

# FEMINISM AND SEXUALITY IN VIETNAMESE AND CHINESE LITERATURE (THROUGH SHORT STORIES BY NGUYEN NGOC TU (VIETNAM) AND WEI HUI (CHINA))

Tran T.V.D.

*Tran Thi Van Dung - main lecturer,  
THUA THIEN HUE JUNIOR COLLEGE OF EDUCATION, THUA THIEN HUE;  
PHD STUDENT, HANOI NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION, HANOI,  
VIETNAM*

**Abstract:** *the East's literature is diverse and contains profound aesthetic and epochal values. The literature of the East in general, and the literature of countries in the region, have created many kinds of values, perspectives, and new identities, with unique sameness. Vietnam and China are neighboring countries with many similarities in culture in the past as well as the modern period. In this article, the author has analyzed and compared modern literary creations of Chinese and Vietnamese writers through the short stories of two 70s generation authors, Nguyen Ngoc Tu and Wei Hui. The research clarifies what they have in common regarding feminism and sexuality.*

**Keywords:** *modern literature, Vietnamese literature, Chinese literature, femininity in literature, sexuality.*

## ФЕМИНИЗМ И СЕКСУАЛЬНОСТЬ ВО ВЬЕТНАМСКОЙ И КИТАЙСКОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЕ (ИЗ РАССКАЗОВ НГУЕН НГОК ТУ (ВЬЕТНАМ) И ВЭЙ ХУЭЙ (КИТАЙ))

Чан Т. В.З.

*Чан Тхи Ван Зунг - главный преподаватель,  
Младший педагогический колледж Туа Тиен Хюэ, г. Туа Тиен Хюэ;  
Аспирант, Ханойский национальный педагогический университет, г. Ханой,  
Вьетнам*

**Аннотация:** *литература Востока разнообразна и содержит в себе глубокие эстетические и эпохальные ценности. Литература Востока в целом и литература стран региона создали много видов ценностей, перспектив и новых идентичностей с уникальным сходством. Вьетнам и Китай — соседние страны, имеющие много общего в культуре как прошлого, так и современного периода. В этой статье автор проанализировал и сравнил современные литературные произведения китайских и вьетнамских писателей через рассказы двух авторов поколения 70-х, Нгуен Нгок Ту и Вэй Хуэй. Исследование проясняет, что у них общего в отношении феминизма и сексуальности.*

**Ключевые слова:** *современная литература, вьетнамская литература, китайская литература, женственность в литературе, сексуальность.*

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### Introduction

Since the 1980s, women's literature has achieved many achievements and has become a global phenomenon. In the same 70s generation, Chinese writer, Wei Hui and Vietnamese writer, Nguyen Ngoc Tu have multidimensional conceptions of life and writing. Although there are differences in geographical location and compositional context, the two women writers have the same thought about feminism and sexuality in their works. Therefore, we have studied "Feminism and sexuality in Vietnamese and Chinese literature through short stories by Nguyen Ngoc Tu and Wei Hui" to understand, compare, and introduce more literary works, meeting the increasing demand for culture in the integration period.

Feminism and sexuality are two issues that have different views in each period. Medieval literature is formal and abstract. In contrast, modern literature analyzes details based on concepts of beauty and people. The social context is also increasingly changing, and the need to liberate human ontology is revealed and decoded more profoundly and directly.

The works of other Chinese female writers, such as Mien Mien, Xuan Thu, and Truong Khang Khang, or the works of Vietnamese female writers, such as Do Hoang Dieu, Phong Diep, Nguyen Thi Thu Hue, and Y Ban, are the voices that liberate the self, the sexual desire, and the dream of women. They are artistic conceptions of people with a feminist spirit, which are also reflected in the character system, another aspect we will clarify in the following research work.

According to Professor Tran Dinh Su, "the cultural value of literature also has a relationship between national and international cultural values. In which values that come close to the need to liberate humanity, feelings, and ideals are more likely to be recognized by the world." Therefore, the messages we receive through Nguyen Ngoc Tu and Wei Hui's short stories about feminism and sexuality are cultural and humanistic issues. These are ones that women want others to understand and share.

However, because the two countries' circumstances and cultural and social characteristics are different, readers may have dissimilar reactions when receiving the works of Wei Hui and Nguyen Ngoc Tu. It is an inevitable effect in the

process of exchanging and acclimatizing thought flows in literature and culture, and also the requirements set forth by both the author and the reader in the modernization trend in the region and the world. Hopefully, with the appreciation of the literary and cultural quintessence of the two countries, Vietnam and China, researchers, readers, organizations, and communities will join hands to promote the deepening cultural and ideological relations between Vietnam and other countries in the region, bringing literature and culture to a higher level.

### **Feminism and sexuality in short stories by Nguyen Ngoc Tu**

The German philosopher Hegel said, “The main object of literature and art is human” [34, p. 102]. Vietnamese female writer Nguyen Ngoc Tu is interested in people, specifically women, in society. It can be said that feminism and sexuality are of great interest to her. Many of her short stories bring messages about the spirit of feminism and women’s wishes or the unconscious instincts that nature has given humans. In addition, a warning message about sexual depravity, contrary to social ethics, is also released, aiming to direct people to a more beautiful and humane lifestyle.

Through the characters in the short stories, Nguyen Ngoc Tu conveyed the spirit of feminism in the multi-dimensional aspects of life. That was the right to dream of many women: “I wish the water weren’t so clear so that it wouldn’t show a fading beauty” [10, p. 60]. Someone dreamed of becoming a celebrity: “I can’t give up on my dream of becoming a famous singer. How can I refuse the role I’ve been waiting for, the heroic Trung Trac in *Tiếng trống Mê Linh*” [11, p. 115]. The woman’s dream of becoming a mother was always longing and haunting: “I long for the feeling of protecting a living being in me. It’s a sacred feeling that can’t be borrowed or rented: motherhood” [12, p. 130 - 131].

Besides, the reality of life made women find their voice with strong and decisive protests: “Nga sighed and said that every woman in her neighborhood suffered. Dinh said that Áo Dài would replace a wedding dress. Nga was silent and did not argue. The girls didn’t talk much. They had other ways of speaking, more intense and resonant than when they screamed” [20, p. 76]. Although sometimes they could rest on their laurels: “Sao was used to living and working for someone, like her grandma. Her grandma loved her grandfather, so the grandma sailed to marry two concubines for him. Or, like Sao’s mother, to redeem Sao’s father from the debt by Cockfight, her mother had to sell all her land, leading her to live on a boat. Sao got married to the man her mother chose because “that guy had one acre of land” [30, p. 16-17], but she still hoped “to meet someone to love again” [31, p. 111].

Feminism was also emphasized by Nguyen Ngoc Tu in the women who would give birth: “A wife was happy because she was not forced to give birth and did not have to walk to the maternity ward by herself because she was pregnant with a daughter. The children were delighted because they were not beaten or scolded for being girls” [31, p. 165]. Her work also showed resistance: “her heart suddenly started pounding, breaking through the walls enclosing her. The arrogance before the storm began to rise with delight, howling, etc. She didn’t say anything but jumped into the water as fast as a wink.” [9, p. 115-116].

Every person born had the right to have relatives, especially a mother. However, that genuine wish was not always acknowledged and shared because “dad never knew that at that time, mom contributed a line to the imaginary play, or they were actually bathing in the same stream of memories when saying: Being nagged by mom, I’m happy” [13, p. 15].

When the abuse became an obsession, girls’ right to be clean served as a wake-up call for the moral corruption of sexual predators: “Someone had to make amends for the feeling of stomach cramps and nausea every time crossing Tan Thach bridge, for the pitying eyes on them, and for their withered twenties” [14, p. 29]. Arranged marriages with foreigners with language differences clung to the fate of young girls in foreign countries: “Nhon Thanh women often spoke so curtly and got back from their husbands a kick in the stomach, a slap, or a head grab and hair pulling. Only Nhi’s husband was happy and laughed whenever his wife expressed her anger at life. Not knowing each other’s language was interesting” [32, p. 115]. The awakening of conscience or the man’s confession before his right to be himself: “A poisonous wind blew, bringing a chill to the crown of the head. Grandma said if I didn’t have land, I was nothing. However, at this moment, I realized I was nothing and nobody if I didn’t have a name. Do I exist, and am I a ghost or a human?” [19, p. 169].

All the characters in Nguyen Ngoc Tu’s short stories have created the spirit of feminism in the new era. It is a woman’s right to live as she is, to be loved, expressed, cared for, and devoted.

Besides, sex is also an aspect that can change people. In Nguyen Ngoc Tu’s short stories, the multidimensional levels revolving around sexuality were reflected in different characters and situations. That was the child’s unconscious sexuality: “Be’s fortune is only his grandmother and two breasts slightly larger than his fist. If he opens his mouth all the way, he can take half of it, but he only sucks little by little” [31, p.108]. That was the sexuality of adolescence: “A young female student who lives near my house has a boyfriend. They often snuggle together on the stone bench. His hands are naughty and groping all over her body” [24, p.108]. That was the curiosity to discover: “When reminiscing, the bodies and faces keep huddled together, unable to separate one from the other” [17, p.71]. That was the changes in the human state: “Mot Tam, who was very timid, fought with a bunch of people in a brawl for a plot of wasteland, which later became his family’s field. Mot Tam took the daughter of a cane sugar boat owner under the arm and brought her to the graves of Chinese people. He undressed her and locked her on the dew-drenched marble. After that night, he even ventured down to the riverbank to avoid craving her. Even though he knew he could be arrested at any time as soon as she filed a complaint, he did not run away. More than afraid, he missed the hairs, the white streaks on the gray stone, and the warm touches that rise to the top of his head” [27, p. 28-29].

Sometimes, it was the private moments of love and sex: “When she remembered that he used to drool on her chest on the last stretch, got goosebumps and shiver every time she stroked his tailbone” [29, p. 46]. It was the memories: “Remembering Nhu’s body and the collisions that were both panic and anxiety, distant and flesh and blood. I can’t find

that feeling in my husband, so I regret it sometimes. Solid and stocky, Nhu made me ecstatic during our first sexual intercourse. I like it so much that I can't breathe" [15, p. 18].

It was a natural human instinct in love stories: "The boats were floating. Both boats were untied because the hands that tied them were restless. The boats were floating as if they were also dating. They drifted apart, drifting far away as if they didn't know each other. Coc panicked, jumped up, and shouted: "The boat is floating! The boat is gone." At this time, only heard her weak voice: "Don't... There is a toad." Coc sighed because although there was an elephant here, it was the same. Therefore, the boat kept drifting, slowly, freely, until it could no longer be seen in sight" [9, p.110]. And because: "The struggle only stimulates desire" [16, p. 216]. It was also the couple's sex life: "They could only hug each other at dawn" [25, p. 43].

Nguyen Ngoc Tu also revealed the other side of the debauchery animality, which was the humiliation of sensuality: "He's dead after the first glasses of wine and obscene movies. After the uncontrollable excitement, she went to school alone on an empty street at noon" [28, p. 130]. It was an inhuman sexual desire: "Mr. Tam went to the hut, but I didn't know. Suddenly I found myself pressed down against a board that termites had eaten, and a hand slipped into my shirt, making me startled. I screamed, but my voice was drowned out by a hand that smelled of wine, meat, and urine" [26, p. 143].

On another aspect, Nguyen Ngoc Tu revealed the nature of prostitution: "She needs more and so much that she can devour all the men in the world. At first, it was to make a living, but over time, the physical contact made her addicted" [16, p. 206]. There are also "contracts" of instinct: "Tay feels a cool body from her belly fat, which swoops down and sways on his back. It reminds the boy of a clear, slightly turbulent liquid that can lock onto him and envelop him if he sinks in. Therefore, Tay likes her, a loyal customer, not entirely because she often gives more money" [23, p. 43].

There is also sexuality and natural human aging: "My fingers were dry too when I touched her breasts the first night. She hid her smile in the blanket. "Lying next to you, it's great." The feeling that I'm drying up makes me so weak. There's hardly any excitement that makes me want to hug her." [27, p. 95]. Thus, with the concept of sex: "Sex is not evil, and it does not deserve to be despised" [16, p.199]. Nguyen Ngoc Tu has had far-reaching echoes.

Sex is a natural human need. However, when ethical, cultural, and traditional standards appear, this need is not always revealed. According to Freud, guilt is a psychological state that occurs when instinctive needs appear but are prevented by regulations and laws. It is a state of people in conflict with themselves, their inner self, and the situation when it cannot be resolved. In *Three Essays on Theory of Sex*, in 1905, he wrote: "The importance of male sexual overestimation can be widely studied because researchers can only penetrate the sex life of that gender. On the other hand, the sexual life of women is still covered by a thick veil because it has declined due to becoming more civilized, a reticence following social conventions, and a lack of honesty" [3, p.54].

#### **Feminism and sexuality in Wei Hui's short stories**

China is one of the cradles of mankind with a long history, creating a massive, sustainable, and diverse culture, which is clearly expressed in the unique nationalist literature of Chinese culture. All of which require "knowledge of history, both current and past history, and literary knowledge in the past and present" [6, p. 130]. Writer Wei Hui has brought to contemporary Chinese literature not only the feelings and aspirations of women's rights but also messages from a multi-dimensional perspective on human sexuality.

For Wei Hui, the spirit of feminism is expressed in dreams about family. It was "my children were like daisies. One by one, they came to me cuddling and yawning, leaving me with the fantasy of a happy family" [40, p. 5]. That was the right to beautify the women: "smoothing her hair five hundred times a day is her beauty secret!" because "now, there are only weak beauties with dumbfounded faces and pale lips, no more healthy girls with big ponytails dangling from the back like that! Now, only the noise, the precariousness, and the unthinkable fashions remain!" [40, p. 8].

Some mothers lose their children from adversity: "I was pregnant, but an ectopic pregnancy, which shocked me," or there was a situation: "I don't know what kind of sequelae my weakened body will have. I don't know if I'll be able to have a child in the future" [40, p.127-129].

Sometimes, "looking at themselves in front of a big mirror, they found themselves thin and tall. With a body like that, wearing clothes with a playable style was very suitable. Adding a tight shirt and glossy fabric, especially for a girl with small breasts, buttocks, and long legs was even more appropriate" [40, p. 12]. They also wanted to have freedom and choice in their marriage: "Should I marry him or not? I didn't dare to think about this more and more. I was afraid that he would use his jealous but innocent eyes to burn my life, like a vast cloud covering my free life. We wanted to give our mother compassion, affection, and a smile" [40, p. 106].

They decided their lives with a decisive attitude: "A woman with a shaved head was an extremely romantic hybrid. I used the image of a bald head to break up with the world, but also to affirm my inner emptiness" [40, p.152].

They dreamed of a better future when "chatting with my best friends on the street in New York, or I played the zither and sang in a coffee shop in London. In those dreams, I spoke English very well. My tongue curled up as beautifully as a Persian rug when pronouncing" [40, p. 156].

They might even protest to gain respect: "Your suspicions of me are so great. That's crazy. Maybe you need to see a psychiatrist!" and "She sobbed. It seemed she had been hurt and suffered a great humiliation." It was also about the right to choose a divorce: "We have to get a divorce! She quietly repeated: We have to get a divorce! Get a divorce! You can drive me crazy" [38, p. 156].

In addition, Wei Hui paid attention to women's right to study and research: "The title of PhD student is the impression Phuong Phi gives to those she knows and those who know her" [40, p.10].

Expressing the spirit of feminism in a straightforward, powerful, but very skillful way is thanks to Wei Hui's point of view: "Sometimes, a fantasy that your wish suddenly comes true and appears vividly right in front of you. At that time, you will realize that the "Glass shoes" in the fairy tale are real. That's the essence of romance, a precious thing in life, but unfortunately, it is often overlooked and dismissed" [41, p. 299]. That is also the human spirit that her short stories bring to readers.

Wei Hui's conceptions of sex are associated with love affairs in which "lovers always have a real-life style, with the explosive speed of one night explaining the secret of growing up and love in the modern age. It's no longer a utopia" [40, p.20]. Therefore, the lovers in her character were full of desire and fear, but they still "had sex with each other. The woman was still a virgin. He was so surprised, so he asked her if she was in pain. She nodded and cried for a while. Then, she told him about her desire and fear of sex. He gently kissed the tears on her eyelids." [40, p.21].

Her short story emphasized the lustful essences, states, and instincts of people when in love: "He swore to her that he would forever protect her and love her. The first experience made her feel like she was quickly growing up. Hence, she said: "Let's do it again!" He leaned down to her collarbone, which was very attractive and undulating, was sweating profusely, and hallucinating constantly." [40, p. 21 - 22].

The harmony of sex was like a cure: "The worries and withering thoughts in the night tormented him. In so many nights, with the perfect harmony in the depths, our souls crossed the border of lust!" because "making love" was an excellent remedy that could cure the loneliness and insomnia of restless people like cockroaches" [40, p.31].

It cannot be denied that sex, instinct, desire, and perversion are always present in each story written by Wei Hui so that language barriers can be liberated under the character's being: "He lowered his head. I felt a stormy pressure on my lips accompanied by dramatic arousal. Our tongues were entangled with each other like these goldfish. A salty and fishy taste, like coming from the bottom of the sea, made me intoxicated and infatuated." From there, "we went from one pose to another. Each pose followed a sequence, creating a process full of pleasure, letting go of the old and liking the new." Therefore, "he wanted to have sex with her in a deep, enchanting, dark place. He volunteered to die in her arms! "It has been a long time since they've had sex with each other. She hid her sexual desires" [40, p. 149].

"Under the shimmering lights, her eyes were sparkling and utterly erotic! In bed, she had satisfied him," there was the sublimation of love and the romanticization of the expression of affection" [8, p.181].

With an open concept about sex and marriage, Wei Hui brought a new perspective and solution: "Even if he had sex with a hundred beautiful girls, he was still her BB. Who knows, one day, he might even come back to Shanghai to marry her" [42, p. 227]. After all, Wei Hui is a poetic writer: "I believed a lot of the details were not believable, even meaningless. At the same time, I also determined that there was something strangely incomprehensible! Told that story to Ma Phi and got the answer: - You're too romantic" [35, p. 303]. Maybe, this is the style of a "crazy" writer.

### **Analysis and comparison**

In *Literature Research Methodology*, author Nguyen Van Dan points out that exploring the relationships among different kinds of literature is "the function and task of comparative literature. The task of the comparative method is merely to compare literary phenomena with each other, *whether they belong to different types of literature, or to the same literature*. Therefore, when explaining the similarities and differences in *Feminism and sexuality in Vietnamese and Chinese literature through the short stories by Nguyen Ngoc Tu and Wei Hui*, we find out things that reflect and are reflected in order to help readers easily receive and better understand the spirit of feminism and sexuality in relation to life and society.

In the context of social history since 1976, China entered a "new period." Society developed in the direction of freedom and openness, especially since the 80s, after the arrival of Western feminine literary criticism and gender theory. According to Tran Le Hoa Tranh in *A brief overview of contemporary Chinese women's literature*, "feminine literature is paid attention to in China. Mature female authors have caught up with the currents of feminist thought and criticism and applied them to their work [1]. Wei Hui is currently considered a famous female writer of China's "next generation."

Writer Wei Hui's conception of the writing profession is that "in all my life, I will write for love in my heart, a secret, gentle love that carries the passion of life. Maybe it is not love in the narrow sense that normal people can interpret. Its scope is vast. It can exist in a character, a book, a plate of food, a memory, or a piece of music. I'm an aestheticist. Because writing can bring me to a dreamlike realm, make me get out of everyday life, and avoid being submerged in the "soap bubbles" of daily life" [37].

Her breakthroughs in literature were warmly welcomed by the public because she had determined for herself a proper purpose and path. "The goal of a professional writer is not only commercialism but also ego and art" [39].

Being a female writer of the Southwest of Vietnam, Nguyen Ngoc Tu is a well-known female writer of modern Vietnamese literature with many books published and reprinted. Her concept of writing is that: "ideas and words presented on paper are circulations in closed arteries. They are so hot and full that the writer can't stand them. There's only one way to put them on the pages so that they are fewer. I am influenced by Mo Yan more or less in the style of writing that bears the breath of life, or the chosen characters: small people tossed and pounded incessantly in the world's chaos" [18].

Nguyen Ngoc Tu has made relentless efforts on each word because, for her, "writing is a job I can do well and make a living from. Professionalism in writing is the awareness of the profession's limitlessness, the breadth of literature, and my limited ability" [18].

In *From text to literary work*, Truong Dang Dung wrote that the similarity of literary phenomena was also the result of "similar states of human and social consciousness." It was also the "dialogue between kinds of literature" [36, p. 86] to create a common face of world literature.

Therefore, Wei Hui and Nguyen Ngoc Tu have exposed the hidden corners of the inner world of women and their sex life. By mixing elements of private life, their works express the secrets of the ego and the taboos of social morality and become a means for women to show their voice, assert themselves, and profess their rights to constraints and laws.

With a deep perspective and attention to the complex inner world of man, Wei Hui and Nguyen Ngoc Tu care about fate and people in using fragmentation as a narrative technique to penetrate all composition trends. Fragment is the essence of postmodern existence, so when people no longer believe in things that are round, full, and easy to grasp, "fragment" is the criterion of the nature of the thing" [7, p. 76]. In which, there is a deep sense of self-position and new images of women in an era where feminism is indicated and shined. In addition, sexual recollections are also released in dreams and statements about sex, aiming to liberate the individual and being in women. These are also the message that Wei Hui and Nguyen Ngoc Tu convey in their works.

Similarities can be explained by analogy in historical type. That is, "the socio-historical development of mankind is a process of unification, and this process ensures literature as an ideological superstructure that develops in a unified manner," Grimunsky states.

In the book *Some issues of intercultural and intercultural communication* by Nguyen Quang, "linguistic and cultural identity" is interpreted as something that not only that culture or language community possesses, but also the dominant thing in terms of proportion and manifestation in comparison with one or other linguistic-cultural communities [33, p.189].

On the other hand, the peculiarity of literature lies not in the fact that the general is expressed through the particular, but in the prominent feature: "both the general and the particular are important aesthetic factors, and both form the object of scientific research" [5, p. 340].

Via the above commentaries, we believe that "Feminism and sexuality in Vietnamese and Chinese literature via short stories by Nguyen Ngoc Tu and Wei Hui" is the transmission of each writer's consciousness with the "similarity" of concerns and thoughts ahead of time, people, life, and society. Thanks to creativity, each writer gives readers specific effects through various forms of expression, creating their unique appearances in the general process of national, regional, and international literature and conveying new aesthetic values to the readers.

Notwithstanding being in Vietnam or China, in different moments or dates, and written in Chinese characters or Vietnamese, before the times, human fate, daily life, nostalgia about the past, or wishes for the future, all things are shown through each word and sentence full of feelings.

Nowadays, the China - Vietnam relationship is expressed through the motto of "friendly neighborliness, comprehensive cooperation, long-term stability, and future-oriented thinking." Therefore, we always wish to develop effective cooperation and comprehensive integration between Vietnam and China, especially in literature and culture.

René Wellek said: "If the study of literature is not determined to consider literature a different discipline from other human activities and products, from a methodological perspective, there will be no progress. The problem of "literary features," that is, the nature of literature and art or the problem of aesthetics, is the "literary features" or the universal value of mankind" [2].

In short, the messages that Nguyen Ngoc Tu and Wei Hui have conveyed in their short stories are both imbued with the spirit of feminism and provide readers with multi-dimensional perspectives on sexuality in life. This has provided the literature of the region and the world with cultural and human values in the exchange, acculturation, and enrichment of Eastern literature.

### **Conclusion**

In the flow of contemporary Chinese and Vietnamese literature, each writer has a unique voice. Wei Hui shows fervor and torment, while Nguyen Ngoc Tu indicates sympathy and lyricalness. The authors' messages through their short stories are about the young generation's concerns. Via the comparison (based on short stories written by Nguyen Ngoc Tu and Wei Hui) along with explanations, we hope to contribute to raising readers' expectations as well as the level of literature and culture in the region and the world because "achievements of the artistic activities" [4, p.13] from the national and local literature is forming world literature.

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