



## INTELLECTUAL CHARACTERS IN VU TRONG PHUNG'S NOVELS

*Dang Van Vu*

*Sai Gon University, Vietnam*

*Email address: [dvvu@sgu.edu.vn](mailto:dvvu@sgu.edu.vn)*

*<https://doi.org/10.51453/2354-1431/2024/1248>*

### Article info

*Received: 25/7/2024*

*Revised: 10/10/2024*

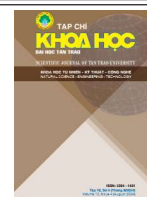
*Accepted: 28/10/2024*

### Keywords

*Vu Trong Phung,  
intellectual character,  
justice, humanity*

### Abstract

Vu Trong Phung is an outstanding realist writer of Vietnamese literature from 1930 to 1945. He wrote in many genres, most notably reportage and novels. The novels of the writer Vu clearly reflect the social reality of Vietnam during the French colonial period, through a rich world of characters, with all types of people in society. Among them, a type of character emerged that did not exist in the prose of contemporary realist writers: the character of an intellectual who plays the role of an official. The character of an intellectual official possesses all the good qualities such as: integrity, respect for justice, defending the weak, living with love and affection, etc. It can be said that, in creating this type of character, Vu Trong Phung had a progressive mindset in reflecting reality without bias. Thanks to that, the picture of Vietnamese social reality in the early 20th century emerged more comprehensively.



## NHÂN VẬT NGƯỜI TRÍ THỨC TRONG TIỂU THUYẾT CỦA VŨ TRỌNG PHỤNG

Đặng Văn Vũ

Trường Đại học Sài Gòn, Việt Nam

Địa chỉ email: [dvvu@sgu.edu.vn](mailto:dvvu@sgu.edu.vn)

<https://doi.org/10.51453/2354-1431/2024/1248>

### Thông tin bài viết

Ngày nhận bài: 25/7/2024

Ngày hoàn thiện: 10/10/2024

Ngày đăng: 28/10/2024

### Từ khoá:

Vũ Trọng Phụng, nhân vật trí thức, công lý, nhân nghĩa

### Tóm tắt

Vũ Trọng Phụng là nhà văn hiện thực xuất sắc của văn học Việt Nam giai đoạn 1930 - 1945. Ông sáng tác nhiều thể loại, nổi bật nhất là thể phóng sự và tiểu thuyết. Tiểu thuyết của nhà văn họ Vũ phản ánh khá rõ hiện thực xã hội Việt Nam thời thực dân pháp đô hộ, thông qua thể giới nhân vật phong phú, đủ các kiểu người trong xã hội. Trong đó, nổi lên một kiểu nhân vật không hề có trong văn xuôi của các nhà văn hiện thực cùng thời: đó là nhân vật người trí thức giữ vai trò là quan chức. Nhân vật quan chức trí thức hội đủ các phẩm chất tốt đẹp như: liêm chính, tôn trọng công lý, bênh vực người yếu thế, sống có nghĩa có tình v.v... Có thể nói, xây dựng kiểu nhân vật này, Vũ Trọng Phụng có tư tưởng tiến bộ trong việc phản ánh hiện thực không thiên kiến. Nhờ đó, bức tranh hiện thực xã hội Việt Nam đầu thế kỷ XX hiện lên toàn diện hơn.

### 1. Introduction

Vu Trong Phung's literary talent was first recognized in the genre of reportage (9 volumes), then in novels (9 books). As a journalist, Vu Trong Phung's novels are always full of "reportage" quality. Unlike the Tu Luc Van Doan novels of the same period, which are full of romanticism, Vu Trong Phung's novels delve into the bare reality of people and society. Also different from the critical realism of Nguyen Cong Hoan, Ngo Tat To, Nguyen Hong... which are often divided into two opposing forces of good and evil; Vu Trong Phung's novels do not have this division, his characters are always

in motion, constantly changing depending on the impact of the circumstances. Emerging in Vu Trong Phung's novels are two types of characters: the gangster character and the intellectual character. If the gangster character shows the negative aspects, the intellectual character reflects the positive aspects of the semi-colonial, semi-feudal society of Vietnam in the early 20th century. Vu Trong Phung's novels are highly predictive, both types of characters can be more or less recognized in today's society, so studying them can be useful for current social life. The article will analyze three typical types of intellectual characters:

intellectuals trained abroad, intellectuals trained domestically and foreign intellectuals in Vietnam.

## **2. Theoretical basis and research methods**

The French philosopher Louis de Bonald once said: "Literature is a social expression" (R. Wellek and A. Warren, 2009, p.159). Although there are many issues to discuss about this postulate, it is clear that literature is always associated with reality. Writers, through their works, generalize issues of social reality and the reality of the soul and thoughts, in order to convey a certain message. For prose, in addition to the narrator - often the embodiment of the author - the world of characters in the story is a means for the writer to convey his thoughts. The world of characters in Vu Trong Phung's works is very diverse, covering all social classes. The character of the intellectual is one of the elements that make up the author's unique features in contemporary realist literature.

To highlight the characteristics of the intellectual character, the writer uses sociological methods to illuminate the authenticity of the image as well as its social significance. Besides, there is the cultural method. Because the Vietnamese-French cultural fusion in the early 20th century had both positive and negative impacts on the Vietnamese lifestyle. Based on the cultural foundation to have a more complete view of the character. In addition, the author also applies the method of analysis - synthesis and comparison to see the depth as well as the unique features of the intellectual character.

## **3. Historical research**

As an excellent realist writer, Vu Trong Phung's works have been studied a lot. By 2020, there were dozens of master's and doctoral theses researching this writer, and there were also hundreds of articles written about him.

In the article *The representation of degenerate human beings in Vu Trong Phung's realist*

*novels*, Dinh Tri Dung highly appreciated the art of building many types of characters, in which Thanh Cong Nhan is a type of degenerate human character. He wrote: "Vu Trong Phung truly has a talent for observing and covering reality on a wide scale. The world of characters in his realist novels is truly rich and diverse". In *Literary Criticism - Commentary*, author Vu Tien Quynh mentioned the "process nature of characters" and considered it a prominent feature of the characters: "The characters in Vu Trong Phung's works all have changes in social status; From the beginning to the end of the work, no character ever stays in a certain position. Also in this work, author Truong Chinh pays attention to the typicality of the characters: "The characters in Vu Trong Phung's novels are highly individualized, diverse, rich in aesthetics, people pursuing personal desires". Tran Dang Thao in the book *Vu Trong Phung's Literary Specialties* published by Phuong Dong Publishing House in 2004, generalized social issues from the system of characters in Vu Trong Phung's novels. He said: "Vu Trong Phung's characters are first of all characters of the era. They are concrete people of flesh and blood, bathing in the concrete atmosphere of Vietnamese history at the time of the 1930s, they are the embodiment, the typical product of urban society under the brutal feudal colonial regime". The most comprehensive study of the world of characters in Vu Trong Phung's novels is the doctoral thesis "Characters in Vu Trong Phung's novels" in 1999 by Dinh Tri Dung. The author affirmed the richness and comprehensiveness of the characters' reality: "With Vu Trong Phung's novels, readers cannot forget his unique world of characters, a crowded world with all kinds of people, all kinds of faces, crowded, noisy, chaotic in the context of a society of ups and downs, crazy". Nguyen Manh Quynh has an article "Poetics of artistic words in Vu Trong Phung's works" examining the aspects of words, sentences, and some prominent techniques in building character. Dang Van Vu

has an article Crowd characters in novels “Dumb luck” and “The storm” by Vu Trong Phung, from a cultural perspective. Proceedings of the international conference on language, literature and culture education - Hanoi National University of Education 2. The article examines the type of crowd character from the perspective of traditional culture. Etc...

Thus, the issue of characters in his novels has been mentioned by many works, but there has been no research on the character of a pure intellectual.

#### **4. Research results**

##### ***4.1. The character of the young district chief of Cuc Lam***

If in the works of Nguyen Cong Hoan, Ngo Tat To, Nam Cao, the mandarins are often ignorant, greedy, cruel, and extremely cunning old foxes, Vu Trong Phung has successfully built the image of a young official, with a doctorate in Law in the most advanced educational system, France.

With a solid knowledge base and a spirit of serving justice, the district chief stood on the side of justice to protect the weak and powerless, specifically in this case, the family of the scholar Uan. Thi Mich, the daughter of the scholar, was raped by Nghi Hach, who filed a lawsuit with the district chief. Unlike Nghi Lai in Nguyen Cong Hoan's *The Last Duel*, who saw Pha carrying the lawsuit “like an ant seeing grease”, the district chief in Vu Trong Phung calmly studied the file and collected evidence from the press to handle it fairly. However, in a society where officials were mainly appointed by lobbying and bribing superiors, the young district chief's frank spirit was immediately eliminated from the system by the dark officials. First of all, we see that this was an official who was appointed based on his serious academic qualifications, not by lobbying. He was proud of that, and boldly replied to the Governor: “Yes, it is true that I have many thoughts that are not in line with the old regime. Your Honor,

but I did not personally lobby the district chief” (Phung T.V, 2016a, p. 51). Perhaps Vu Trong Phung built this character based on an idealistic spirit, in his dream. But in reality, before that, the French had opened schools teaching in French in Vietnam, sending many excellent students to France for training. When these people returned to Vietnam, they made great contributions to the modernization of Vietnam in terms of economy as well as social culture. The District Governor was a product of the most modern education system in the West at that time. With a Doctorate in Law, he had great confidence when he was appointed, and of course, he had no need to “lobby” in the current official recruitment mechanism. The statement: “Your Excellency, but I did not personally go to lobby the District Governor” was like a slap in the face to the Governor, who certainly knew his career path.

The most important quality of an official is integrity. There are many bases for integrity, but the spirit of dedication and service to justice is considered the most direct basis. Corruption and bribery of officials can be said to be traditional in our country. From folk literature to medieval literature, this situation has been mentioned a lot. The insatiable greed of officials in the feudal colonial regime was reflected quite richly in the 1930-1945 Critical Realist literature. In that dark picture, the bright integrity of the young District Chief Cuc Lam stands out. Originally a scoundrel, cunning and cunning in his relations with the mandarin class, facing the risk of having to pay for his crime, Nghi Hach sent a beautiful, clever girl to “negotiate” with the District Chief. And this is the result: “...I know that. That woman was very clever, but I cannot please you” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 48). “Not being able to please you (Nghi Hach)” means not accepting the “negotiation” of the “special envoy” of the notoriously cunning old Nghi. The District Chief was very different from the majority of officials at that time. Many people determined that being an official was to make

money, which is why there was a folk saying: “An official sees lawsuits like ants see grease”. But the District Chief was a rare official in An Nam who became an official to contribute to the “god of Justice” and not to exploit the people, to enrich himself: “If I intended to make money from you, I would have agreed to the woman you sent to negotiate the other day” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 48). Of course, the District Chief also knew Nghi Hac’s cunningness, if he did not please him, the District Chief would easily be harmed by him. Knowing this, but with the courage of an intellectual, he was not afraid of evil. That was the second most valuable quality of the District Chief of Cuc Lam.

Because he did not have the nature of accepting bribes, the District Chief went to work by horse-drawn carriage: “Then the District Chief changed the subject by telling the soldier: - Tell the coachman to bring the horse-drawn carriage out so I can go to the province! The soldier said yes and then retreated through the back door” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 48). That surprised Nghi Hac, so he said: “Your Excellency is so frugal, isn’t he? Why haven’t you bought a car yet?”. Buying a car was a fashionable trend among officials at that time. Becoming a District Chief was not difficult, however, as he said: “I don’t have as much money as other officials”. He didn’t have money because he didn’t earn money at all costs, didn’t exchange his dignity for money like many other officials in society. The District Chief’s attitude was very decisive, each matter had its own purpose: “The District Chief stood and thought for a moment, then smiled and said: - Because I need to go to the province early, I agree to take your car, that’s all. As for buying it back, no, even if you only leave it to me for a silver coin” [3, p. 49]. In this statement of the District Chief, we see two things. First, it shows the demeanor of a civilized person. That is, doing things properly, not being ambiguous like “Love each other, love the path/ Hate each other, hate the whole family” which

is a traditional quality of the Vietnamese people. The District Chief hated Nghi Hac very much, but he did not refuse his offer to ride in the same car with him. Second, the District Chief said he would not buy Nghi Hac’s car back even if he had a coin. This decisive attitude was very rare in the context of money dominating society at that time. Nowadays, we also see many officials “buying and selling” with their subordinates, but in reality, it is giving and receiving bribes. Therefore, that refusal shows the District Chief’s firm character of “poverty cannot be changed”. Looking at the current culture of resignation of officials, we see that the decisive attitude of an official from the early 20th century is worthy of our respect. First of all, the district chief boldly expressed his disappointment before his superior: “The district chief bowed his head for 15 minutes, then looked up and smiled faintly and said: - Your Excellency, I thought that if I became an official, I would be able to do something beneficial to the country and the people! Now that it is like this, I know that I was wrong...” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 51). In the clear mind of a true intellectual, the district chief thought that becoming an official was to serve the people, to make the country more and more progressive. He eagerly became an official to realize that dream. However, he was completely disappointed. Because he knew he was wrong, combined with the threat of the governor to exile him, he decisively submitted his resignation: “Your Excellency, the state does not need to transfer me to exile me!” Even if I don’t go to work, I won’t starve to death... Then please let me know that right now, right now, I would like to return the position of district chief to the State! Tomorrow, there will be a proper resignation letter from me” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 51). Resigning here is not because I feel I have not fulfilled my assigned duties, but because I am aware of the misery of the officialdom with its rampant corruption and bribery that has turned the god of justice into a farce for those with a good conscience to scorn. In



the history of our country, there have been many officials who were willing to “hang up their seals and resign”, such as Chu Van An, Nguyen Trai, Nguyen Binh Khiem, Nguyen Khuyen... They have become examples of integrity that will be remembered by posterity. Integrity is the third positive point of the Cuc Lam District Chief.

Integrity combined with a solid knowledge base helped the District Chief make a decisive decision, thanks to which he was ready to respond to the Governor’s arrogance and threats: “Sir, I’m not bragging, my teacher in the socialist party, if he comes to take up the position of governor, then it won’t be too late for me to become an official. And if I have to become an official, I won’t be a district official anymore... I promise you that in advance” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 52). Here, it’s not about relying on power to be arrogant, but letting the opponent know that he has a foothold to rise up, not to grovel to survive. And before the Governor’s accusation of being “stubborn”, the District Chief was straightforward: “Sir, it’s not stubborn! We understand, because we’ve been district chiefs for a year... Okay, sir, if you say it’s wrong, then it’s wrong. I don’t need to argue, because I’ve already resigned. Let me open a law office and a press agency in Western characters, then I will respond to you and the current mandarin system. You, when people are not uneducated, they can do whatever they want” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 48). The power of the universe cannot be defeated, we often see the subservient attitude of lower-level officials towards higher-level officials in feudal society, and even in today’s society, but for the District Chief of Cuc Chau, he never submits to the power of the superior. That is the attitude of a righteous and noble person that a true intellectual official should have. However, in the context of Vietnamese officials being mere lackeys of the French colonialists, people like Cuc Lam district chief could hardly keep their positions. Therefore, his resignation was inevitable. That was the

author’s sorrow hidden behind the character’s seemingly indifferent tone.

Perhaps the character of the District Chief with Vu Trong Phung’s idealistic nature dreams of a good mandarin system to create a good society according to his wishes. But in any era, in any social regime, there are always good people and bad people, there are always good officials next to many bad officials. That shows that Vu Trong Phung’s perspective is not biased, always respecting the truth. And thanks to that, it creates the realistic value of Vu Trong Phung’s novels.

#### ***4.2. French provincial official***

Because the French colonialists invaded our country, imposed domination on our people, and plundered our country’s resources... in the minds of many Vietnamese people at that time, the French were evil and cruel. Critical realist literature, for some reason, rarely creates French characters, if any, only in passing and rarely portrays them as typical images. Vu Trong Phung was different. He not only created images of evil French officials like those in the novel *So Do*, but also helped identify readers officials who always fulfill their duties well.

The author’s sympathy for the French Consul is shown right in the way he describes this character: “Tonight, sitting at work, the official’s feet were in black leather shoes, his neck was wrapped in a thick official scarf, with bristling sheep’s wool covering his chin. The mandarin’s three-stranded silver beard and shiny bald forehead made him look very majestic and imposing” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 29). Dignity and majesty are the necessary appearance of an official. Because that is the external sign of a resolute personality and inner strength. A leisurely and composed attitude is a sign of steadfastness and intellectual strength. That external appearance is quite consistent with the internal character and qualities. Before describing the character of the Consul, Vu Trong Phung, using the narrator’s language, helped readers have a general view of

this person: “The mandarin is an old man, who has been in the colony for over thirty years, who has won the hearts of the people not because of a false policy, not because of his loud and empty speeches, not because he has used crocodile tears to deceive and deceive the ignorant people, but because he is a very rare gentlemanly person in the world” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 29). This information shows that the mandarin was a long-time resident of Annam. That association helped him deeply understand the Vietnamese people and the country of Vietnam, which was an important condition for him to outline his governing policy. However, his “governance” was not for his own personal gain or for his country France, but mainly for the peace of the people. That was an important factor for him to “win the hearts of the people”. “Win the hearts of the people”, those three words are simple but it was an extremely difficult problem for an official. Even for Vietnamese officials, it was difficult to win the hearts of the people because of the officialdom restricted transparency, because of the concept that “when one person becomes an official, the whole family benefits”. The envoy was a Frenchman who came to rule a colonial nation, but he did not follow the usual practice of an official from the mother country “bringing civilization to the barbarians” with “false policies, loud and empty speeches, crocodile tears”. That is because he became an official with the heart of an intellectual who loved to read and write. It was that humane person that made him unable to live a lie, even with people of other ethnicities. He escaped from narrow-minded selfishness to become a human being, serving humanity.

It was fortunate for the people in the province to have such a good and benevolent mandarin: “The mandarin’s benevolence has almost become a proverb that has been passed down. Intellectuals, even skeptical journalists, had to admit that he was a rare person, having lived in the colony for half his life, but still maintaining very broad concepts of personal freedom, still expressing

the respectable spirit of the French intellectual class, without being infected with the character of the colonialists with batons” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 30). Author Vu Trong Phung, through the narrator, continued to praise the Consul in terms of benevolence, especially the “personal freedom” that he had absorbed from the individual consciousness formed very early in Western civilization. Respecting personal freedom, even though he was a high-ranking mandarin, he still behaved very friendly and approachable, not arrogant or domineering. Vu Trong Phung recounted a small detail that highlighted the friendly and gentle attitude of the Consul: “One day, there was something to do at the wire house, so the Consul just walked and walked like a normal Westerner. Passing a street, there was a private school, a group of children were playing soccer, causing the ball to hit the Consul’s chest. A large mud stain was imprinted on the lapel of his shirt, where the Big Dipper medallion was, the Consul entered the school. The private school’s principal was scared pale like everyone else would be scared in such a situation. But the Consul leisurely took a cotton towel to dust off his shirt, washed his hands in a basin of water, and then calmly told the principal: “You have to tell your students to go to the grass field next to the market to play soccer, because playing sports in the middle of the street like that will cause traffic accidents.” Then the consul left, his face still gentle, as if nothing had happened” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 31). A small detail, but shows the “greatness” in his behavior coming from his modesty as well as his benevolent tolerance.

The most difficult thing about being an official is to maintain the balance of justice. The envoy not only had very friendly actions and gestures towards children, he was also someone who always defended the poor in society. This is how he treated the woman who was catching crabs and snails: “Another time, the official’s car had just returned from the capital, the driver was driving

around to enter the embassy yard, when a country woman holding a petition came and knelt right in front of the car. The soldiers in green clothes were about to raise their rattan canes, but the envoy signaled to stop and asked... “Is your petition clear?” The woman complained for a while, then the envoy said: “Okay, just go back and I will judge” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 32). Just the act of stopping the soldiers in green clothes from beating the country woman who dared to block the official’s car showed that the official was someone who did not see himself as a superior to have a spirit of equality between people. That makes the mandarin’s stature appear higher in the eyes of everyone. It is common practice that when you appear tall in front of others, others will see you as small; and vice versa, the more humble you are, the more people will see you as great. Vietnamese people have a saying “big fish swallow small fish”, often the weak and the weak are always bullied by the big guys. The feudal system in Vietnam is the factor that creates this bad habit. The French ambassador was not like that, he was willing to stand up to defend the woman who was catching crabs and snails from the bullying of the village elders: “The reason was that a woman went to catch crabs and snails, and was punished by the village because she was pregnant before her husband’s funeral. According to the petition, she was tortured by a group of village elders who used bad customs to torture her, but in fact, she had finished mourning a few months before she became pregnant” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 32). Carefully considering to make the right decisions to avoid injustice is the duty of those holding the scales of justice. Thanks to that, the mandarin wrote a letter in response to that crab-hunting woman: “Madam, I have considered your petition. If you are still in mourning for him, then according to Gia Long law, being pregnant like that is a mistake. But if you have finished mourning, no one is allowed to punish you. If you can find enough evidence that you have finished mourning, then go to court and

present it, I will punish those who are corrupt” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 33). Strict superiors will be able to control corrupt subordinates. Of course, to control subordinates, superiors must not accept bribes, because “if the superiors are not righteous, the subordinates will be in chaos”. The provincial governor was very honest and fair, so the governor, the district chief, and the district chief “frowned,” and the village elders were “scared to death”: “A letter from a provincial governor with such a polite tone toward a crab-hunting woman made the governor, the district chief, and the district chief frown. Then the village elders were scared to death and had to pay the penalty. These two stories are enough evidence that the provincial governor, Nghi Hach, at that time, was such an easy-going person” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 34). Compared to the shouting tone of Nghi Que and Nghi Lai with Ms Dau and Mr Pha; we appreciate the “polite tone” of the provincial governor even more. This was definitely a mandarin who was well-trained in civilized France, and of course he was not infected with the “colonialist baton habit” of the governing reality in colonial countries. Humble, modest, and defending the common people, he was also resolute and strict in punishing the officials who oppressed the people. Thanks to that, he was always loved by the people.

Another way of behaving shows that the mandarin is not a person who works mechanically, does not wait for people to show signs of weakness to punish them for profit, but he always has a flexible way of behaving, beneficial to the people: “I know! I know... You should have been arrested immediately. But the government is also willing to forgive those who know how to admit their mistakes and repent. So now I will sign a temporary release for you. From today, you must expel an extra student, and then prepare to appear in court tomorrow. That is enough of a privilege. If I were the government, I would not prosecute you. But I am only a person who enforces the law, and cannot arbitrarily go against the whole



regime” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 67). If compared to Nguyen Cong Hoan’s Nghi Lai who incited Pha to sue to take over eight fields, pushing him into a situation of family ruin, then the mandarin’s way of handling things is truly admirable. Under the pen of Vu Trong Phung, the mandarin appears in a comprehensive way. If Vietnamese officials, in addition to work time, spend a lot of time partying, having fun, and drinking; then the mandarin: “In addition to the hours of being busy with governing, the mandarin often reads books and writes. Because he is very good at Chinese, he has published a research book on the use of troops by Tran Hung Dao. Therefore, the mandarin speaks Annamese fluently and is easy to listen to” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 29). Reading books and writing are the work of literati. Although he is busy with a thousand things as a provincial mandarin, he still spends time reading books. Even more, he composes and researches to publish books. It can be said that this detail has helped readers visualize an ideal mandarin. By building a good character of the mandarin, Vu Trong Phung has determined his own position, not mixed with the critical realist writers of the same period. His perspective truly represents progress in terms of ideology. Not falling into narrow nationalist ideology, not being influenced by prejudice, not being rigid in the issue of humanism, Vu Trong Phung is the first writer to successfully portray a person representing the foreign invaders but not as evil and cruel as we often see in the literature of the same period and later. However, the French imposed their domination on our people for hundreds of years. Many greedy and cruel French officials were deeply ingrained in the Vietnamese subconscious, so the image of the French consul still could not overcome the hatred for the invaders.

#### **4.3 Character Tu Anh**

Tu Anh has a rather complicated background, living in Nghi Hach’s family, but he did not follow his father’s business but became a teacher, holding

the position of “director of Dai Viet school”. Tu Anh is the only bright spot in Nghi Hach’s “dark” family.

Like many other characters, Vu Trong Phung paid little attention to describing the appearance of the character Tu Anh, he only used a few sketches: “He was a small, fair-skinned, very handsome man” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 27). “The scholar ran out and saw a young man, whose face and demeanor appeared to be very polite, but he did not understand what was going on, he just stood there looking, stuttering, wanting to ask but his tongue was tied” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 118). The author only described “his face and demeanor appeared to be very polite”, but the reader already had a good picture of this character.

Tu Anh is a member of Nghi Hach’s family. If Nghi Hach is the embodiment of evil, then Tu Anh is the “witch” who restrains the rampage of that evil. As a person working in the field of education, Tu Anh has always been a thoughtful, profound young man who respects reason. When he learned about Nghi Hach raping Thi Mich, Tu Anh immediately went to see him to scold him: “No, sir! People have told the truth! Because in addition to the journalist’s investigation, there is also my investigation, your son! After that nonsense, you also sent the prostitute Lan back, intending to bribe the district chief, but you failed. Do you know that many people hate you? If you want to disown me, then please disown me, but let me say a few words! I can’t hold it in anymore” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 28). Before condemning his father, Tu Anh had conducted her own investigation. That caution was the basis for him to be able to make his father unable to deny. Both raping and bribing the district magistrate of the old man Nghi made Tu Anh “unable to bear it”. The Vietnamese have a saying “brothers are like arms and legs, when torn, they cover up, when bad, they help each other”, so there is often a tendency for people in the family to cover up and cover up each other’s bad habits

in their relationships with outsiders. Not following that custom, Tu Anh did not, because of their father-son relationship (at this time, neither Tu Anh nor Nghi Hach knew the truth about father and son), condone his vile father. That shows that he is both an upright person and has the progressive thinking of an educated young man.

Progress is that, although he is indebted to his father, he does not therefore become an accomplice to his father's crimes. He frankly says: "Sir, you are my father, I always remember that. I owe you a lot, but you have done many despicable things. You gave birth to me, so you have the right to let me live or let me die... Sir, please let me die. Please kill me" (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 28). The clear distinction between emotion and reason, between gratitude and respect for justice makes Tu Anh react very strongly to Nghi Hach: "Sir, please let me die. Please kill me". The father has smeared ashes and chaff on his son, so the son is so ashamed that he is willing to die. Of course, that is just a strong reaction in Tu Anh's anger, but it shows the good conscience of this character. Of course, that was just Tu Anh's strong reaction in anger, but it showed the clear conscience of this character. Vietnamese culture highly values the word "filial piety", clearly opposing the person who gave birth to her, Tu Anh was not without inner turmoil. But with her honest nature, Tu Anh stood on the side of justice.

Not only condemning his father, Tu Anh took action to resolve the consequences by forcing Nghi Hach to marry Miss Mich as a concubine. He told Long: "Why did I object? It was me, I forced my father to act like that, to make up for his recklessness, it was not what my father wanted!" (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 54). Tu Anh "punished" his father thoroughly because he wanted to force him to correct his recklessness. And further, he knew very well that Nghi Hach would use money to bend the scales of justice. Country folk like Mr. Uan could hardly win against a rich man like

his father, especially in the context of justice in today's society like a clown. His attitude was very decisive and clear. When hearing Long say that Mr. Nghi did not need to marry Miss Mich, he only needed to pay the money, Tu Anh sternly replied: "Teacher, don't talk nonsense! The virginity of a girl, even a stupid country girl, is still very precious. If the old man had broken her virginity, he must have married her. And married her properly, not bought her to be a servant like others. !" (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 54). The Vietnamese people highly value virginity, virginity is a very important issue for girls, so Nghi Hach "breaking" Miss Mich's virginity was a terrible crime. Miss Mich, who had lost her virginity, would have a hard time getting married, and if she did get married, she would be looked down upon by her husband. Understanding that, Tu Anh had to step in to save her by forcing her father to marry her, and marry her properly, not bought her to be a servant like others. Although he belonged to the upper class, he did not look down on the country people, but more than that, he respected them very much. It proved that Tu Anh was a Western-educated boy but still respected the culture and traditional morality of the nation. He also always had a spirit of equality, charity and progress in the unjust society of that time.

To carry out justice, Tu Anh went all the way to Quynh Thon village to meet the scholar Uan to "settle the consequences". Even though he was in a poor countryside, at the house of a commoner, Tu Anh still had a very humble and polite attitude: "- Greetings, sir. Please forgive me, are you really the scholar Uan?"- Sir, please don't be afraid. I am not a government official, not a spy of the governor, nor a spy of the district magistrate, here to investigate you or this village... Please let me into your house" (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 118). Tu Anh knew that the mentality of the countryside people was that when someone dressed a little more luxuriously, they would show fear, so he reassured the old man so that he could calm down. When the old man calmed down, Tu Anh spoke

slowly: “Yes, I am that man’s son. But I am not like that man, I do not defend that man, even though he is my father. The obvious evidence is that I came all the way here to make amends for a mistake my father made. My father harmed you and your children, both physically and mentally. I don’t want to repeat your suffering, which hurts you and me” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 119). Tu Anh’s words were full of goodwill, he analyzed the pros and cons to convince the victim’s father. That showed his sincerity in compensating the scholar and his children. A high sense of responsibility combined with tact in dealings helped Tu Anh bring justice to the weak and powerless.

In addition to being a good citizen, Tu Anh is also a good brother in the family. To his spoiled younger brother Van, who spends all day talking about opium, Tu Anh sincerely advised: “Okay, if you suspect me, then from now on don’t suspect me anymore, and if you don’t suspect me, then don’t. You should also reform, stop hanging around like that, stop going from one shop to another” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 60). Some people think that Tu Anh just wants Van to stop slandering Nghi Hac, stop providing unfavorable information about her father to reporters, so she shows concern and worry for her brother but in fact does not love him. However, a person who is willing to do his best to bring justice to strangers, how can he not care about his relatives? Dialectically, if he cannot “manage his family”, he cannot “govern the country”; if he does not love his family, he cannot love outsiders.

Tu Anh is also very complete in his friendships. Even though he is the boss, he treats his employee Long with utmost respect and harmony. Long is Mich’s lover. Mich was raped by Nghi Hac, Long was very hurt. He was even more hurt when he learned that Nghi Hac would marry Mich under Tu Anh’s arrangement, so he was depressed and went to the opium shop. Tu Anh went there to confide in Long: “I know very well, I know very

well, Mr. Long. If not, why would I go all the way to find you in a place where if I went, it would harm my honor like this? I dare to boast that in this world, I understand you better than anyone else, and you should also be proud that I am your best friend in life, if you think that is something to be proud of” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 125). For her friend, Tu Anh was willing to go to a place that was very “harmful to the honor” of decent people. Tu Anh puts friendship above honor because he thinks that honor is not enough to save a friend who is falling into despair. He uses all his sincerity and kind words to advise his friend. His advice follows the logic of psychology. First, he praises Long: “I don’t mean to flatter you, I have always loved you very much. I see that although you are poor, you are ambitious, self-respecting, have a personality of the upper class, and have thoughts, so in my heart I still want that from the position of an employer and an employee. From the place of needing to use each other to do worldly things, I want us to become closer, just to do worldly things! If I am still like that, unfortunately, bad things will happen...” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 125). Arousing a confident and close-knit mentality, Tu Anh brings out the “law of life” to comfort him: “Why should I be angry with myself and resent life? Life is like that, there is always something that happens, making us happy turn into suffering, or suffering makes us suffer even more than before... Everyone suffers from the same fate, not just me, so I want to advise you to be brave and fight against life” (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 125). Tu Anh comes here as a philosopher using quite sharp reasoning and solid arguments to convince his friend. His words of advice are full of intelligence, good thinking ability, solid philosophical foundation; proving that he is a real intellectual, not a fool like Mr. Van Minh or Tu Tan in So Do.

As the principal of a private school and the son of a capitalist, Tu Anh did not indulge in debauchery with brothels and gambling dens like many rich people in Hanoi at that time. That was because

he was very aware of its harmful effects. He said: "... Obscene literature and books, obscene films, obscene theaters, obscene pictures, dance halls, tattoo parlors, rickshaw drivers who told him to take the virginity of all kinds of women for five or three coins, obscene music, increasingly obscene clothing trends, in short, how many things push people into the cycle of immorality! Do you see that we are drowning up to our necks in that muddy swamp of obscenity? (Phung T. V, 2016a, p. 126). Being close to the mud but not tainted by its smell, that can be said of Tu Anh. Staying away from the temptations of lust and the brown fairy helped Tu Anh stand firm in his position as the Principal of a Dai Viet school. It can be said that the character Tu Anh is a convergence of all the good qualities of an intellectual with correct ideals, a serious lifestyle, a high sense of responsibility, compassion and a sense of justice.

### 5. Conclusion

Vu Trong Phung's writing tends to satirize and criticize the reality of Vietnamese society in the early 20th century with many evils and vulgarities, so his characters are mostly negative. But no matter how evil a society is, there are positive things. No matter how bad a mandarin system is, there are positive officials. Vu Trong Phung has nine novels, but only three of them have built the character of an official who was a true intellectual. It is this intellectual quality that is the foundation for his officialdom to be "honest and fair", always standing on the side of justice, implementing justice strictly, they are "rich and noble cannot be corrupted, poor and humble cannot be moved, mighty and powerful cannot be subdued", always defending the weak and voiceless people who are oppressed by tyrants and tyrants. They always

live with meaning, love and integrity. They are bright spots in the dark sky of the mandarin class as well as the semi-colonial, semi-feudal society of Vietnam. The character of the intellectual also shows the comprehensive and progressive realistic pen of Vu Trong Phung in the realistic literature of the early 20th century.

### REFERENCES

- An L. N (1992). Vu Trong Phung - talent and truth. Writers Association Publishing House.
- Phung T. V. (2015). Short story collection. Literature Publishing House.
- Phung T. V. (2016a). Storm. Broken dike. Literature Publishing House.
- Phung T. V. (2016b). Lucky number. Literature Publishing House, Hanoi.
- Phung T. V. (2019). Prostitution. Literature Publishing House, Hanoi.
- Phung T. V. Winning the jackpot. Website: vietmessenger.com
- Luu P. (Editor-in-Chief), (2006), Literary theory. Education Publishing House.
- Ta H. T (1999). Writer Vu Trong Phung with us. Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House.
- Uyen T. K. (2018). Modernism in the works of Vu Trong Phung. Ho Chi Minh City Publishing House.
- R. Wellek and A. Warren (2009) (translated by Nguyen Manh Cuong). Literary Theory. Literature Publishing House.
- Ronathan Culler (2020) (translated by Pham Phuong Chi). Introduction to Literary Theory. Writers Association Publishing House.