

## HUMAN SELF AND ECOLOGICAL SELF THROUGH THE SORROW OF WAR AND THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper examines the soldier's self through two typical works of Vietnam War literature, The Sorrow of War by Bao Ninh and The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien, in two aspects: human self and ecological one. The human selves which are influenced by the different ideological paradigms between the East and the West regulates the different selves between Vietnamese soldiers and American soldiers. The ecological self which is influenced by the common ecological environment reflects the resemblance between the soldiers, or from another perspective, between human beings and the ecosystem.*

**Keywords:** *the self, Vietnam War, human self, ecological self, The Sorrow of War, The Things They Carried.*

### Introduction

The self is Western's political issue, stemmed from Ancient Greece. This paper has no intention of delving into the concept of the self, it uses this definition to analyze inner human aspects related to "humanity" and "ecology". This combination comes from the following things:

Firstly, "the self" is a multistage concept and interdisciplinary, from philosophy, religion, biochemistry, culture to psychology. Character analysis from the self opens up a variety of possible paths. In this paper, we consider from two aspects: humanity and ecology.

Secondly, the real meaning of "the self" refers to an individual existence, and this existence is divided into two forms: "existentialism" and "ideal existence" – because man not only presents like tree, or fish, but also bases on faith, religion, dream, hope and so on – so character analysis from the aspect of the self not only clarifies his existence with characters embodied in works, but also mentions the contradiction between these types of existence, between "what is" and "what should be" in relationship between societies and the environment. And then, "the self" is generalized and multidimensional.

Finally, exploiting characters from the self perspective research (the works written about the Vietnam War) is an interdisciplinary approach to history: the history of war in works of fiction is not wholly fictitious, it is a spiritual history, microhistory. That kind of

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history is not unbearable when asking the question: In the war, what measures are essential for human existence?

In light of this, in addition to common usages of the Vietnam War in literature (such as prosody, narration, historicism - humanism, and so on.), the article has a suggestion of accessing to the Vietnam War literature from the self, in the combination between two views - a work of Vietnam and a work of "the other side" written about The Vietnam War.

#### **1. The self or the difference between two perspectives on war**

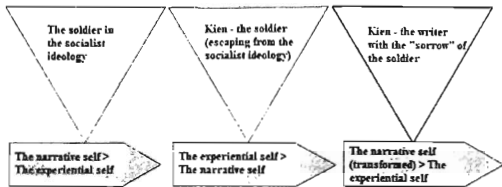
Humanities are vital issues that keep different cultures and races from sharing a common measure of moral conduct. For example, people can argue about the legitimacy of Japanese surprise raid at Pearl Harbor during World War II, but everyone agreed that bombing hospital is inhumane. Measuring humanism can be unique to each nation, but it is also common to human beings.

When considering the self, Yuval Noah Harari in *Homo Deus* proved the existence of two types of the self in a man: *experiential self* and *narrative self*. In particular, the experimental self is the living moments of the subject before the event, and the narrative one is the way that "I" recount my experience, though it may not like the feeling that I experienced. Take him as an example, "In most cultures, childbirth is narrated as a wonderful experience rather than as a trauma" (Harari, 2016, p. 297), because reproductive maintenance is the way human beings exist, so instead of retelling the painful feelings of childbirth, they choose to talk about the good meaning of motherhood, the sacredness of the birth.

Using that argument in The Vietnam War, we found that this made a good contribution to explain the difference in the attitude of the Vietnam - US war.

#### ***From narrative self...***

*The Sorrow of War* written by Bao Ninh is the most representative work about the Vietnam War in modern literature. From the self perspective, Kien is a character who poses many problems with the soldier's existential value in the internal conflict between reality and ideals, in other words, between the real experience of war and how he chooses to tell it. Before Bao Ninh, the war perspective in Vietnamese literature was consistent because it was subject to the socialist humanism system: praising the revolutionary ideology, promoting the hero's characters. Setting up the "sorrow" of the soldier broke that epic voice and created a conflict between the experiential self (Kien as a soldier) and the narrative one (Kien as the author). It is possible to imagine the process of developing the soldier's self in Vietnam War literature until the *The Sorrow of War* has introduced through the following outline:



*Figure 1. The process of the soldier's self in Vietnam War literature (until the "The Sorrow of War")*

Because of the domination of national ideals, soldiers in Vietnamese literature in the past let the narrative self overwhelm the experiential self, in other words, they believed in the ideal that the story is told from this generation to others (that deaths are worthwhile because the war is legitimate) rather than raised mental trauma. When Kien became famous as a soldier with sadness, painful experiences in the post-war with traumatic "ego" seemed to have escaped the illusion of the ideal story told. But that led to another tragedy when Kien acted as a writer looking back on his story: Kien awoke from the illusion of war, but he could not escape it:

"My life seems little difference from that of sampan pushed upstream towards the past" (Bao Ninh, 1998, p. 44)

That why he chose to become a writer, wrote down, and when he finished writing, he wanted to burn his manuscript, but the manuscript was "unburnt". Yuval N. Harari gave a profound illustration of this non-escape psychological phenomenon: A poor peasant who sacrifices a bull for Jupiter believes that Jupiter is real, and one day he discovers the "uselessness" of god in carrying out his prayers, he continues to sacrifice one more bull, one more, and more, because he does not want to admit that all the bulls that had been sacrificed before were useless. Many great appreciation of *The Sorrow of War* often focuses on the "escape" of the soldier in a pattern to deeply enter the soldier's personal character. It is not easy like that. Kien's tragedy does not stop at disillusionment when he wakes up from the illusion of war, and when he is awake, he still uses the atmosphere of story to tell the story because of the kind of these stories. He is stuck in the past, obsessed with the past experience. On the other hand, he also clinged to that past, as a way to made sense for his present and future (if not, what does life mean? As the peasant sacrifices all bulls because he does not to accept the meaning of the sacrificial past):

"The tragedies of the war years have bequeathed to my soul the spiritual strength that allows me to escape the infinite present" (Bao Ninh, 1998, p. 44)

"It was necessary to write about the war, to touch readers' hearts [...], to bring to life the electric moments, to let them, in the reading and the telling, feel they were there, in the past, with the author" (Bao Ninh, 1998, p. 53)

"He believed he had been born again, and the bitterness of his recent post-war years faded. Born again into the pre-war years, to resurrect the deep past within him, and this would continue until he had relived a succession of his life and times; the first new life was to be that of his distant past" (Bao Ninh, 1998, p. 83)

From this perspective, Kien is a new character belonging to an old story. In other words, the soldier's self is Kien, in the end, just a kind of "transformation" of the narrative self as the previous soldiers. "Sorrow" is still in that aspect, therefore, the sorrow becomes bigger and more intense.

*...to experiential self and further*

Unlike the social humanism that defines the voice of the narrative self must be greater than the experiential one, liberal humanism has paved the way for the superior presentation of the experiential self in soldiers' imagine. This clearly shows in the way soldiers define war through the short story - "*How to Tell a True War Story*" - from "*The Things They Carried*" written by Tim O'Brien:

"True war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis" (Tim O'Brien, 2009, p. 74)

"[A] true war story is never about war" (Tim O'Brien, 2009, p. 81)

Because war is not a "generalization", it goes into small things but it makes the soldiers' character - what the writer calls "things". There are two types of "*things*" that Alpha platoon soldiers usually carry on their march (the short story "*The Things They Carried*"). The first are small "*things*" such as watches, mosquito repellent, cigarettes, lighters, candy, needles, brushes, condoms, opium, tranquilizers, The Bible, photographs, correspondence and so on... through them, we can imagine the internal life of each soldier: Jimmy Cross's passionate love with his girlfriend through the picture he always carries with him, Henry Dobbins's spiritual sentiment when he always wraps the feet of the lover around his neck for luck, Kiowa is a sincere about Christian when he always carries the New Testament book. It is the history of small things, micro-history, of infantry soldiers that are not only depicted in appearance but also visualized by the things they carry. The second are intangible "*things*": shame and nonsense. Behind the soldiers of this Alpha platoon, there is no ideal story; they enter the battlefield because of feeling "embarrassment" without applying, and they fight because they are programmed, not because of its mean:

"no volition, no will, because it was automatic, it was anatomy, and the war was entirely a matter of posture and carriage, the hump was everything" (Tim O'Brien, 2009, p.14)

Therefore, war "is never about war", in others exactly words, it is about how ordinary (not hero) soldiers live and experience war.

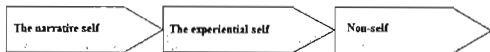
Tim O'Brien goes even further by questioning the credibility of soldier's experience through the way writers structure their stories. His story's set is very unique, is styled: the following story negates the previous story. Although they are independent short stories in the same series, they are actually intertwined with the other story by interpreting and

negating. For example, the character "I" in "The Man I Killed" meticulously told about the crime of killing a Vietnamese person in My Khe village caused by "me", the same fame work is told in another short story, "Good Form", "I" deny that "confession", reaffirm:

"I did not kill him. But I was present [...] I blamed myself. And rightly so, because I was present. But listen. Even that story is made up" (Tim O'Brien, 2009, p. 171)

This writing confuses the reader, they are not able to know what the American soldier finally did, and how to judge him... That's how the writer breaks the tradition rule of writing history, with a look non-historical, it is non-essential of the soldier<sup>1</sup>.

*The Things They Carried* written by Tim O'Brien is the most representative of American modern literature written about the Vietnam War, it can be said that this work has the same position as *The Sorrow of War* in Vietnamese literature. This work deserves to be a typical representation of the American perspective on the war. From this work, it is possible to imagine the direction of depicting the soldier's self in the American works about the Vietnam War through the following diagram (the arrow direction is the development process):



**Figure 2.** The process of the soldier's self in the American works about the Vietnam War

Therefore, depending on the regulation of thinking system, the image of soldiers is exploited differently, from the self point of view: If the social humanism thinking upholds the narrative self, the image of soldiers have to carry revolutionary heroic qualities, or a soldier who has a "sad" experience cannot escape that way of telling stories traditionally, so humanism who always hightens individual than the community has portrayed the soldier as the experiential self in micro history, or it has broken the historical rule of the soldier's self in an extreme way, meaning the non-self, as a way of condemning war.

## 2. Ecological self, or the similarity between two perspectives on war

While the human self enters into the relationship between people themselves and people with culture and history, the ecological self enters into the relationship between people and the natural environment. While the human self emphasizes the difference between soldiers on this side and the other because of the dominance of social system, the ecological self is known as the similar ponits between them, for two reasons:

Firstly, the war breaks down the notion of "human centralism", arouses the natural nature that is associated with human nature, which we call *ecological self*.

<sup>1</sup> In the contemporary era, this style of concept and writing more developed. Winston Groom's "Forrest Gump" is a good example. Forrest Gump is a kind of "idiot savant", with talents for sports, music, and physics, but he is unconscious with every event happens around him. Forrest went into the Vietnam War with this mindless attitude. While America is proud of its historical story, which refers to the truth of civilization and democracy .. when conducting wars with Indians, Mexican, Vietnamese and Iraqi, Forrest Gump went through that stream of history with the role of an unconscious idiot. Because he is an idiot, he has no prejudice, no comments, no stories to tell, and no experience left behind. It is a type of counter-historical character, which is also non-self. The author used this type of character to disrupt the remaining consciousness of about war of the soldier's self.

Secondly, the ecological self is exploited strongly in a special space, also a special battlefield in the Vietnam War: forest space. In the forest, there is no boundary line between this side and the other side, it means that the forest is an ecological region with the capable of erasing the difference (in terms of race, civilization, social morality, history and so on.), bringing soldiers (both sides) back to his self.

### *Establish ecological rules*

Since the agricultural revolution, people have gradually forgotten how to live with nature. The war paid them back to the starting point: the soldier who wanted to survive in the forest had to obey the forest's principle, find food (they had to learn about the species of poisonous mushrooms, change vegetables by alternative plants) to avoid the danger (they have to distinguish where the dangerous animal's footsteps are to avoid, and use the footprints to improve their meals), to win the enemy (they must know where booby traps are, or "smell" enemy's scout). Different from hunting and gathering period, when their ancestors existed between nature! In the forest, whether Vietnamese or American soldiers, they all share the same starting point:

"...a human being's duty on this earth is to live, not to kill. Taste all manner of life" (Bao Ninh, 1998, p. 55)

"[A]fter seven months in the bush I realized that those high, civilized trappings had somehow been crushed under the weight of the simple daily realities" (Tim O'Brien, 2009, p. 190)

The forest not only creates the way of life, but also erases all boundaries of hatred: between this side and the other one, between life and death, by containing a great deal of ghosts. Manes are always present in the forest (regardless of the manes of people or manes of object), not only because of the darkness of the forest that fits the "ghost" story, but also because it exists in an other life form - leave the burden of body who wears with both civilization and prejudice - they become "indistinct" from each other and nature. That is the reason why most of the Vietnam War works often talk about the forest space as a special match of soldier's character, and present the catastrophe of war

That is how Bao Ninh wrote about the forest: about the land of Goi Hon, about the hairy gibbon that was shot and killed, and when this gibbon was shaved its fur, a woman was revealed; about the black soldiers who do not play the procession of lights in the forest; about the howl wild in the rainy days - all the elements that belong to the forest and belong to the people - refer to the same war:

"The rumours and the predictions were all seen as warnings of an approaching calamity, horrible and bloody" (Bao Ninh, 1998, p.11)

That was the way Tim O'Brien wrote about the soldier's death: the soldier played in the sun-lush forest, under giant trees, and when death came, it was mysterious and beautiful, as if the death known as the cause as well as the reward for the soldier so that man could be one with the forest:

"There was a noise, I suppose, which must've been the detonator [...] Lemon step from the shade into bright sunlight [...], and when he died it was almost beautiful, the way the sunlight came around him and lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree full of moss and vines and white blossoms" (Tim O'Brien, 2009, p.67)

It seems that human beings nature in combination with nature in is intentionally exploited and used.

While *The Things They Carried* brought a strange story about this kind of self-mixing: Mary Anne (the story "*Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong*") is the mistress of a soldier on the Vietnamese match. The long time living in the forest with lover transformed from an American girl who is unfamiliar with the war into an empathetic person and passionate about both war and indigenous "savage" culture. She left her lover and the battle at the edge of the forest to disappear in the mystery of the deep forest. Perhaps, the author wants to depict the depravity and corruption of American identity when bogged down in the Vietnam War? And is Mary's act of renouncing the American identity to stay forever with the forest a way to condemn prejudices from colonial civilization, condemn war? Or from an ecological point of view, the author wants to affirm the contrast between the ecological self which is inherent in man and that "civilized" nature?

### *Establish ecological psychology*

How to exploit the forest space, on the one hand it helps to erase the boundaries that the civilized world creates itself (as analyzed above); on the other hand, it breaks down the position of people who believe themselves center evaluate again from the "human" aspect. The paradox is that when people are at the center of life forms, people often do not understand themselves (illusions about themselves), and when the central nature is faded, they are able to go deep into their sou. And this is a way to let the natural world reflect people (rather than the common sense that people reflect on nature, in the way "how could it be cheerful when one was in grief").

Therefore, naturally, when the soldier in the *The Sorrow of War* looked and listened to the persistent sound of the rain, they suddenly realized the boredom of the battle scene:

"The rain had kept pounding, day after day [...] if one stared hard and long into the dark, grey, wet-season sky, or listened to the rain falling on the canvas canopies, one thought only of war and fighting, fighting and war" – "Oh, this is war without end" (Bao Ninh, 1998, p.12-13)

Or the rain falls "in sync" with the love of the people who are longing for love on the one side of the land Goi Hon and the other side of the valley:

"The shadows slipped quietly into the stream and headed, in teeming rain, towards the great dark mountain" (Bao Ninh, 1998, p.25)

More mysteriously, Tim O'Brien showed the life of the forest that shapes human thinking. That happens when an American patrol performed the eavesdropping mission in the forest, what they heard was:

"They hear this terrific mama-san soprano. Then after a while they hear gook opera and a glee club and the Haiphong Boys Choirs [...] All these difference voices. Not human voices, though. Because it's the mountains [...] The rock – it's *talking*. And the fog, too, [...] The trees talk politics, the monkeys talk religion. The whole country, Vietnam. The place talks" (Tim O'Brien, 2009, p.71)

Since that moment, the soldier defined that war was "what happened" and "what seemed to happen", in other words, it was an objective event and how we think about it - anyway it is the truth, including ghosts living in soldier's mind or the voices of deep forests.

Only immersed in the war, strained all the senses and intuition, the new soldier can listen to that voice, so that he can refer to his situation, to understand himself, his teammates and his enemies. We call it *the ecological self*: the self of nature, the self of human from a natural point of view, and the mixture of the natural being and the human being.

### Conclusion

In the current interdisciplinary research context, exploiting the subject of war in literature opens many opportunities for researchers. This paper tries to use many different perspectives on war works, such as the direction of literature - history, literature - society and literature - ecology, to clarify a problem: the soldier's self. The self is also a problem that needs to be seen in the world literature (not under a formalism system). This is the reason why we choose to compare the perspective of this and other soldiers in the same war (Vietnam-America). The comparison whether to explain the difference or the same is to go to the goal: to affirm the "cross-borders" of war literature, especially the Vietnam War: cross the border between the West and the East, between our side and the enemy side, to bring mankind closer together.

❖ **Conflict of Interest:** Author have no conflict of interest to declare.

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## BẢN THỂ NHÂN VĂN VÀ BẢN THỂ SINH THÁI QUA NỖI BUỒN CHIẾN TRANH VÀ NHỮNG THỨ HỌ MANG

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### TÓM TẮT

Bài viết nghiên cứu về bản thể của người lính qua hai tác phẩm tiêu biểu viết về văn học chiến tranh Việt Nam, Nỗi buồn chiến tranh và Những thứ họ mang. ở hai khía cạnh: bản thể nhân văn và bản thể sinh thái. Bản thể nhân văn, do chịu sự chi phối của hệ hình tư duy khác nhau giữa Đông và Tây, quy định tính bản thể khác nhau giữa người lính Việt Nam và người lính Hoa Kỳ. Bản thể sinh thái do tác động của hệ sinh thái chung nên tạo ra sự tương đồng giữa những người lính, và ở góc độ khác, là sự gặp gỡ giữa con người với môi trường sinh thái.

**Từ khóa:** bản thể, chiến tranh Việt Nam, bản thể nhân văn, bản thể sinh thái, Nỗi buồn chiến tranh, Những thứ họ mang