand genre, which is no longer popular in Western literature. Although Chinese martial arts are introduced to the West, thanks to various media products, Manalo (2010) still asserted that scenes in *wuxia* novels are "distinctive." The kung-fu maneuvers that *wuxia* fictions portray are veneered with fantasy, but that fantasy is not about dungeon and dragon, witchcraft, or fairy tales. It is "something" else that is not familiar in the eyes of Western readers. The translators will hit the wall when trying to translate Chinese names, regardless of the methods used— transliteration or conventional translation (Frisch, 2018). Poetic kung-fu moves in Chinese with five syllables such as *Luo Ying Shen Jian Zhang* will become *Wilting Blossom Sacred Sword Fist*, which sounds rugged and heavy in English, not to mention that the new given meaning is obscure. Names that help create the distinctive nuances of *wuxia*, which are easily grasped by Asian readers, are exotically alien and require an additional glossary. That would make a page of *wuxia* in English filled with uncountable footnotes and endnotes, making reading a mind-torturing activity rather than contemplation. The same thing happens to *wuxia* games when localizing games for the Western markets. The text boxes cannot feature long names because one Chinese character is equal to two Romanised words, while the audio works will have to deal with strange words that

make almost no sense to listeners. Moreover, the length of a *wuxia* series could be up to a few millions of words, and Frisch (2018) did not think that Westerners can hold the patience to finish reading, with the exception of the overseas Chinese people who also happen to be the main consumer in the West. Although there are still long series in Western literature such as *War and Peace*, these series contain a deep, sophisticated philosophy and a universal outlook on life that *wuxia* fictions have not reached ever (Nguyen Giang, 2018). That could be explained by the fact that *wuxia* stories were originally published chapter by chapter, and the sense of a consistent philosophy, if available, is thus disrupted. Oriental values and standards, which could be at an extreme level, such as courage, loyalty, kinship, homesickness, and so on, might receive Asian readers and players' empathy, but Western people would find that cheesy, childish, cliché, or even unnecessary. Earnshaw (2018) declared that dramatic events in *wuxia* mean nothing elsewhere, and those who did not grow up in the culture would have to decrypt or give up on understanding. Even Earnshaw himself, as the translator, could not understand why the protagonist could travel with a pretty woman in the desert for days and never makes a move on her, and why fight scenes need to be that long. Thus, translated *wuxia* works are not popular in the West, and that situation makes *wuxia* games there underrated.

When the idea of having an entirely "made in Vietnam" online game was brought up, *wuxia* theme was also prioritized with the birth of *Thuận Thiên Kiếm*, a role-playing game that uses Vietnamese history and myths as the source of inspiration. Although the aspiration of having *wuxia* games made totally in Vietnam kick-started by *Thuận Thiên Kiếm* was not successful due to operation failure, and the trend now is moving to multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) games and other casual games, the willing of having Vietnamese history-based *wuxia* games still presents. Nonetheless, because history is used as the material, the screening process conducted by the authority would be long and hard to pass because the state would not want to see history become modified. Besides, the production of a *wuxia* game is also costlier than importing games (even *Thuận Thiên Kiếm* used Overmax graphics engine, which is a Chinese product).

Conclusion

The tempestuous history of Vietnam during the 20th century pandered to the axiomatic prevalence of *wuxia* fictions, also opening up the path for numerous studies in Vietnam that focus on the impacts this genre has upon the Vietnamese popular culture. Starting as a marginal genre that was undercredited, *wuxia* novels have made a silent but sound literary revolution, being a typical example that showcases the harmony between popular culture and the so-called high culture. Although it is undeniable that *wuxia* novels have the goal of satisfying the demands of a wide range of readers,

the obsolete thinking proposed by Greenberg (1961) and Adorno (1970) that mass literature primarily promotes the standardization of thinking and suggests certain stereotypes, letting the readers be deprived of an opportunity for proper assessment of various situations, is no longer valid, at least in the case of *wuxia* fictions. By going abreast of the Vietnamese history from the colonial time until today, the vitality of *wuxia* fictions lies in the capability of standing out from the trait that other genres of mass literature have followed. V. T. Tran (2017) noted that because *wuxia* novels know how to trigger readers to think beyond the boundaries set by the writer, the process of reception cannot be considered to be passive. In terms of creativity, the complex and intertwined social relationships depicted in *wuxia* fictions are gathered into the characters' fate, pushing the character's fate to the climax of the tragedy, forcing the character to choose the behavior that they themselves sometimes also extremely confused. It is this feature that makes *wuxia* novels have a strong social background, being capable of portraying social contradictions and the capriciousness of people's psychology when facing the turning points of national history. The compilation of *wuxia* novels, thus, becomes inherent rather than a product created in accordance with preset motives ubiquitously found in mass literature.

The availability of *wuxia* online games as the digital continuation of *wuxia* fictions might make people once a gain come back to the concept of art commercialization that Greenberg (1961) and Adorno (1970) emphasized. Regarding this perspective, I understand that human existence and development find themselves in exchange activities. Written works also do not exist independently because they must exist through exchanges with readers. Therefore, the commercial process and the artistry are not at all facets of contradiction. Online games are played globally, but they are not seen through the same lenses because players have different social and cultural backgrounds, which are crucial factors that would influence their perspective. In the case of Vietnam, the concept of *wuxia* is mainly clarified through the political and cultural interaction between Vietnam and China. The most striking feature is the taste of game genre selection, which is unveiled to be *wuxia*-themed. Before the exposure to Chinese media products including web dramas, online fictions, and Chinese *yanqing* novels—those that have only become popular in the 2000s and onwards—Vietnamese people attached themselves to the Chinese culture through *wuxia*-related products. The legacy of *wuxia* novels has been culturally sanctioned and has borne a great resemblance to Vietnamese players' experience in selecting games and bonding with games that reflect the *wuxia* theme. Although the contestation between two countries in terms of politics raised the question of boycotting Chinese products, the long-term relationship and the deep penetration of *wuxia*-themed products in the popular culture of Vietnamese people have made the resistance futile, strongly drawing the demarcation line between the political tension and the reception of culture.

The process that transforms *wuxia* from reading preference to playing reference in Vietnam should be considered a part of transnationalization in gaming. Transnationalization is a process that consists of internal and external factors. The internal elements can be understood as the interaction between players of one nation and the video games designed and released by another nation's developers. These include selection taste (the tendency of choosing to play games designed by one specific country), the procedure of integration and reconfiguration (when the players put their own personality into the games, which could reflect cultural values of their home country), and a variety of characteristics manifested by players of different countries shown while playing the same game/genre of games (Ng, 2006). The external elements of transnationalization are displayed through video game companies, including the developing unit and the distributing firm. Those enterprises have transnationalized through the exchange of people (staff), new business models, and financing systems (Jin, 2010, p. 144). It also includes the development process in which a designer may be inspired by previous games from another country and the localization process in which the original games are transformed into a local version. Thanks to *wuxia* fictions, Vietnamese players have been motivated to engage in the process of welcoming games produced in East Asian countries, while Vietnam game companies took *wuxia* as the ignition point to build up the local industry. Although *wuxia* games are yielding a portion of their market share to MOBA games and other eSports genres, the dominance in terms of game titles is undeniable and would last as long as Vietnamese players are still mesmerized by the literary nature of *wuxia*.

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