



The continuity of tradition and the impulse for modernization in Nguyen Huy Thiep's Short Story "A Fleeting Glance of Xuan Huong"

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Abstract

In the flow of contemporary Vietnamese literature, Nguyen Huy Thiep is widely regarded as one of the pioneers with a profound and powerful commitment to artistic innovation. His creative oeuvre consistently operates on the frontier between inheritance and innovation—simultaneously preserving historical and traditional cultural values while embodying a modern spirit of self-reflection and a distinct impulse for formal experimentation. This intricate synthesis constitutes the singular identity of the author's artistic universe. Among his most exemplary works, "A Fleeting Glance of Xuan Huong" stands out as a short story that vividly illustrates the intersection of the traditional and the modern. Drawing inspiration from the historical icon Ho Xuan Huong, Nguyen Huy Thiep does not merely reconstruct the exquisite talent, idiosyncratic personality, and tragic destiny of a woman in the feudal society; instead, he repositioned the character within a novel perspective that dynamically dialogues with history and culture. Consequently, the work both perpetuates traditional humanistic themes and displays a de-mythologizing impulse, a critical spirit, and the sophisticated narrative sensibilities of post-1975 literary renovation.

Keywords: The continuity of tradition, the impulse for modernization, Nguyen Huy Thiep's short stories, A Fleeting Glance of Xuan Huong, humanistic sensibility

Introduction

In the landscape of contemporary Vietnamese literature, Nguyen Huy Thiep is recognized as a writer possessing a profound and vigorous drive for artistic renovation. His creative works persistently navigate the delicate threshold between preservation and breakthroughs: they simultaneously sustain historical and cultural heritage while breathing a modern, self-reflexive consciousness and a sharp desire for structural innovation. It is precisely this synergy that crafts the singular profile of the author's aesthetic worldview.

Among his seminal creations, "A Fleeting Glance of Xuan Huong" perfectly crystallizes this convergence of the classical and the contemporary. Drawing creative breath from the historical figure of Ho Xuan Huong, Nguyen Huy Thiep does not limit himself to mirroring the brilliant wit, rebellious character, and doomed fate of a woman trapped in an archaic social order. Rather, he introduces her into a highly dialogic framework that interrogates history and culture. Through this approach, the text anchors itself in traditional humanistic sensibilities while pioneering a subversive, de-mythologizing critique and a modern narrative logic representative of the *Đổi Mới* era.

Engaging with "A Fleeting Glance of Xuan Huong," the reader can perceive an organic blend of folklore texture and vanguard narrative techniques. Beneath the multi-layered anecdotes of Ho Xuan Huong lies the kinetic motion of a modern literary mind, manifested through a polyphonic variety of narrative perspectives, an existential sense of alienation haunting the individual, and a fluid merging of historical reality with the phantasmagoric. Nguyen Huy Thiep rejects viewing tradition as a static, sacrosanct monolith to be preserved passively; instead, he treats it as raw, dynamic material destined for re-creation and polyphonic dialogue under a fresh artistic light. Researching the theme "The Continuity of Tradition and the Impulse for Modernization in Nguyen Huy Thiep's Short Story 'A

Fleeting Glance of Xuan Huong" therefore not only sheds light on the idiosyncratic contours of the author's style but also maps the evolutionary trajectory of Vietnamese prose in its process of aesthetic modernization. Concurrently, this inquiry paves the way for an intertextual methodology—one of the most vibrant critical developments in post-1975 Vietnamese literary studies.

Content

1. The Continuity of Tradition

1.1 Narrative Plotline

A primary indicator of traditional inheritance in "A Fleeting Glance of Xuan Huong" is the explicit way Nguyen Huy Thiep mines the plot structure from folk culture and classical national literature, restructuring the protagonist through a modern lens while safeguarding its foundational legacy. First and foremost, the core narrative structure is modeled directly upon the oral anecdotes surrounding the historical Ho Xuan Huong that have long circulated in the public consciousness. Historically, Ho Xuan Huong has never existed merely as an institutionalized poet—canonized as the 'Queen of Nôm Poetry'—but has always been enveloped by quasi-mythical tales regarding her volatile romances, intellectual acuity, and fierce independence. Nguyen Huy Thiep inherits this exact folkloric wellspring to construct his text.

Specific plot markers, such as Xuan Huong marrying Tong Coc, her later status as a concubine to the Tri Phu (Prefect) of Vinh Tuong, and her subsequent descent into windowhood and agonizing isolation, are deeply rooted archetypal motifs in Vietnamese cultural memory. The author adopts these elements as a structural anchor—a traditional scaffolding—upon which he applies a modern psychological lens, thereby engendering new philosophical layers for the character. This demonstrates that true traditional continuity is never a verbatim duplication of

historical templates, but rather an active, intellectual dialogue with national culture.

Furthermore, the text retains the imprint of classical storytelling traditions by assuming the structural form of an anecdote collection. In both folklore and medieval monumental literature, brilliant yet ill-fated figures are historically framed by legendry to throw their unconventional temperament and tragic lifespans into sharp relief. The character of Xuan Huong in Nguyen Huy Thiep's design operates precisely within this legendary space. Her life is rendered as an unstable sea of misfortunes—twice a secondary wife, twice widowed. The plot intentionally avoids developing through high-octane, linear external actions, focusing instead on portraying poignant, structural snapshots and profound cross-sections of her private existence.

Crucially, Nguyen Huy Thiep aligns himself with national tradition by organizing the plot around the classical motif of 'the beautiful and brilliant woman cursed with a tragic fate' (tài hoa bạc mệnh)—a timeless thematic fixture in the vernacular canon. From Nguyen Du's epic "The Tale of Kieu" to the historical verses authored by Ho Xuan Huong herself, pre-modern Vietnamese literature has endlessly lamented the systemic crucible of women endowed with profound genius and fierce agency yet denied structural happiness within patriarchal structures. "A Fleeting Glimpse of Xuan Huong" extends this exact humanistic lineage. Although the protagonist is seldom depicted through unmediated dramatic actions, her presence radiates through an industrious, highly competent, and resilient domestic stewardship; yet, her life ultimately dissolves into a profound cosmic loneliness and unfinished romantic yearnings. This precise emphasis on internal domestic tragedy resonates with the historical humanitarian tradition of Vietnamese literature.

Moreover, the decision to center the narrative on Xuan Huong mirrors the broader post-1975 renaissance of returning to cultural roots. In an era where contemporary writers were desperately seeking aesthetic updates, Nguyen Huy Thiep chose not to sever ties with the past, but to enter into an intense dialogue with it. He borrows historical-folkloric material to orchestrate a plot that feels simultaneously intimate and strangely defamiliarized. While oral traditions historically celebrate Ho Xuan Huong through her overt poetic vibrancy, Nguyen Huy Thiep unearths her deep, existential solitude and her primal craving to live authentically to her instincts and private self. Consequently, traditional continuity here functions not as stagnant replication but as creative subversion, demonstrating the author's ability to rejuvenate cultural archetypes through contemporary structural philosophy.

1.2 The Celebration of Female Beauty

Sustaining the historic humanitarian current of the domestic literary tradition, Nguyen Huy Thiep dedicates extensive descriptive space in "A Fleeting Glimpse of Xuan Huong" to venerating the intrinsic beauty of the Vietnamese woman. From folk songs and oral lyrics to fairy tales, the female icon has historically been adorned with idealised moral virtues and stylized physical perfection. Nguyen Huy Thiep, however, bypasses the artificial, stylized tropes of classical aesthetic models, grounding his subjects within the visceral, tangible beauty of authentic, unmediated reality.

Throughout the stories, the character of Xuan Huong (as Tong Coc's wife) and the figure of the young maiden Huong at the Tam Xuan river ferry are captured as deeply mesmerizing presences. Set against the atmospheric canvas of "a pale, grey winter afternoon," the female subject emerges with an untamed, organic elegance, possessing "exquisitely beautiful eyes" that strike the observer with absolute, breathless intoxication:

"The young woman narrowed her eyes and tossed her hair. He stood paralyzed by the simple, pure femininity of that single gesture. A stray lock of hair brushed softly against her parched lips..." [p. 113]

Nguyen Huy Thiep consciously steps away from classical panegyrics that utilize cosmic, formulaic comparisons, choosing instead to place women within the immediate, tactile grace of everyday life. He also honors traditional virtues regarding the domestic capability and sophisticated soul of the Vietnamese woman. In the first narrative installment, Xuan Huong is textually constructed as a highly adroit, industrious, and meticulous manager of the domestic estate. Remarkably, she rarely manifests directly within the immediate dramatic space; instead, her spirit saturates the entire home through structural details of daily life and the obsessive interior monologues of Tong Coc.

Her presence is felt everywhere: from "the exceptional wine Xuan Huong brought back from her maternal home in Kinh Bac" to the immaculate domestic sanctuary: "The ancestral altar was spotlessly clean. A hand of choice bananas was neatly arrayed on the painted tray, flanked by a pristine branch of camellia blossoms. Today is the third day of the third lunar month. Xuan Huong must have tended to the altar since the early hours of the dawn." [4, p.97]. It shines through in small, intimate culinary details: "The warm infusion of cleistocalyx buds, into which Xuan Huong had dropped a few slices of fresh ginger, giving it a peculiarly subtle, unfamiliar fragrance." The first tale concludes with a haunting tableau: "On the mahogany daybed, a platter of freshly made, steaming-hot floating cakes (bánh trôi) sat invitingly. He stared blankly around the completely silent ancestral hall, desperately searching for the elusive shadow of Xuan Huong..." [4, p.98].

Furthermore, Xuan Huong's core beauty resides in her profound existential fortitude and psychological resilience. Despite a life lacerated by bitter disillusionments and romantic ruins, she retains a sublime internal equilibrium, living with a fierce autonomy that refuses to surrender to cosmic fate—a quality that compels Tong Coc's deepest reverence: "He deeply admired Xuan Huong for her unique capacity to endure endless defeats in life while remaining completely composed, never once exhibiting the aura of a loser." [4, p.97]. This design firmly links her to the historical archetype of the traditional Vietnamese woman: highly resilient, bearing suffering with dignity, yet fiercely preserving her self-worth and existential desires. The integration of folkloric sentiment with modern structural logic ensures that the female icon in this text is both historical and contemporary, pulsating with the autonomous life-force of post-1975 literature.

1.3 Humanistic Sensibility

Within "A Fleeting Glimpse of Xuan Huong," Nguyen Huy Thiep further cements his connection to the foundational humanism of classical letters. The work does not merely register a profound empathy for the structural suffering of

human beings; it actively champions the modern quest for existential liberty, romantic fulfillment, individual happiness, and the sovereignty of the private self. It is this specific focus that infuses the text with its remarkable philosophical depth.

First, Ho Xuan Huong is presented not only through her legendary intellectual supremacy and indomitable will but also as a site of immense sorrow and isolating alienation. Despite her celebrated intelligence, rapier wit, and extraordinary psychological independence, she remains structurally incapable of escaping the suffocating realities of a secondary wife imprisoned within an institutional framework of societal prejudice. Her fragmented marriages, subaltern marital status, and profound emotional exile doom her to a perpetual state of unfulfilled longing and psychological dislocation. Consequently, Xuan Huong is simultaneously fiercely autonomous and deeply tragic, intensely proud yet utterly marooned within her social environment.

Even when she appears at the funeral of the Prefect of Vinh Tuong, her physical presence is rendered completely redundant and estranged: "No one needed Xuan Huong anymore," and "From this moment onward, Xuan Huong would embark on a bitter journey, where countless freezing winds would blast directly into her naked heart." [4, p.107]. The devastating imagery of "the lady Ho Xuan Huong clad in coarse funeral sackcloth, weeping bitterly for the immense, boundless loneliness of this earthly existence" [p.109] transcends individual grief. It transforms into a poignant commentary on the universal existential alienation inherent to the human condition. Through this, Nguyen Huy Thiep directly inherits the historical humanitarian tradition, focusing his authorial gaze on the wounds, fractures, and silent miseries of human life.

Alongside this structural empathy, the text vibrates with a modern passion for personal freedom and individual self-actualization. The protagonist operates as an iconic symbol of an individual desperate to break free from the asphyxiating chains of Neo-Confucian morality. She fiercely demands authentic emotional reciprocity, seeks to live true to her passionate impulses, and insists upon her absolute worth as an individual. She is a figure who maintains an unyielding self-respect and life-affirming vitality despite the tragic ironies of her destiny. This is why, despite her profound suffering, she never collapses into passive victimhood. As Tong Coc marvels: "He deeply admired Xuan Huong for her unique capacity to endure endless defeats in life while remaining completely composed, never once exhibiting the aura of a loser." [4, p.97]. Similarly, Am Huy confesses: "He revered Xuan Huong because she possessed a lucidity far superior to her husband. She sowed in his heart a complex mixture of profound awe and terror." [4, p.101]. Thus, through "A Fleeting Glance of Xuan Huong," Nguyen Huy Thiep seamlessly merges traditional humanistic empathy with a contemporary validation of the individual's inner sovereignty, establishing the profound conceptual value of modern Vietnamese short fiction.

2. The Impulse for Modernization

2.1 De-mythologizing Cultural and Historical Icons

In "A Fleeting Glance of Xuan Huong," Nguyen Huy Thiep's modernizing drive is most acutely felt in his radically contemporary re-reading of historical and cultural

figures. The author completely rejects approaching Ho Xuan Huong as a sacrosanct, fossilized monument characteristic of traditional hagiography. Instead, he systematically repatriates the icon back to the messy arena of ordinary existence, complete with its primal appetites, devastating solitudes, and purely human heartbreaks. In doing so, the narrative functions as an intense, critical dialogue with historical memory, showcasing a highly sophisticated spirit of modern intellectual skepticism.

Primarily, Nguyen Huy Thiep purposefully 'de-mythologizes' the cultural icon of Ho Xuan Huong—a historical figure long ossified by layers of myth and reverent adulation within national literary history. In institutionalized memory, she is almost exclusively celebrated as the monolithic 'Queen of Nôm Poetry'—an untouchable champion of proto-feminist rebellion and intellectual grandeur. Nguyen Huy Thiep, however, exposes her under-examined domestic vulnerability, capturing her as an ordinary mortal navigating structural grief and profound isolation. By anchoring her within the unvarnished realities of the human condition—polygamy, widowhood, and social displacement—the author strips the historical icon of her legendary pedestal, compelling her to walk through the gritty terrain of raw human experience.

This demythologization is achieved by prioritizing her interior psychological fractures and existential loneliness over romanticized celebrations of her poetic defiance. Within the narrative architecture, Xuan Huong rarely steps into the spotlight as an active, unmediated narrator; instead, her silhouette is refracted through the subjective lenses of those around her. Viewed through the eyes of Tong Coc, she is simultaneously intimately domestic and grandly enigmatic—a vast, towering shadow that eludes his cognitive grasp. He acknowledges that he 'deeply admired Xuan Huong for her unique capacity to endure endless defeats in life while remaining completely composed, never once exhibiting the aura of a loser.' This specific framing reconstructs Xuan Huong as a profoundly wounded, deeply scarred individual who nonetheless possesses immense spiritual fortitude, thereby shattering the simplistic, one-dimensional idealization typical of orthodox classical historiography.

Furthermore, the text showcases a highly modern, dialogic interrogation of history itself. Nguyen Huy Thiep treats historical record not as an objective truth to be passively mirrored, but as fluid raw material for philosophical inquiry. He channels the historical persona of Ho Xuan Huong to confront the anxieties of the modern subject: cosmic isolation, the desperate quest to live authentically to the private self, and the systemic suffocations of an individual trapped within structural prejudices. Crucially, the image of the young woman at the Tam Xuan river ferry at the story's climax acts as a symbolic reincarnation of Ho Xuan Huong in the contemporary present. This woman is a mere proletarian laborer, yet she carries the exact same natural grace, haunting destiny, and immense loneliness—resembling 'a solitary egret in lonely flight'—as her historical counterpart.

Additionally, Nguyen Huy Thiep's critical thinking manifests in his choice to re-evaluate historical grandeur from the intimate perspective of private history. While classical literature prioritizes state morality and collective didactic lessons, "A Fleeting Glance of Xuan Huong" plunges into the psychological displacement and existential

homelessness of the private citizen. Xuan Huong is rendered as an intellectual titan who remains completely unanchored and alienated from her social fabric. At the funeral of Prefect Vinh Tuong, her physical presence is treated as an absolute redundancy: 'No one needed Xuan Huong anymore.' The shattering sight of her weeping in funeral weeds for the 'immense, boundless loneliness of this earthly existence' ceases to be a localized biographical note; it becomes a powerful emblem of modern alienation. This defines the core of Nguyen Huy Thiep's aesthetic revolution: he approaches the historical subject not from a distance of blind worship, but from the bottomless depths of shared human vulnerability. By humanizing a cultural myth, he breathes new life into it, reflecting the democratization and intellectual maturation of post-1975 Vietnamese prose.

2.2 Polyphonic and Multiplex Narrative Perspectives

A seminal formal hallmark of Nguyen Huy Thiep's modernizing technique in "A Fleeting Glance of Xuan Huong" is his sophisticated orchestration of pluralistic, shifting narrative viewpoints. Where classical narrative forms traditionally employ a singular, omniscient, and ideologically unified voice, Nguyen Huy Thiep continuously destabilizes the narrative center by shifting the gaze among various characters, thereby generating a highly polyphonic and multi-dimensional text. The author consciously refuses to offer an unmediated portrait of Xuan Huong; instead, her identity is completely constructed through the subjective, often contradictory impressions of external observers: Tong Coc, Am Huy, Huyen Thang, and even a contemporary modern actor playing Chiêu Hồ.

Each distinct character brings an independent cognitive framework, ensuring that the image of Xuan Huong remains elusive, multifaceted, and resistant to definitive categorization. There is the gaze of Tong Coc—a man who acknowledges himself as someone who 'never possessed the refined elegance of classical literati,' born 'coarse, clumsy, and physically unappealing,' yet who secretly possesses an uncorrupted moral conscience and an authentic chivalric honor: 'he had his own absurdities, his own code of honor, which few could easily replicate.' [4, p.94]. To this unrefined man, Xuan Huong embodies a sublime manifestation of the Ideal Beauty that transcends the mundane—simultaneously pristine and courageously grand. Her specter manifests three distinct times, always anchored to traditional domestic markers: the regional Kinh Bac wine, the ancestral altar, the ritual bananas, the steaming platter of floating cakes... These images evoke a deeply rooted folk aesthetic, small and unassuming, yet they consistently strike Tong Coc with a sense of wonder, tenderly soothing his private anxieties with their pure, crystalline grace.

Xuan Huong never materializes in a definitive physical form; she exists as an architectural collection of shadows and impressions, yet each appearance forces a profound cognitive pause within Tong Coc's stream of consciousness, leading him to intuit: 'He suspected she was far greater than he, more resilient, and lived with a much grander courage.' In sharp contrast stands the perspective of Am Huy—an intellectual trapped within the ivory tower of abstract morality, completely enveloped by scholastic doctrines and textual definitions. To this scholar, Xuan Huong is an imposing monument of superior intelligence, inspiring an uncomfortable mixture of intellectual reverence and existential dread, a sentiment shared by Huyen Thang who

openly admits to 'holding sister Xuan Huong in deep respect.'

Finally, the perspective shifts radically to a modern actor rehearsing the historical role of Chieu Ho, who views Xuan Huong through a highly complex, contemporary, and post-modern lens. In the eyes of this modern man, Xuan Huong is simultaneously immediate yet impossibly distant, transcendent yet profoundly secularized. She is transformed into a contemporary subject, living within the immediate reality of the present day. Stripped of her historical armor and unburdened by her reputation as a legendary literary prodigy, she appears as the rustic maiden Huong, naturally rowing a wooden boat and tending to livestock... Yet, the timeless ghost of Xuan Huong continues to hover over her through her striking physical grace, her sharp intelligence, and her expansive generosity. This deliberate rejection of a singular narrative viewpoint transforms the protagonist from a predictable, flat character into a highly dynamic, open-ended interpretive site. This shift marks the definitive arrival of modern self-reflexive prose and an egalitarian, democratic spirit in contemporary Vietnamese fiction.

Conclusion

Nguyen Huy Thiep's short story "A Fleeting Glance of Xuan Huong" stands as an undisputed masterpiece that exemplifies the seamless, harmonious synthesis of traditional heritage and modern vanguard aesthetics within the landscape of post-1975 Vietnamese literary renovation. By actively engaging with the historical archetype of Ho Xuan Huong, Nguyen Huy Thiep does not abandon national cultural roots but systematically deepens them across multiple fronts: from reclaiming narrative structures steeped in legendry and renewing the classical defense of female dignity, to organizing a polyphonic narrative system that strips Xuan Huong of her mythic fossilization. He transforms her into a living, breathing human being caught in the vortex of interior crises, romantic longings, and a profound cosmic isolation. This precise artistic choice infuses the short story with its extraordinary humanistic resonance and contemporary philosophical value.

Through this narrative tour de force, Nguyen Huy Thiep convincingly demonstrates that tradition is never a dead, static mold to be passively copied, but an incredibly vital, dynamic cultural text destined to be interrogated, reimagined, and radically transformed through contemporary aesthetic frameworks. In this text, the preservation of heritage and the impulse for structural modernization do not exist as polarized antonyms; rather, they are organically fused, feeding into one another to forge the author's singular literary identity. Concurrently, the work cements Nguyen Huy Thiep's pioneering vanguard status in the evolution of contemporary Vietnamese fiction, particularly highlighting his revolutionary success in modernizing narrative psychology and investigating the human subject at the complex intersection of cultural history, mythic memory, and existential individuality.

Ultimately, exploring "A Fleeting Glance of Xuan Huong" opens up a multitude of fertile critical pathways for studying both Nguyen Huy Thiep's larger body of work and the wider dynamics of modernized Vietnamese prose. The text serves as an ideal site for intertextual critique, illuminating the sophisticated ways contemporary fiction enters into a vibrant dialogue with classical vernacular literature and oral folklore. Furthermore, analyzing the construction of the

female subject through a feminist critical lens promises to unearth pioneering insights regarding personal agency, gendered space, and the quest for autonomy in contemporary literature. Finally, taking this story as a theoretical case study allows critics to map the broader post-1975 trajectory of de-mythologizing historical narratives, providing a clearer understanding of the radical philosophical shifts and the structural evolution of the human subject in the ongoing modernization of the national literary consciousness.

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