

The Construction of Images of Vietnam in Thai Writings การประกอบสร้างภาพของเวียดนามในงานเขียนของไทย

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the images of Vietnam portrayed in Thai writings about Vietnam and to analyze the construction of such images. The corpus of Thai writings about Vietnam can be divided in 3 periods: (1) the Early Rattanakosin Era, (2) the Cold War Era, and (3) the Contemporary period (from the 1990s to 2015). Documentary research and textual analysis reveal that the pictures of Vietnam in the books of the first two periods are heavily affected by the nationalist mindset of either the feudal royal courts or the military governments. Therefore, Vietnam was seen as a patronised inferior, troublesome competitor for power, ideological enemy and communist threat. This mainstream perspective dominated despite that there were other voices about different aspects other than politics and ideology. The new context of eased atmosphere and warm relations since the early 1990s facilitate the Thai writers to travel to Vietnam and write from their first-hand experience. Reality-based images of Vietnam are comprised from a revisit of the Vietnam War, construction of opening and changing Vietnam from traditionality to modernity, and recognition of the Vietnamese as fighters in any circumstances. Details of the portrayal vary according to the writers' views, attitudes, backgrounds and motivations. In general, they reflect positive Thai perceptions toward the neighbouring country.

Keywords: Vietnam, Thai writings, Thai-Vietnamese relationship

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้มุ่งศึกษาภาพของเวียดนามที่ถูกนำเสนอในงานเขียนของไทยเกี่ยวกับเวียดนาม และวิเคราะห์การประกอบสร้างภาพเหล่านี้ โดยสามารถแบ่งงานเขียนจำนวนนี้เป็น 3 ยุค ได้แก่ (1) ยุคต้นรัตนโกสินทร์ (2) ยุคสงครามเย็น และ (3) ยุคร่วมสมัย (ระหว่างทศวรรษ 1990-2015) ผลการศึกษาเอกสารและวิเคราะห์ตัวบทปรากฏว่า ภาพเวียดนามในงานเขียนสองยุคแรกถูกนำเสนอภายใต้อิทธิพลของกรอบความคิดชาตินิยมของราชสำนักไทย หรือของรัฐบาลทหารไทยหลายสมัย ดังนั้นเวียดนามถูกมองว่าเป็นผู้อยู่ภายใต้การอุปถัมภ์ เป็นคู่แข่ง คานอำนาจ ศัตรูผู้ร้าย และเป็นภัยคอมมิวนิสต์ ซึ่งเป็นมุมมองกระแสหลักที่เน้นประเด็นทางการเมืองและอุดมการณ์ ซึ่งกลบเสียงอื่นและบังงมุ่มอื่น ตั้งแต่ทศวรรษ 1990 เป็นต้นมา บรรยากาศและความสัมพันธ์ระหว่างประเทศพัฒนาไปในทิศทางที่ดีขึ้น ทำให้นักเขียนไทยสามารถเดินทางไปเวียดนามได้อย่างสะดวกและผลิตงานเขียนจากประสบการณ์จริง ภาพเวียดนามที่ถูกนำเสนอแสดงให้เห็นถึงการทบทวนภาพเวียดนามและสงครามเวียดนาม การเสนอภาพใหม่ของเวียดนามที่กำลังเปิดประเทศและเกิดการเปลี่ยนแปลงสังคมจากการพัฒนาเศรษฐกิจยุคโลกาภิวัตน์ รวมทั้งการชื่นชมความเป็นนักสู้ของชาวเวียดนาม แม้รายละเอียดของภาพเหล่านี้จะแตกต่างกันไป ขึ้นอยู่กับมุมมอง ทศนคติ ภูมิหลัง และความมุ่งหมายในการเขียนของผู้แต่ง แต่โดยรวมต่างแสดงให้เห็นการรับรู้ของไทยที่เป็นไปในทางบวกเกี่ยวกับประเทศเพื่อนบ้านนี้

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Introduction

Thai academics have recently been questioning the rationality of Thai awareness and understanding of their neighbouring countries. Charnvit Kaset Siri (1998), Sunait Chutintharanon (Ed., 2006) and other researchers point out many limitations in the ways the Thais have studied and viewed nearby countries: The Thai worldview is often biased, their attitude often negative, due to the influence of Western-originated Southeast Asian Studies and the sense of Thai nationalism. It seems that a revision of Thai understanding of countries in this region is taking place with the lead of scholars in area studies. Yukti Mukdawichit (2012), for instance, suggests that Southeast Asian Studies should be reformed into “neighbour studies” because of the need to get rid of Orientalism, and for the rise of regional studies by local researchers. Moreover, Theera Nuchpiam (2012) observes that at present, exchanges are not limited at bilateral state relations but are broadened through a variety of regional cooperation frames and especially, extended to common people’s level. Such varied stakeholders increase the dimensions to the relations between Thailand and neighbouring countries.

As a neighbouring country of Thailand, how is Vietnam perceived by the Thais? Despite the fact that Thailand and Vietnam do not share a common border, the two countries are in close proximity to one another both by land as well as by sea. The relations and mutual exchanges between Thailand and Vietnam throughout history are complicated and multi-dimensioned – they passed many strained phases but are currently developing positively. The turning point was the early 1990s with the end of the Cold War, the settlement of the Kampuchean dispute, as well as the adaptation of two governments’ policies to meet the needs of economic development including *Doi moi* or “Renovation” policy by Vietnam and Thailand’s new approach to Indochina countries “turning battle fields into market places”. In this context of warming regional atmosphere and Thai-Vietnamese relations, the image of Vietnam in Thai perception also changed, in government’s and people’s perspectives, in diplomatic, economic and socio-cultural dimensions.

After 2007 when ASEAN nations collectively agreed to shorten the timeline to establish ASEAN Community (AC) from 2020 to 2015, the interest of Thai people in neighbouring countries including Vietnam surged. However, among the three pillars of AC, mainstream voices including the state and the media have so far paid most attention to AEC or the economic community while ignoring the socio-cultural aspects. Socio-cultural issues should be taken more care of since cultural exchanges and contacts at common people’s level are essential in shaping the true understanding among the member countries and the awareness of each citizens in the community (Rato, 2014).

This study attempts to discover how the Thai writers view Vietnam from the literary perspective. Studies of Thai perceptions of Vietnam are not high in number, scattering here and there and often narrowly revolving around certain subjects like history, security, politics and foreign relations such as works by Chanthawimol (1998), Sripana (2005), Sukhakanya (1983), Visutthiwat (2003). A recent study by Thianthai and Thompson (2007) surveyed Thai students' perceptions of ASEAN as a region and of its particular neighbours, in which the respondents showed positive assessment of Vietnam in general. However, papers or works reviewing Thai writings for how Thai people see Vietnam is scarcely found. The thesis by Moeller (2011) studied the *Thai Attitude towards Vietnam as shown in Contemporary Thai Writing*, focusing on the genre of travelogue. What the traveler-writers knew most were Vietnam's long history, the Vietnam War and hostilities in Thai-Vietnamese relations; tourism did not contribute much to the improvement of the Thai attitude towards Vietnam. Anyway, these writers were a new generation looking for a more accurate picture of Vietnam. At the end of his thesis, Moeller (2011, p.81) remarks that the topic of Thai people's attitudes towards Vietnam is still an "almost entirely undiscovered area of studies".

This research fills the gap by analysing Thai writings about Vietnam from the past to the present and explaining the process of constructing the images of Vietnam in the books. By Thai writings, the researcher would like to refer to the written works that have been published in Thai language in Thailand. They include Thai fiction and non-fiction books that have Vietnam and/ or Vietnamese people as the main theme or as the setting, the list of which is provided in the appendix.

Objectives

The research has two specific objectives as follows:

1. To analyse the images of Vietnam portrayed in Thai writings
2. To examine the factors influencing the construction of images of Vietnam in Thai writings

Approach and Methodology

This study employs the approach of discourse analysis to examine the construction of images of Vietnam in contemporary Thai writings. Discourse is defined as "a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images and practices which provide ways of talking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society" (Hall, Evans, & Nixon, 2013: xxii). Discourse is treated here not as a linguistic concept, but as a model of how people in a culture use systems of signs to make meanings. Therefore, a discourse operates within a specific society in a certain historical context. Accordingly, the historical and cultural conditions of the contemporary period in which Thai writings about Vietnam are created will be



examined. In addition, the writers, their background as members of the society, and their motivations in creating the works are also taken into account.

Following this approach, the researcher conducted the following methods: First, the researcher did secondary research by collecting, summarizing and reviewing available relating studies, and other surrounding data such as about the writers and the writing context of Thai books about Vietnam. Second, the researcher did close reading and textual analysis of the Thai recent writings about Vietnam to generalise the images, categorise them, analyse the influential factors, and examine the construction of such images of Vietnam. Last but not least, interviews with four book writers of different writing genres were conducted to seek insight of their personal and work background that might influence their works about Vietnam, as well as the particular intention with which the authors produced the works.

Findings

The corpus of Thai writings about Vietnam can be divided in 3 periods: (1) the Early Rattanakosin Era (from the middle of 18th century to the 19th century), (2) the Cold War Era (from 1960s to 1980s), and (3) the Contemporary period (from the 1990s to 2015). The textual analysis reveals the images of Vietnam in each period and the mechanism in which they are constructed as follows:

1. The Early Rattanakosin Era

While early trading routes since the 12th century between the predecessor civilisations of Thailand and Vietnam were recorded in Vietnamese chronicles and Western documents (Nguyen, 2016), it is in the Early Rattanakosin that Thai records formally mentioned Vietnam and the Vietnamese. In the Early Rattanakosin Era, both countries were feudal territories headed by the Royal Court of the Chakri Dynasty in Siam and the Nguyen Dynasty in Vietnam. The late 18th century and the whole 19th century were the last periods of feudalism before the colonisation and modernisation arrived at the region.

Phongsawadan or “chronicle”, also referred to as the Thai national history, is an important type in Thai writing traditions to record and narrate happenings in the feudal courts. Chronicles in the first four monarchs of the Chakri dynasty spent quite a considerable proportion telling stories about Yuan and its relations with Siam, and hence offer the Siamese court’s view of Vietnam in the historical context of the late 18th century to mid-19th century. These³ include *Phongsawadan*

³ Translations of the book titles in respective order: “Yuan and Khmer Chronicles in Rattanakosin Chronicles”; “The Royal Chronicles in the Reign I-IV of Rattanakosin Era by Chaophraya Thiphakonwong (Kham Bunnag)”, and “Annam-Siam War: the Warfare between Thai versus Lao, Khmer and Yuan”.



Yuan le Khmer nai Phongsawadan Rattanakosin by Prince Damrongrachanupap, *Phraratcha Phongsawadan Krung Rattanakosin Ratchakan thi 1-4 doi Chaophraya Thiphakonwong (Kham Bunnag)*, and *Annam Siam Yut wa duai kan Songkhram rawang Thai kap Lao, Khmer le Yuan*⁴.

Thai *phongsawadan* constructed the first image of Vietnam as dependents or patronised inferiors, before becoming troublesome rivals for regional power. Vietnam or “Yuan” in these books refers to the Nguyen Lords and their followers as subjects of Siam, who came to Siam for assistance, stayed under the patronage of the Chakri kings and tried to return to Vietnam to restore their power (including Ong Chiangsue who later became King Gia Long of the Nguyen Dynasty). After cordial relations early on, Yuan, referring to the Hue royal court of the Nguyen Dynasty, was considered Siam’s enemy in the battles between An Nam and Siam. Both Siam and Vietnam were feudal kingdoms, and hence had strong nationalist sense of protecting their territories and expanding their influence. Therefore, anyone or anything that could endanger their territorial sovereignty and political power would be viewed as enemies. *The Royal Chronicle of the Ratanakosin Era: The Third Reign* (1961, p.188, in Chetana Nagavajara, 2004, p.156) told about the warning of the ageing King Rama III to his assistant that: “Wars against the Vietnamese and against the Burmese will probably not recur, but do not rule out (the possibility of wars with) the Westerners.” Accordingly, Vietnam was viewed in the reign of King Rama III as a serious enemy, as dangerous as the Burmese, who had always been the Thais’ historical arch rival. Yet, the prediction that the war between Siam and Vietnam would not recur indicates that such feeling of critical rivalry existed mostly in this particular reign. Also, in Rato’s opinion (2013), An Nam - Siam clashes did not originate from direct conflict between the two kingdoms, but from the ambitions to get greater or absolute control over their common vassal - the Khmer Court.

The images of Vietnam in Rattanakosin’s documents are not just bounded in the spheres of politics and military, though. Many pages of those chronicles tell about the Vietnamese who moved to reside in Siam. Apart from *phongsawadan*, the well-known *Nirat Phukhao Thong* (“The Travel to the Golden Mountain”) written by Sunthorn Phu in 1830 mentions “ban Yuan” or Yuan village/ community, which should have been in the neighbourhood of Bang Pho with many shops and residents who were earning their livings as fishermen and retailers. Aside from this, there are brief records in Thai *phongsawadan* regarding the religion of the Vietnamese who came to Thailand as either Buddhists or Christians and built quite a few Yuan temples and Christian cathedrals in Bangkok and nearby provinces. The Vietnamese Buddhist sect and its monks received support from King Mongkut and King Chulalongkorn. In addition, *Tamra Phithi Phra Yuan*

⁴ Yuan and An Nam are two names that Thai people used to address Vietnam and Vietnamese people in the past.



("Book about Ceremonies of the Yuan Monks") describes a variety of their Buddhist rituals that are still performed to this day. It shows that the Vietnamese communities were well-established in Siam; they had keen religious beliefs and an unwavering intention to preserve their traditions.

To sum up, the Early Rattanakosin Era was a dynamic period in the history of Thai-Vietnamese relations, especially in the reigns of the first three kings in the Chakri dynasty. Due to the historical context, the Siamese court's perception of Vietnam was influenced by feudal and nationalist frames of mind. The first image of Vietnam in Thai books of this period was dependents, inferiors, and even enemies. Whereas, the second image of the Vietnamese communities in Siam in less popular sources portrayed the lucky refugees that received good living conditions and the freedom to follow their beliefs and customs.

2. The Cold War Era

In the late 19th and early 20th century, Siam, as King Rama III predicted, no longer had to be concerned about clashes with the Burmese or the Vietnamese. The needs to preserve national sovereignty in facing European colonial power became more urgent. The feudal systems of Siam were reformed in the reigns of King Rama IV and V; the country changed its name to Thailand and underwent a nation-building and modernisation process. Meanwhile, Vietnam, after toppling the French and Japanese colonial rules in the mid-20th century, had to fight the two Indochina Wars. As a result of no direct official exchanges and more immediate domestic concern, there were scarcely any Thai books to be found written about Vietnam during this time.

Vietnam appeared in Thai books again in the Cold War Era from about 1965 until 1985. Thailand and Vietnam fell under the global polarization of the Cold War, the former being an ally of the United States while the latter on the side of the Soviet bloc. The 1960s was the time when the U.S. asserted its full involvement in the Southeast Asian region, including backing the South Vietnam government in the Vietnam War and exchanging Thai support for their anti-communist and military activities through development aid (Baker and Phongphaichit, 2014, p.148). In this climate, most of the books, heavily affected by the political mindset of the Thai state, portrayed the image of Vietnam associated with communism through the representations of the Vietnam War and the Vietnamese refugees in Thailand. Meanwhile, another side of Vietnam was revealed from personal overseas experience of the anti-Vietnam War movements in America. Both perspectives of Vietnam in Thai books were strongly associated with politics and ideology.

First, the representations of Vietnam and the Vietnamese refugees in the first batch of books were associated with dangerous communists and hence sustained the concern about the

looming communist danger spreading to Thailand. The three books including *Songkhram Vietnam* (“The Vietnam War”) (1968), *Ruchak Phuanban* (“Getting to know a Neighbour”) (1979), and *Vietnam laeo Thai?* (“Vietnam, and then Thai?”) (1976) discussed the situation of the war. They stressed the grave toll the war took on the country and its people, assessing the defeat of South Vietnam and American troops at the hands of North Vietnam and drawing out lessons for Thailand. A number of reasons leading to the failure of South Vietnam are elaborated; and the writers often reflected back on the situation of Thailand as well as discussed the possibility that Thailand might become communist. Another image regarding the Vietnamese refugees coming to Thailand at the end of World War II was portrayed in *Yuan ya le* (name of a lullaby about Yuan) (1975) and *Yuan Opphayop* (“Vietnamese Refugees”) (1978). The main points of both of the books contained the migration of Vietnamese people to Thailand, their life and movement within Thailand, the problems of Thai authorities in managing Vietnamese refugees, the refugee repatriation back to North Vietnam, and solutions to the problem, etc. These works about Vietnam were alongside the anti-communist policies and discourses born out of the collaborations between the U.S. and Thai military governments.

Dominating as the Thai state’s discourses were, they could not entirely suppress dissenting voices. Intellectuals and university students, as significant social groups in Thai society, formed their own network of discourse in contrast with the aforementioned state discourse (Kongkirati, 2002). This can be demonstrated by the two books that won considerable attention from the society at that time - *Made in USA* and *Ngo ngao tao tun* (“Complete idiot” or “Made in USA 2”) by Sujit Wongthes (1973). In fact, the writer did not directly address the conditions of Vietnam or the Vietnam War; he aimed to reconstruct Americanness from his real experience in the U.S. in 1971. Sujit depicted the confusion of overseas Thai intellectuals encountering the forceful anti-Vietnam War activities of American students, the sudden hand- shakes between the U.S. and China, and another version of the Vietnam War told by an overseas Vietnamese student. Suchit’s new narrative, on the one hand, shook Thai “old knowledge” or “ignorance” of the US and American-Thai relationship as well as of communism (Feangfu, 2011, p.115), and on the other hand, revisited the image of Vietnam as an aggressive communist invader and reconstructed it instead as a victim in the Vietnam War.

Although the number of works about Vietnam in the first two periods are not very abundant, patterns in the writings have been drawn out as above. In spite of their being in two different historical periods, socio-political contexts and genres of the writings, Thai perception of Vietnam can be wrapped up with Thongchai Winichakul’s observation (2004, p. 124):



In the Thai [mainstream] perspective, Siam had helped Vietnam [the Nguyen Dynasty] to survive only to have it become a new arch rival... Vietnam is seen as an aggressive expansionist power in the region. This image is reformulated and reinforced during the Cold War as Thailand sees in the communist Vietnam the bastion of the communist influence in the region, giving support to the insurgent movements that tried to destroy Thailand, and backing the regimes in Laos and Cambodia after their revolutions.

On the contrary, the context of the contemporary period would provide more favorable climate for the change of Thai social perspectives as well as Thai perception towards its neighboring countries, including Vietnam, to be more dynamic and pluralistic.

3. The Contemporary period (the 1990s-2015)

After the Cold War Era, the broad socio-historical context changed at global as well as regional domains. The Vietnam War was over in 1975 with the unification of North and South Vietnam. The country was renamed the Socialist Republic of Vietnam in 1976. In the same year Thailand and Vietnam established official diplomatic relations on the 6th of August. Yet, Thai internal unrest in 1976-1977 did not allow its government to implement its foreign policy smoothly. Besides, the military involvement of Vietnam in Cambodia during the 1980s led to tension between Bangkok and Hanoi again. The chaos in regional politics and security still hindered Thai-Vietnamese relations until the early 1990s.

The end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the decline of super powers and increasing role of ASEAN in Southeast Asia, as well as the trend of relationship normalization and integration throughout the world all affected the situation and policies of Thailand and Vietnam in early 1990s. Thailand adjusted its approach – “turning Indochina from battlefields into marketplaces” (Szalontai, 2011). Vietnam announced Doi moi or “Renovation” policy in 1986, and openness was displayed in Vietnam’s foreign policy in about 1988-1989, especially with a comprehensive settlement of the Cambodian conflict (Thayer, 1999). Since this turning point, Thai-Vietnamese relations have had fast and firm development. Their extending cooperation in both bilateral relations and regional frames enable more Thai writings about Vietnam to be produced and open up new dimensions to Thai perspectives of this neighbour.

Apart from that context, one cannot overlook the situation of Thai adjustment of perceptions towards itself and other peoples. According to Sattayanurak’s analysis of such rapid transformation of Thailand’s social and cultural structures since the late 1960s, “the mainstream thought on

'Thainess' [was] too narrow to respond to such changes" (2005, p. 30). As the situation evolved, new social classes and more public spaces in the print and electronic media from 1970s onwards comprised a Thai's society "celebrating diversity" with ethnic, social and cultural varieties (Baker and Phongphaichit, 2014, p. 226). Two novels *Kieu bao Nachok* ("Overseas Vietnamese Fellows at Nachok village") (2003) and *Phuan Rak Rim Khong* ("Good friends by the Mekong River") (2004) reflect the incorporation of Vietnamese refugees (particularly despised before) as an ethnic group in Thai society and the elimination of legal and socio-political obstacles to that acceptance.

At the turn of the new millennium, the growth of the Thai middle-class with a penchant for travelling, more convenient connectivity in Southeast Asia, more secure and open atmosphere in ASEAN enable both individual writers and literature institutions to have more experiences with and in other countries. Soon after Thailand and Vietnam normalised their relationship after the settlement of the Kampuchean issue in 1991, a new phase of Thai writing about Vietnam started with a travel diary by H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn (1993) - *Annam Siam Mit*. The book has a similar name to that of a well-known book about the war between two nations in the Early Rattanakosin era - *Annam Siam Yut*. Princess Sirindhorn artistically replaced the word "yut" (war) with "mit" (friend) in the title, indicating a new era in Thai-Vietnamese bilateral relations as well as a turning point for Thai writings about Vietnam. Although mere itineraries and simple narrations of every places and activities comprises the book, it unveils a country of diverse aspects worth travelling and learning. Many other authors followed her in discovering Vietnam and writing about their travels after going to the country.

After *Annam Siam mit* - more of a symbolic pioneer, *Xin chao Vietnam* ("Hello Vietnam") (1997) by Teeraparb Lohitkun made a stronger impression on a larger audience. The book provided a fresh depiction of newly-opened Vietnam with little-known images through Teeraparb's lively unique style. Its influence won him the Mekong River Literature Awards and was considerably empowered by his popular television documentary *Lok Sa-lap Si* ("Varicolored Worlds") about neighbouring countries. Teeraparb therefore was referred to in some successors' books, especially his description of romanticised images of Hue and of Vietnamese daily life. The followers include Phitsanu Sup with *Chaliang Tawan Ook*⁵ (2000), Khamsing Srinawk with *Khoam Hanghoen thi yu*

⁵ Translations of the book titles in respective order: "Eastern Passageway" (2000); "The Detachedness in Neighbourhood" (2002); "Telling Stories about Vietnam" (2003); "Two Tastes of Vietnam" (2004); "Colourful Vietnam" (2006); "On the Golden Star" (2009); "Watching the Yuan" (2010); "Vietnam in the Middle of Storms" (2010); "Travel in Vietnam, Get Knowledge" (2011); "Along the Land of Vietnam" (2013); "Vietnam After the Wars, a Land of Beauty and Meaning" (2014); and "Vietnam, so Close, Yet so Far" (2016).



Tit Rua Ban" (2002), Niphatporn Phengkaew with *Lao Rueang Mueang Viet* (2003), Surasawat Suksawat with *Vietnam Song Rot*" (2004), Suphalak Kanchanakhundee & Suthida Malikaew with *Sisan Vietnam* (2006), Sirasak Aphisakmontri with *Bon Dao Si Thong* (2009), Pitsanu Janvitan with *Yon Yuan* (2010), Wanrawee Rungsaeng with *Vietnam Klang Phayu Fon*" (2010), Wut Loetsukprasoet with *Vietnam Thiao Ao Rueang* (2011), Niphatporn Phengkaew with *Liap Thin Phaendin Viet* (2013), Prachakhom Lunachai with *Vietnam Phaendin Lang Songkhram nai Khwamngam le Khwammai* (2014), and Sommalak Wongrat with *Vietnam Chitklai Muan Klaihang* (2016).

Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum Vietnam ("Writing about the Golden Land - Vietnam") is a special case when Naowarat Pongpaiboon (2013) composes it in the form of poetry while its content is, in fact, that of a travelogue. Forty poems in the collection describe places and people across the country as well as his feelings about them after five trips in Vietnam. That travel writings absolutely outnumber fiction does not lessen the importance of fiction genres, including the short-story collection *Khwam Lap thi Sapa* ("Secret at Sapa") by Thatsanawadi (2003), and novels, namely *Vietnam tam Lamphang* ("Alone in Vietnam") by Khajornrit Raksa (2010), and *Rak nai Man Fon* ("Love in the Rain") by Prapatsorn Sevikul (2012). They provide in-depth pictures of Vietnamese society and Vietnamese people as individuals in the stories.

Textual analysis of these writings reveals a portrayal of Vietnam and Vietnamese people from various angles and aspects. The image-based conclusion draws out three main images about the country and its people as follows:

The first outstanding image of Vietnam is that of a country of wars. It is initially constructed from old memories and past impressions of the Thai writers about the Vietnam War mediated by western media, and about communist threat demonized in the polarized context of the Cold War era. They are then replaced by the writer's first-hand experience in Vietnam with the image of a tough war of national defense that caused severe material damages and intangible losses. This aspect is constructed from statistics, iconic war sites, war remnants and people's stories from the Vietnamese mainstream display. To add more dimensions to the picture, the Thai writers also tell individual stories highlighting war and post-war emotions of the Vietnamese people, employ literary techniques to construct romanticized images of a brave fight for peace, and use the image of the Vietnam War as a civil war to warn Thai people about domestic conflict.

From the past, the Thai writers move on to portray the second image of Vietnam at present – a country in transition to modernity and integration. The Thai books written in the early days of



Vietnam's opening emphasize the beauty of idyllic nature, rich sources of plants and animals, indigenous ways of life, traditional culture and ancient towns and by contrast, signs of approaching capitalism. The attitudes displayed together with the portrayal are nostalgia of romanticized traditionality and strong criticism against a materialized society. More recent books portray the active transition process of Vietnam to modernity and integration through a variety of aspects, like vigorous economic, infrastructure and tourism development, socio-cultural changes regarding lifestyles and values, adjustment of views and policies toward domestic development and outward integration. The fact of changing and opening Vietnam is accepted as a matter of course. The dynamics of the image and the writers' attitude in constructing it reflect the active transitional process of the country.

If the first two images portray Vietnam from the past to its present, the last picture focuses on a substantial part of the country — its people. In the eyes of Thai people, Vietnamese people are fighters that can keep their spirit strong in any circumstances. In reflecting their fighting spirit, the writers go from its manifestations in war time to their present life such as the guerrilla fight, art creation, forgiveness and positive outlook to a better future, hard work to improve their living conditions, as well as their bad habit of cheating tourists. This major image and several aspects of the previous two provide Thai readers with better understanding of the people of Vietnam as individuals rather than part of a general entity. Many travelogues construct the image of Vietnamese people from the writers' observations of the people they briefly meet and talk to during their trips; some can tell life stories of their Vietnamese acquaintances and friends; fiction through their plots and characters can go further to reveal Vietnamese personal views and feelings.

Discussion

Overall, the images of Vietnam and Vietnamese people in Thai writings are the result of a complex process of image construction in each period of a long course of development. The pictures of Vietnam in the books of the Early Rattanakosin Era and the Cold War Era are heavily affected by the nationalist mindset of either the feudal royal courts or the military governments. Therefore, Vietnam was seen as a patronized inferior, a troublesome competitor for power, an ideological enemy and a communist threat. This mainstream perspective concerning politics and ideology dominated other voices about different aspects. In the contemporary Thai writings about Vietnam, the tone and attitude towards the country are much improved. Some old nationalist thoughts such as the feeling of competition are perpetuated and expressed in new ways. For example, it is expressed here and there in the fear of Vietnam as a fast-growing competitor in economic development, that would soon catch up or surpass Thailand. Sometimes the Thai travellers complained about its underdevelopment and inconvenience on the one hand, and on



the other, found it an idyllic oasis for a nostalgic trip of urban inhabitants. Nevertheless, positive perspectives and attitudes are more dominant with three main images presented previously. In general, Vietnam is viewed as a good tourist destination and an interesting neighbor with rich history and culture that is integrating into the world's system. Old problems in Thai-Vietnamese mutual exchanges are told but with understanding and sympathy rather than hatred.

There are several factors leading to the remarkable difference in the way contemporary Thai writers studied and wrote about the country of Vietnam. The first and most determinant is the context. As history evolves, unfavorable conditions of the polarized world in the Cold War Era improved to a better atmosphere of normalization and development of international relations. The tendency of interdependence, cooperation as well as regional and bilateral integration in economic, socio-cultural and security domains has closed the curtains on Thailand and Vietnam's conflicts in the past and opened up a new page of more effective partnership.

Apart from that context, one cannot overlook the trends in contemporary Thai literature and the situation of Thai adjustment of perceptions towards its neighbouring countries. According to Sattayanurak's analysis of such rapid transformation of Thailand's social and cultural structures since the late 1960s, "the mainstream thought on 'Thainess' [was] too narrow to respond to such changes" (2005, p. 30). As the situation evolved, new social classes and more public spaces in the print and electronic media from 1970s onwards comprised a representation of Thai's society "celebrating diversity" with ethnic, social and cultural varieties (Baker and Phongphaichit, 2014, p. 226). Two novels *Kieu bao Nachok* ("Overseas Vietnamese Fellows at Nachok village") (2003) and *Phuan Rak Rim Khong* ("Good friends by the Mekong River") (2004) reflect the incorporation of Vietnamese refugees as an ethnic group in Thai society and the elimination of legal and socio-political obstacles to that acceptance.

The process of re-defining Thainess and adjusting Thais' views of its neighbours occurs in parallel with the dynamic inner development of contemporary Thai literature. Contemporary Thai writings have broadened international and regional scope as the result of globalised communication and from the active attempts of the writers themselves to find new topics to present to the readers. They reflect the lifestyle of metropolitan Bangkok inhabitants with immense internationality. At the same time, people have higher individualism, more isolated lives and unconnected relationships (Chotiudompant, 2014, p.113-130). As the Thais quest to travel out of the usual limited boundary for a claim of their identity, contemporary Thai writers are eager to explore uncharted cultural territory.



Secondly, the stakeholders of the image construction have changed. While in the past, the knowledge and perception of Thai society on Vietnam almost depended on the only source which was the mainstream top-down data and perspectives, the present situation of open mass communication and connectivity enables more social groups to take part in the process. Professional and independent writers have chance to raise their voice and views. Although the media nowadays perform powerfully in shaping the understanding and perception of the mass, its shortcoming is containing many stereotypes, often general overviews and reports of real-time happenings. Long-term works such as the contemporary documentaries, travel writings, novels, short stories provide more in-depth understanding of the country as well as help diversify and reconstruct the images of Vietnam from a variety of perceptions and perspectives.

The increasing number of writers who compose about Vietnam and their varied backgrounds has created new aspects within the body of Thai literature about Vietnam. The books are written by independent travellers, academic researchers and professors in anthropology or arts, journalists, diplomats, or professional writers, most of whom play more than one role. Some are beyond their middle-age and have first-hand experience of the Cold War period such as Khamsing Srinawk, Prapatsorn Sevikul, Naowarat Pongpaiboon, or Pitsanu Janvitan. Others are younger but have travelled with certain impressions of the Cold War atmosphere, either with their childhood memories of negative Thai propaganda-induced images of communists as Niphatporn Phengkeaw memorised, or from Western media and literature as Teeraparb Lohitkun often mentioned; but then they realised that reality and the stereotypes were entirely dissimilar. Many had partiality for Vietnam before their trips such as Prachakhom Lunachai, who found a shared fighting spirit with Vietnamese people from his own lifepath, or Wanrawee Rungsaeng with her admiration of Ho Chi Minh and penchant for Vietnamese food.

Importantly, all the contemporary Thai writers went to Vietnam before creating their literary works. That means the authors did not stay in their home country to write about a far-away subject from secondary sources like in the Early Rattanakosin Era or the Cold War Era. Under new convenient conditions of the present time and Thai-Vietnamese harmony, Thai writers went and explored the country, collected factual data and wrote of their own first-hand experience. As a result, Thai books about Vietnam published between the 1990s and 2015 can provide more complex insights of the deep layers of Vietnamese society, and disclose individual character, stories and feelings of Vietnamese people, especially in fictional works. The Thai portrayal of Vietnam is thus based more on reality.



Adding up to realism of experience, the writers' intention and aspirations also determine the construction of Vietnam's images in their works. Some were inspired by the firsthand experience in the country and decided to do research and produce a history-oriented book such as Wut Lertsukprasoet and Suttiphong Wutthichat. Others including Pitsanu Sup, Surasawat Suksawat, Sirasak Aphisakmontri, Sutthida Malikaew, and Niphatporn Phengkeaw study specific subjects like architecture and art, the ethnic life of Tais in Vietnam, or produce anthropological and humanist documentaries; their narrations spent more space to describe Vietnam in the aspects they interested in. Pitsanu Chanvitan, as the Thai Ambassador to Vietnam, provided detailed data about Vietnam and Thai-Vietnamese relations as well as cleared out fallacious assumptions about Vietnam. Notably, many writers travelled and published their books about Vietnam with increasing consciousness of ASEAN neighbors. Some of them stated the objective clearly of promoting mutual understanding and friendship between the two countries and of the region like Prapatsorn Sevikul with his novel project *Literature for ASEAN*, and Naowarat Pongpaiboon with *Khian Phaendin Suwannaphum* ("Writing about the Land of Suwannaphum"). In this respect, the role of marketplace should not be left out. Eager readership, new chances for writers to publish, not to mention generous budgets and sponsorships for ASEAN-labelled projects were a strong stimulus for the writers - the former winning grants from the ASEAN Association of Thailand, and the later under the Ministry of Culture's sponsorship.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the images of Vietnam in Thai writings are constructed from distinct features of each historical period in the interplay of external and internal context, the image constructors, the subject of the images, and the perception of and attitude toward Vietnam. It confirms the shift of Thai society's awareness and perspectives of Vietnam from biased and negative attitude in the feudal and Cold War eras to more pluralist, close-to-reality and friendly perspectives at present. The image of Vietnam as a good friend and partner of Thailand starts to take form. Beneath this general trend, one needs to keep in mind that it is hard to defy any clear-cut, complete representations. Due to the complexities of the contemporary society (context) and human (writers) with interactive influential factors, all should be considered in the on-going process of image construction.

The research findings are useful to the disciplines of social sciences and humanities, especially Thai Studies since firstly, they present an analysis of a body of materials that has not won much attention before. Secondly, the study provides a detailed examination of the images of Vietnam and the Vietnamese in Thai writings, thus disclosing the Thai perceptions on attitude

toward Vietnam. As this research covers a large corpus of works spanning different time periods, it brings a more comprehensive picture of the country. In addition, this is an example of a study of how socio-historical factors leave impact on Thailand's construction of knowledge/ narratives of another country. The researcher believes this study will be a practical source of literature and reference for those who are interested in doing cross-cultural researches.

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Appendix

Table: List of Thai writings about Vietnam in different time periods
(ตาราง แสดงรายการงานเขียนไทยเกี่ยวกับเวียดนามโดยแบ่งตามยุคสมัย)

Time periods (ยุคสมัย)	List of books (รายการหนังสือ)
Thai writings in the Early Rattanakosin Era (งานเขียนใน ยุคต้น รัตนโกสินทร์)	พงศาวดารญวนและเขมรในพงศาวดารรัตนโกสินทร์. (พิมพ์ 2557). นนทบุรี: ศรีปัญญา.
	ทิพากรวงศ์, เจ้าพระยา. (พิมพ์ 2555). พระราชพงศาวดารกรุงรัตนโกสินทร์ รัชกาลที่ 1-4 ฉบับเจ้าพระยาทิพากรวงศ์ (ข้า บุนนาค). กรุงเทพฯ : ศรีปัญญา.
	พระครูคณานันท์สมณาจารย์ (ปี) กับหลวงอานันท์สงฆการ (หงวน เหวียงตัน) (พิมพ์ครั้งที่ 2, 2474). ตำราพิธิพระญวน. พระนคร: ราชบัณฑิตยสภา.
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Thai writings in the Cold War Era (งานเขียนใน ยุคสงคราม เย็น)	ขจัดภัย บุรุษพัฒน์. (2521). ญวนอพยพ. กรุงเทพฯ: ดวงกมล.
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Thai writings in the contemporary period (งานเขียนร่วม สมัย)	ขจรฤทธิ์ รักษา. (2553). <i>เวียดนามตามลำพัง</i> . กรุงเทพฯ: บ้านหนังสือ.
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