

## Literature and Postcolonial Capitalism in Contemporary Vietnam: Indian Characters in Hồ Anh Thái's Writings

**Chi P. Pham**

*Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences, Hà Nội, Vietnam  
University of Hamburg, Germany*

### Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between literary representation and nationalism in contemporary Vietnam, a socialist state which has opened up to capitalist forms of economic organization. It asks if Vietnamese literature has changed its political role in the context of Vietnam pursuing policies of economic liberalization, engaging with global capitalist relations and opening to global private capitalist sectors. In other words, the paper asks how national literature, a body of literary works in the Vietnamese language that was historically constructed in anti-colonial, anti-imperial terms, has participated in the contemporary cultural, economic and political projects that the Vietnamese state has undertaken in order to retain its socialist and nationalist goals, while practicing transnational negotiation and socialist flexibility. In continuing the tradition of constructing Indian characters as “capitalists” and “foreign invaders,” Hồ Anh Thái’s writing suggests that the so-called political and economic relaxation of post-reform Vietnam is a strategy for the Vietnamese state to maintain itself on the path of socialism and nationalism. Through its examination of Hồ Anh Thái’s novels and short stories, focusing on their construction of Indian characters, the paper argues that socialist realism remains the guiding principle of contemporary Vietnamese literature. The choice of Hồ Anh Thái and his writing about Indians is based on the fact that the author and the Indian setting of his work embody important political and economic characteristics of post-reform Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Hồ Anh Thái, Indian characters, Vietnamese national literature, socialist realism, postcolonial capitalism.

This paper explores the relationship between literary representation and nationalism in contemporary Vietnam, a socialist state which has opened up to capitalist forms of economic organization. Dana Healy (2016) addresses Vietnamese literature since the time of Reform (1986) as “a literature in transition” in which the strictly guarded and sheltered rules of socialist realism are abandoned and “the new” and “the unknown” are (reluctantly) encouraged (49-50). This paper, in examining Hồ Anh Thái’s writing, particularly his construction of Indian characters, argues that socialist realism remains the guiding principle of contemporary Vietnamese literature. It asks if Vietnamese literature has changed its political role in the context of Vietnam’s pursuit of economic

liberalization, its engaging with global capitalist relations and opening to global private capitalist sectors. In other words, the paper asks how national literature, a body of literary works in the Vietnamese language that has its origins in anti-colonial, anti-imperial movements in Vietnam (Wilcox 11-12)<sup>1</sup> has participated in the contemporary cultural, economic and political projects that the Vietnamese state has undertaken in order to retain its socialist and nationalist goals, while practicing transnational negotiation and socialist flexibility. In continuing the tradition of constructing Indian characters as “capitalists” and “foreign invaders,” Hồ Anh Thái’s writing suggests that the so-called political and economic relaxation of post-reform Vietnam is a strategy for the Vietnamese state to remain firmly on the path of socialism and nationalism.

The choice of analyzing the works of Hồ Anh Thái (1960 - ), one of the leading and best known writers of contemporary Vietnam, is based on the fact that both the writer and the Indian setting of his work embody important political and economic characteristics of post-reform Vietnam: that is, Hồ Anh Thái is a diplomat of the Vietnamese government, spending much of his career in foreign countries; he earned his postgraduate degrees in India, a non-socialist country, with a scholarship from the Indian government (based on an agreement between the two governments). His works are exceptionally well-constructed, with foreign settings and foreign characters; despite this, his target audience is mostly Vietnamese, given that his works are primarily in Vietnamese and are published in Vietnam by traditional government-sponsored publishing houses. As such, Hồ Anh Thái and his writing career, exceptional among contemporary Vietnamese writers, demonstrate contemporary Vietnam’s ways of realizing political, cultural and economic relaxation and negotiation, in which questions about the process of nation-building and the political role of literature in that process are challenged.

Indians have long been central characters in anti-colonial Vietnamese literature (the national literature of Vietnam). Historically, the term “Indians” includes people, who are (or who are descendants of) those who, from the second half of the nineteenth century, migrated from French-British India to then Indochina – Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. The Indians mostly ran their own businesses in Indochina, including money-lending, driving services, cattle herding, security, and textile businesses (Huỳnh Tịnh Paulus Của 438; Pairaudeau 14-18; Chandra 31-32). In the wake of the Marxist-Leninism-based nationalism that took hold in the early twentieth century, Vietnamese intellectuals associated the Indians with French colonists, and therefore felt they could attack the French by attacking Indians. This association arose from the historical fact that the French colonial government developed Indian migration to Annam to make them mediators in businesses, particularly money-lending and tax collection, to exploit the colony’s population. Using Indians as mediators was the French administrators’ and businessmen’s colonizing tactic: the French did not have to have direct contact with “dirty natives,” and thus any possible resentment of natives because of material losses would be directed at the mediators. This meant that the

French still looked good in the natives' eyes while pillaging the natives' material resources; the Indians would be the ones seen as the cause for the natives' bankruptcy and degeneration. I argue that this historical association facilitates the metaphoric relations between the images of Indian migrants and French colonizers in colonial Vietnamese writing: Vietnamese intellectuals used the metaphor of "bloodsucking Indians," which allowed French colonizers to be addressed as targets of anti-colonial sentiments in the name of Indian migrants. To reiterate, this depiction would effectively stimulate common resentment for the French regime. As such, the imagined formulaic association of Indians with colonial capitalism in Vietnamese writing is associated with the Marxist-Leninist doctrine of class struggle which started dominating Vietnamese intellectual thought in the 1920s (Duiker 191-194; Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial* 358-360).

After the August 1945 Revolution, South Vietnam's failure to complete the democratic and national revolution forms the historical condition in which the "bloodsucking Indian" metaphor re-appeared in the writings of prolific novelists Vương Hồng Sển (1902-1996), Thanh Nam (1931-1981), An Khê (1923-1994) and Xuân Phát (1932-2014). Indian landlord and moneylender characters were made visible in accordance with the formulaic metaphor of the bloodsucking Indians, with the aim of indirectly criticizing the Republican government for being out of touch with the masses, given the excessive ownership of important economic sectors by domestic and foreign capitalists such as the French and Americans (Nguyễn Văn Mũi 113-114). In North Vietnam, there is no single socialist realist novel, in which the Indian bloodsucker has "maximum contact with the present (contemporary reality) in its open-endedness" (Todorov 88). Instead, images of the Indian bloodsucker appear in northern writing only in the form of formula, metaphor or metonym, suggesting a contemporary new Vietnamese society beyond colonial capitalism. In other words, the bloodsucking Indian images purely serve as "a national past" – the colonial dead – that either helped glorify the proletarianization led by the Party or potentially functioned as reminders by contemporary nation-makers of the lingering colonial legacy that had to be wiped out.

After the unification of the nation in 1975, bloodsucking Indians still appear as "vestiges" of idealized decayed colonial capitalism and as a reminder of the role of the Party in bringing into existence present-day independent, socialist Vietnam: the Party-led Revolution terminates Indian capitalists' and other foreigners' economic domination in Vietnam (Chi P. Pham 200-210). But surprisingly, as this paper will indicate, since the year of Reform (1986), Indians appear as living, contemporary characters (not just as dead or decayed Indians of the past), in Vietnamese writing, particularly in Hồ Anh Thái's works. This turn must be associated with the characteristic form of postcolonial capitalism in contemporary Vietnam.

The term "postcolonial capitalism" refers to "particularities" of capitalism in postcolonial contexts; it is a form of global capitalism which emerges in historical, cultural, and social associations with national independence

movements, decolonization and nation-building in formerly colonised countries. In other words, accounts of contemporary global capitalism must include the role of the postcolonial – in both its historical and political senses – in its formation. And this specific aspect of global capitalism – postcolonial capitalism – requires a new understanding of the role of the political within the matrix of nation-building, capitalism and postcoloniality (Naruse, Xiang, and Thandra 1-21). Postcolonial capitalism in Vietnam appears in the form of socialism-oriented capitalism that has been promoted since the reformations in 1986 when the Vietnam government started pursuing the policy of economic liberalization to “create favorite conditions (the modernized) for the building of socialism and defending the homeland” (*75 Years of the Communist Party of Vietnam* 809). Vietnam’s promotion of global capitalist relations and transformation of the state sector to the global private capitalist sector leads to the sudden appearance and dominance of foreign and domestic capitalist companies and groups. The Vietnamese state constantly eulogizes postcolonial capitalists, either Vietnamese or foreigners, as respected supporters of the socialist and nationalist revolution of Vietnam: in journalistic and administrative writings, the Indians and other foreigners, those whose migration to Vietnam is associated with rising bilateral trade, investment, and tourism contracts between Vietnam and other countries, appear as valuable investors in sectors that help with modernizing the Vietnamese economy (Tharkur and Thayer 246-252; Srivastava in Sakhuja 33-42; Mohanty in Sakhuja 43-69).

What we can see as a typical characteristic of capitalism in contemporary postcolonial Vietnam is that Vietnamese capitalism – market economy – has been accepted in Vietnam particularly since the early 1990s (Fforde 213), but it has been institutionalized and idealized to bear socialism and national hegemony of Vietnam as the ultimate goals of its operation. This means postcolonial capitalism in Vietnam is open to domestic and global private economic operation, but this openness is disciplined so that it becomes the means to reach “the modernized” or the “industrialized,” which form the essential conditions for completing socialism and national hegemony. This discipline has been repeated in all congresses of the Party. For example, the Political Report of the Eighth Congress (1996) emphasizes promotion of globalization as an important factor that would maintain the peace, break up the state of blockade and embargo, enhance international status and “create favorite *environment for the task of national construction and defense*” (*75 Years of the Communist Party of Vietnam* 949; emphasis added). The principle of maintaining the socialist state and national unity while moving towards globalization also formed a central theme of the Ninth Party Congress (2001). The theme is defined to include: promoting the “Entire Nation’s Strength,” continuing with “the Renewal Process,” “stepping up Industrialization and Modernization”, and “building and safeguarding the Socialist Vietnamese Homeland (*75 Years of the Communist Party of Vietnam* 1097; capitalized letters are in original).

Nurtured by this form of postcolonial capitalism, postcolonial Vietnamese literature is also institutionalized to support socialism and national hegemony of the nation. Specifically, the Party's contemporary theoreticians still maintain the so-called Marxist-Leninist ideology for literature; accordingly, literature is a form of the superstructure, and it is able to drive and be driven by the material conditions out of which it is born. In the Sixth Party Congress (1986), the congress that lifted up reform policies, the Party asserted that no other ideological form than literature could effectively foster "healthy sentiment" and "renew people's thinking habit [sic] and way of life" (*75 Years of the Communist Party* 744). The seventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam reasserted the material function of literature in its 4th Meeting on January 14, 1993. The meeting resolution, "Tasks of Literature and Culture in Coming Years" (04-NQ/HNTW), contains Hồ Chí Minh's saying "culture and art are also a battle; artists are soldiers in that battle," which specifically emphasizes the "fighting capacity" of literature. The meaning of the term "fighting capacity" does not go beyond the traditional belief in the practical impact of literature on material reality and ideology. Particularly, the document insists that literature forms new Vietnamese people while fighting against any hindrances to the nation's socialist construction and independence (Đảng cộng sản Việt Nam (Vietnam Communist Party) 54-55). Alongside Resolution 04-NQ/HNTW, Resolution 23-NQ/TW, issued by the Politburo on June 16, 2008, is the second important document since the time of Reform to articulate the Party's stance on literature as a sharp ideological weapon (Tô Huy Rúa 13-19). Literature is expected to construct the Vietnamese people's morals to serve the "industrialization and modernization" of the country and to build as well as to defend the socialist Vietnamese nation. The Resolution defines the type of merits that are expected to deal with economic and political challenges: for full industrialization by 2020, the Party, the state, and the people have to fight against the "old," "backwardness," "the bad" and "degeneration" — all characteristics of colonial capitalism. The Resolution further argues that the colonizing project might return in the form of postcolonial capitalism through direct economic investment; it might destroy the cultural, moral and political solidarity within the Party and the nation. The quest for national sovereignty and socialism, associated with the Party's sole leadership, remains the central concern of contemporary nation-makers regardless of their acceptance of global capitalism.

Accordingly, the nation-makers continue using literature as an instrument to sustain public memory about victories of national and class revolutions associated with the Party's eminence. Literary Vietnamese writers, relying on the indirectness and suggestiveness of literature, reconstruct the metaphor of Indian characters, alerting the public about the economic, social and political degeneration that postcolonial capitalism might bring for Vietnam. For example, Tô Hoài (1920-2014), a nationally acknowledged Vietnamese writer, describes an Indian owner of a series of Indian restaurants in Vietnam in the story "Qua miền Trung" (Through Central Vietnam)

(1993) with the aim of raising questions about the return of colonial capitalism in the form of foreign investments in Vietnam. The short story centers on the adventures of the narrator through the Central provinces of Vietnam; an image of sheep wandering in Ninh Thuan highland reminds the narrator of curried sheep meat in Indian restaurants in Hồ Gươm and Mã Mây streets in Hanoi. The narratives emphasize details that potentially remind the audience of the bloodsucking Indian migrants of colonial Vietnam, who relentlessly found ways and tactics for capital accumulation: the restaurant's Indian owner never takes a rest; he takes on several jobs at the same time to save and make more money, including receiving food orders, serving foods to customers, cleaning tables and serving as the cashier. The traditional Vietnamese perception of Indian migrants as the best strategists in trading occurs in the detail about sheep meat supply: finding that the sheep meat in the restaurant originates from Calcutta, the narrator excitedly tells the Indian owner about a source of sheep from Ninh Thuận province, and advises him to import sheep meat from there instead of from India. Immediately, the narrator is embarrassed to realize that his advice is unnecessary for the Indians, who “wander everywhere [to earn money]”; the Indian owner reveals that he explored the sources of sheep in Central Vietnam long enough to open a curried sheep meat restaurant in Saigon to exploit domestic meat sources. In the end, the narrator admits that he wasted his time giving advice on the matter of capital accumulation to those who are famous over the world for their excellence at making money; even Gandhi wandered around ports in Africa selling textiles when he was a child. The detail about Gandhi, widely perceived as a national hero in mainstream Vietnamese accounts, would function as a shield to cover some fear and sentiment about the vigor of the Indian businessmen – symbols of capitalist characteristics such as vampiric greed, materialism and cold calculation – in contemporary Vietnam. This fear and sentiment towards the presence of the shadow of colonialism also appears earlier in this short story when the narrator wonders why a mineral water branch established by the French colonialists still functions in a central province. Opening the paragraph about the Indian owner, a welcome migrant, the narrator immediately wonders whether this man is a trader, a manager of some trading company, a heavy moneylender “xẹt ty (chettiar),” or “tây đen bán vải” (black westerner selling textiles) at Hàng Ngang and Hàng Đào streets – these characters were once categorized as “capitalists” or colonial remains in mainstream Vietnamese writing. It would be politically incorrect if the narrator were to make all these colonial capitalism-associated terms and images visible: in principle, only new Indian migrants, whose migration to Vietnam is associated with the country's reform policy, not moneylenders or “black westerners selling textile”, exist in the socialist framework of Vietnam. Nevertheless, the terms “xẹt-ty” and “Tây đen bán vải” at Hàng Ngang-Hàng Đào streets themselves already evoke in the audience images of the possible existence of colonial capitalism in Vietnam, in its path towards reaching “industrialized” status.

Within the principles of socialist realist literature, Indians as colonial capitalists – bloodsucking entities – must exist only in the dead past, to highlight the rigor of present-day Vietnam’s socialist, independent figure. Nevertheless, contemporary Vietnamese writers still use such images in the depiction of contemporary Indian migrants – welcome migrants – as an indirect way of reminding the public of the possibility of the return of colonial capitalism in Vietnam, a threat to the idealized national hegemony and socialism of the nation. As one of the very few Vietnamese authors to consciously share their writings with English speakers, and as the only contemporary Vietnamese author who sets his writings in India, Hồ Anh Thái subtly revitalizes the colonial image of Indians with the aim of warning Vietnamese audiences about potential threats to the nation’s class and national struggles in the era of postcolonial capitalism.<sup>2</sup> In other words, Hồ Anh Thái’s construction of images of contemporary Indians, as will be demonstrated, echo images of bloodsucking Indians that pervaded the writings of Vietnamese authors in colonial times; this echo functions as a reminder to Vietnamese audiences about socialism and national independence as the ultimate goals of modern nation-building attempts in Vietnam.

Hồ Anh Thái is particularly famous for stories set in India; his long years of study and work in India help ensure the credibility of his Indian characters. Nonetheless, his literary construction of present-day Indians likely leans on the formulaic metaphor of bloodsucking Indians; the Indians in his writings remain greedy, cunning, savage and, particularly important, capitalist in nature. In the novel *Đức Phật, nàng Savitri và Tôi* [The Buddha, Savitri, and I] (2007), for example, the Indians are represented as extremely miserly. None of the Buddha’s followers is willing to take responsibility for his cremation. They hesitate to look at each other, shift the responsibility to others, only murmuring to ask who will finance the ceremony, who will buy the oil and wood to cremate the Buddha’s body. They constantly look away to avoid others’ eyes and then quietly look back when the others turn their eyes away. In the end, the villagers contribute some money, which is only enough to buy cheap wood. At the cremation, it is found that the wood is not even sufficient to cover the Buddha’s body, leaving his feet to protrude out of the firewood. This image of the Buddha’s uncovered feet likely confirms the formulaic image of Indians as greedy and self-interested, prominent characteristics that make this population appear as bloodsucking creatures.

In another example, the short story “The Man Who Stood on One Leg,” the metaphor of bloodsucking Indians is more obvious; its shadow prevails in the construction of Indians as people who sacrifice their lives and integrity for money. Ananda, a villager, ceaselessly chases the director of a condom factory for a one million-rupee donation to erect a temple in his Khushi village. The chase is endless, as seen in the following two examples:

“Will you stay here until your last breath?”

No, not until my last breath. Only until I receive one million rupees” (*Behind the Red Mist* 61)

“No, he would only donate a small contribution to the village charity fund. And when he said ‘small,’ Ananda knew, the young director wasn’t simply being modest – he meant really small. Tiny.” (*Behind the Red Mist* 57)

The two quotes are about Ananda and the condom factory’s director; they are money worshippers (they fight to the death for material gain). This extreme greed suggests that Hồ Anh Thái’s presentation of “authentic” Indians seemingly relies on the formulaic metaphor of bloodsucking Indians (*sét-ty*), a tradition of presenting Indian migrants in Vietnamese writing in colonial times. Ananda stands, still and stubborn, on one leg, on a dusty road leading to the condom factory, persistently exhorting the director for the full one million rupees. The storyteller likely attempts to create a legend of Ananda’s relentless push for money by constructing the haunting image of young Ananda staying in the same position day after day over years, long enough that his body becomes wrinkled and frozen. A vulture gives up and flies away, unable to wait for Ananda’s death to feast on his body. Ananda retains the same posture, regardless of the company director’s attempt to crash a car into him, regardless of ants making nests on his body, and regardless of sand storms and wild gusts of winds. In the end, a temple is erected with a statue of a one-legged standing man. Visitors guess that the figure might be Ananda or Shiva. The narrative transforms Indian greed to a holy status, with Ananda assuming the position of world creator.

However, again, this legend is in no way different from the familiar image of greedy Indian migrants current in colonial Vietnam: almost one century ago, depictions of ghost-like Indians running after their indebted subjects prevailed in colonial Vietnamese literature. *Ở theo thời* (Living with the Time, 1935), by Hồ Biểu Chánh, also contains a legend about the Indian propensity for money worship. In this story, two Indians sense that their debtor, Lợi, is secretly selling the land that he has given them as surety to teacher Phát, to evade the debt. They then initiate a tireless hunt for the debtor and his accomplice, to take the land back. Phát is continuously astonished and scared at the Indians’ indefatigable ability to trace their objects’ footsteps: they are able to find Phát’s school; if they do not see Phát at school, they immediately present themselves at Phát’s house; if they do not get money from Phát, very quickly, they are successful in bringing Phát to court. The magically effective, aggressive chase of the Indians haunts Phát so much that he is constantly obsessed with thinking that he will be imprisoned regardless of his announced innocence. In another novel, *Lời thề trước miếu* (An Oath in front of A Shrine), Hồ Biểu Chánh condenses the Indian trait of money worship into a quick plot point instead of a long narration:



Ms. Đào takes a seat for more comfort. As soon as she intends to speak, a chà và [Java]<sup>3</sup> enters, without putting off his hat, without greeting people in the house, and shouts insolently: “Pay for the community fund! Your outstanding debt last month is one đồng. Now, pay seven đồng. Pay all, no lacking.”

Ms. Đào takes from her pocket a paper đồng and a silver coin. She counts two silver coins. She puts the other two coins back in her pocket and gives the chà và two coins and two đồng papers. She says:

- I do not have enough money today. Please take three đồng ... please give me one more week ... I will pay you.

-No. Pay all. No lacking.

- Poor me, sir. If I had enough money, I would not have to be in underpayment.

- Underpayment every month. Move to another place to live, I do not allow you to stay here anymore. Tomorrow, you have to move. If you do not move, the court will take action, if that is the case you will have to pay more fees. Do you know?

(Ibid. p 75)

The passage trims off the human aspects of the Indian, constructing him as a savage and mechanical debt collector. In Hồ Anh Thái’s construction of modern day Indians, the colonial image of Indians as bloodsucking creatures re-occurs, effectively condensing them into the typical image of capitalists and materialists.

The condom factory’s director is an obvious example of the recurrence of the metaphor of bloodsucking Indians. As described in the story, the director acts irresponsibly and impudently towards his community: his company makes profits while polluting the whole village. Fearing to pay a big fine for the pollution that is discovered by Ananda, the director cunningly corrupts villagers with small donations that prevent them from seeking legal compensation for the pollution. This representation of the director is in consonance with the stereotype of bloodsucking Indians as capitalists. The director obtains his wealth from the blood, sweat, and tears of villagers. This image of the director reflects Brenner’s definition of “capitalists” as those who always accumulate; increasing productivity or production for benefit is a must for capitalists to survive in business (Brenner 30). Strikingly, their bloodsucking nature, shown through their habit of relentless exploitation, forms the central characteristic of Indians in colonial Vietnamese writing since roughly a century ago. The December 17, 1931 issue of *Phụ nữ tân văn* (Modern Women), a dominant newspaper of colonial Vietnam, highlights a report that police captured three Indians who traded opium and smuggled guns. These “Indian gangs” worked for

the Franco-Asiatique des Petroles company and the Cochinchina train branch, and run a monthly dining service for Indian guards. Regardless of their salary, the Indian migrants want to earn more money through illegal businesses. The report disregards the fact that the Indians deny their guilt, asserting that they would have to admit it to the police in a coming reinvestigation. Also in *Phụ nữ tân văn*, on August 24, 1933, a journalist calls the Indians “black bats” in a news article about one “set ty” who accumulates capital illegally. The term “black bats” denotes a meaning similar to the term “bloodsucker.” This colonial image of bloodsucking Indians seems to cast its shadow on Hồ Anh Thái’s representation of the character of the condom company’s director: he ignores that his company renders barren both the women and the soil of the village. The life of the company goes on at great cost to the surrounding environment and people. In general, the Indian businessmen of today are seen as not being different from their overseas ancestors years ago, in Vietnam: they all bloodily exploit the vitality and prosperity of others.

The sense of “authentic” Indians forever being foreigners or outsiders in Hồ Anh Thái’s novels is another example of the reflection of bloodsucking Indian images in present-day Vietnamese writing. The two short stories “The Indians” and “The Barthers” suggest that one should never trust Indians because they are dangerous outsiders. In “The Indians,” a British archaeologist attempts to “conquer” Indian civilization through his internationally recognized collection of Hindu relics. In “The Barthers,” a German student attempts to transform his mind and body into Indian ways of working and living. Both characters believe that they have mastery over Indians, and that therefore that Indians should rightly be part of their conquered world. Instead, however, the Indians are always grabbing things from westerners, who attempt to make them insiders of their world. In particular, while the British scholar is out doing his fieldwork in India, his wife, Kitty, at home, has an affair with their cook, a young Indian man named Navin. More tragically, until the end of the story, the scholar still believes he understands Indians very well; he never finds out about the affair between his wife and Navin. In “The Barthers,” the German student, Heinrich, passionately pursues and practices Hinduism without knowing that his Indian wife works as a prostitute in their house. In both stories, the two Indian characters are seen as quiet, submissive and obedient – credible, good insiders – but are revealed to be dangerous in nature – harmful outsiders. Together, the two stories serve as a warning: one should never make the Indians insiders of one’s community, as they could turn around and harm one anytime.

Similar ways of presenting the Indians as a warning pervade colonial Vietnamese writing. For instance, Trần Quang Nghiệp’s short story “Con của ai” [Whose is the son?] (1931) contains similar Indian characters as embodiments of “defiance of morality.” This story first appeared in the newspaper *Đông Pháp thời báo* (Indochine Times) under the title “Lòng người khó biết” (Unexpected Human Thoughts), and again later in the short story

collection *Hai bó giấy* (Two Papers Bundles) published by Đức Lưu Phương (1931). The colonial story centers on the sexual affair between an Indian man and a married Annamese woman. Minh, a security guard for the Charner Company in Saigon, gets married to his colleague despite his parents' disapproval. His parents from Sóc Trăng province send him a letter demanding that within two years, either his wife has to deliver a baby or he has to divorce her. Minh feeds his wife with various types of medicines that he believes will improve her fertility. For six months, there is still no sign of pregnancy. However, after one year passes, his wife informs him that she is pregnant. Minh happily reports this to his parents and sacrifices his money to take care of his wife. On the day of her delivery, his parents visit the couple in the hospital. Tragically, as soon as they look at the baby's face, they collapse: the baby has "black" skin and looks energetic like "the Indians." It is only at this point that the narrator starts talking about a hidden "hero". More than one year ago, Minh befriended an Indian man, a co-worker; seeing this Indian man as an honest person, Minh offered him a place in his house. While living together, Minh completely gave this man his trust as he seemed to be harmless and innocent; he just sat in his room reading day by day; he was gentle and quiet, attempting not to disturb the members of the household. All these details show that Minh offers the Indian the position of an insider in his Annamese world. When the story returns to the present tense, it reveals the hidden danger of the Indian man: in response to Minh's astonished declaration that "this is not my son," his wife, in an indifferent tone, responds, "who had told you this would be your son?" (190); in the end, Minh leaves the hospital quietly, not expressing any anger; he just throws his house key at the Indian man, telling him that the house and his wife now belong to him. The story suggests that the locals should never treat Indians as insiders; otherwise, they will lose everything to them. In so doing, the story participates in the production of knowledge about Indians as unwelcome foreigners by Vietnamese intellectuals during the colonial period.

The constant recurrence of images of colonial capitalists – bloodsucking Indians – in Hồ Anh Thái's accounts of current Indians is derived from the traditional association of Vietnamese writing with nation-building. Particularly since the country's reunification, the Party Congress has insisted that the construction of "socialist people" be the main task of "ideological works" in order to clean out any vestiges of feudalism and colonialism. Definitions about "socialist people" since the Fourth Congress (1976) have obviously centered on non-materialism, love of community, and patriotism – the characteristics that people require to overcome the supposedly capitalist characteristics of materialism and self-centeredness. The Sixth Party Congress (1986) insisted on authors' "sense of responsibility as citizens and militants." This means the author must "create spiritual values that foster minds and sentiments of generations of citizens and shape their personality and character and create an ethical environment in society" (*75 Years of the Communist Party of Vietnam* 744). Spiritual values

became a special focus in the Eighth Party Congress's Document (1996), the first document that highlighted "national identity" as a separate point. This Congress urged authors to build "an advanced culture with profound national identity." The Congress also decided that all cultural, literary and artistic activities "must ... inherit and promote the intellectual and aesthetic values, cultural and artistic heritage of the nation... inheriting and promoting the people's ethical traditions" (*75 Years of the Communist Party of Vietnam* 983). These cultural attempts must aim at cleaning out capitalist characteristics that are rising in contemporary Vietnamese society due to the market economy and expanded international exchange; these characteristics include "money worshipping," "defiance of morality" and tendencies of glorifying "the alien and the profane leading to the loss of one's national roots" (*75 Years of the Communist Party of Vietnam* 983). The recurrence of the metaphor of bloodsucking entities in Hồ Anh Thái's writing seems to aim at awakening and provoking a long-standing fear of colonial capitalists, who are supposedly embodiments of materialism, self-interest, and national otherness. The presence of the colonial image of Indian migrants in the image of present-day Indians also effectively reminds the Vietnamese public of the eternal values of socialist, national revolutions and the associated Party leadership.

Nevertheless, and more importantly, the persistence of the colonial metaphor of bloodsuckers in contemporary depictions of Indians indeed suggests the existence of the colonial legacy in postcolonial nation-building. In Thái's stories about postcolonial India, the British are still the economic and educational masters of the Indian population, and the condom company is shown as contributing to the moral and physical destruction of local people. The Westerners' eager intervention into local culture disrupts its traditional flow. Writing about the colonial legacy in India is a way through which Thái evokes in the Vietnamese public a comparable image of postcolonial Vietnam, where the number of private companies run by domestic and foreign capitalists is growing dramatically (Katariina Hakkala and Ari Kokko 5). Particularly, it is the state that constantly honors private business owners regardless of their nationality. For example, the Indians whose migration to Vietnam is a result of Vietnam's reform policy, are largely owners of transnational private companies. A report dated January 13, 2016, provided by an official of the Ministry of Police of Vietnam, records that Indian businessmen have invested in sectors that help with the modernizing of the Vietnamese economy. These sectors include oil and gas exploration, mineral exploration and processing, thermal power plants, sugar manufacturing, agro-chemicals, banking, IT, and agricultural processing. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Vietnamese government constantly awarded Indian businessmen medals bearing the name of Ho Chi Minh, for supplying modern technologies to Vietnamese industries and linking numerous Indian investors to Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> However, the social consequence of such increasing economic liberation is an increase in social inequality, with peasants constantly losing their land and industrial workers being the most exploited (Arkadie and Mallon 10), and the "New Class" or the "emerging

class of nobles” taking advantage of their political power and connections to accumulate private wealth (Cheshier 18, 119; Greenfield 203-233; Gainsborough 42).

With such increasing social inequality created by domestic and foreign private business owners, many of whom are or have close connections to Party members, the question must arise about the achievement of the class and national struggles that were supposed to have been accomplished with the departure of French capitalists in 1945 and American capitalists in 1975. The presence of the colonial image of Indian bloodsuckers as presented in Hồ Anh Thái’s writing indeed creates a more obvious link and reference to the colonial capitalism that still haunts present-day Vietnam. Specifically, Hồ Anh Thái’s accounts of social destruction caused by industrialization and international cooperation in contemporary India – all embodied in the greedy bloodsucker metaphor – potentially suggest to the Vietnamese audience the possible colonialist exploitation embedded in the rising national and transnational capitalism in contemporary Vietnamese economy and culture. Although Vietnamese nation-makers constantly warn the public about social and cultural destruction caused by Vietnam’s opening up to the global, private capital sector, discourse on economic losses and damages appears to be marginal, given that modernization and industrialization still form the principal policy in present-day Vietnamese nation-building. Additionally, the term “capitalism” in Vietnamese, “chủ nghĩa tư bản,” is not institutionally allowed to be used to describe the present-day Vietnamese economy, because, as mentioned, that economic and social system was supposed to have died within the borders of Vietnam with the end of French and American colonization of the country (Phạm Văn Đức 23-34). Nevertheless, public fear about the increasing visibility of capitalism through increasing social inequality and a greater social divide – similar to what happened under colonial capitalism – is transmitted in the subtle, uncertain echoes of the formulaic metaphor of the bloodsucking Indians that appear in Thái’s accounts of present-day Indians. As I have mentioned, in socialist realistic Vietnamese historiography, colonial capitalism is completely dead; accordingly, the bloodsucking Indians no longer exist. In socialist realist literature, anything belonging to the old society is “dead”; this must also be reflected in accounts of the Indian population. In this context, using the colonial image of Indian migrants in the present tense – to depict Indians in the present world – would have been seen as politically incorrect. Thus, creating colonial images of Indian migrants in postcolonial India would be a safe yet effective way of warning the Vietnamese audience about the lingering presence of colonial capitalism in postcolonial Vietnam and the emergence of a new wave of colonization in the form of globalizing forces. In general, images of Indian migrants in contemporary Vietnamese literature, disciplined in socialist realism, exist in the metaphoric form of bloodsucking colonial capitalists so that Vietnamese intellectuals, as the minds and conscience of the nation, can remind their compatriots of socialism and national independence as the ultimate, overriding goal of Vietnamese nation-building even under the Reform

era.

## Notes

1. Scholars agree that “national literature” did not occur in the land of Vietnam until modern times, with challenges and changes engendered by French colonization and with the coming of Western and Asian ideas (Dutton and others 335-337). However, there are different explanations of how the concept of “national literature” came about in Vietnam. J. De Francis, in his book *Colonialism and Language Policy in Vietnam* (1977) reveals the close and active involvement of French officials and intellectuals in the late nineteenth century in forming a “national literature” for Vietnam so that “Cochinchina will be definitely secured to France” (98). Authors of *Sources of Vietnamese Tradition* (2012), George E. Dutton, Jayne S. Werner, and John K. Whitmore, emphasize the efforts of French-educated Vietnamese intellectuals in the 1920s in forming a new national literature that was based on the romanized writing system. This content also occurs in Ben Tran, “Queer Internationalism and Modern Vietnamese Aesthetics” (2013).
2. Hồ Anh Thái held the position of President of the Hanoi Writing Association from 2000-2010 and was a member of the Leadership Committee of Vietnam’s Writing Association from 2005-2010. He is also a high-ranking diplomatic official of the Vietnamese government and has served in a number of countries. While in India, Thái was not only a post graduate student in Oriental Studies but also a diplomat with the Vietnam Embassy for six years.
3. “Java” was a term commonly used to address Indians in colonial Vietnam.
4. In 1992, the permanent representative of the International Cimco company (Birla Group), Amit Saxna, received the Hồ Chí Minh medal for “his excellent achievements in contributing to improve the friendship between the people of HCMC and the people of India during his working time in the city, from 1987 to 1992” (Decision number 459/QĐ-UB, March 24, 1992). In the same year, Shantanu Srivastava, director of Namita Industrial and Trading Concept PTE-PTD branch in HCMC, received the Hồ Chí Minh medal for “improving economic relations and friendship between people of HCMC and people of India” (2200/QĐ-UB August 27, 1992).

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