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Murakami Haruki and Young Vietnamese Readers

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Murakami in Vietnam

Murakami Haruki has become a literary phenomenon in recent years in Vietnam. In little more than five years, nineteen Vietnamese translations of his books have been published, with copies numbering in the thousands. What is the reason for this astounding phenomenon? In this essay, I will explore this question from a personal point of view, although I believe that if a wide-ranging and collaborative study were embarked upon, it would yield even more informative findings.

Murakami's first novel to be published in Vietnam was the 1997 translation of *Norwegian Wood* by Lien Hanh and Hai Thanh. In this version, many of the scenes dealing with sex and sexuality were dropped due to moral censorship on the part of the publisher; consequently, the novel was not enthusiastically received by readers. Nearly ten years later, in 2006, a new translation of *Norwegian Wood* was published, along with translations of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and several collections of short stories. Since then, nearly every year has seen a work by Murakami published in Vietnam, and at the present there are nineteen translated titles available in Vietnamese. This is an impressive number for a foreign writer in Vietnam. In other words, Murakami Haruki has become a publishing phenomenon in Vietnam. He is especially popular among younger readers, who have read most of his works and discuss them on social media such as Facebook and blogs. Moreover, a movie adaptation of *Norwegian Wood* by Tran Anh Hung, a Vietnamese French director, was released in Vietnam in 2010, further igniting Murakami's popularity among younger readers.

In this essay I will not approach Murakami's fiction through the lens of literary analysis, but rather I want to present the emotional reactions of both myself and my friends to his works. Although I cannot categorically state that the ideas in this essay are representative of how young Vietnamese people think about Murakami, I do believe that it will contribute to an understanding of the way Vietnamese people read Murakami and the reasons for his popularity in Vietnam.

I first read Murakami at the age of twenty, as an undergraduate student. Back then, Murakami had not been translated and published widely in Vietnam, so I only read *Norwegian Wood* and a number of short stories available on the Internet. Compared to the Japanese writers I had read at the time, including Kawabata Yasunari, Natsume Sōseki,

Mishima Yukio, Dazai Osamu, Ōe Kenzaburō, and Abe Kōbō, Murakami's completely unique Japanese sensibility, so different to what I knew, amazed me. His works were like an exotic new food to me, kindling within me an excitement which led to me to discover and imagine another Japan, a Japan of jazz and pop music, spaghetti, and a fast-paced lonely life, and not a Japan of *tatami*, *chadō*, the *samurai* spirit, and the beauty of pure Japanese aesthetics. It is on this journey to discovering a new Japan that I have met myself and my generation.

Sympathy

One answer to the question of why Murakami has become so popular with young Vietnamese readers lies in the way his works have touched their heart and sympathize with their sorrows, worries, and romantic difficulties.

On the whole, the older generation (over forty years old) has not shown much interest in Murakami's fiction because they are the last generation whose social background is different from that of today's youth. In contrast, those who came of age in the 1990s, a period of when the Vietnamese economy was finally recovering after the Vietnam War and when the country was opening its doors to the world, have a different view and value set. With the growth of Vietnam's economy, young people no longer face famine or death and war as their elders did; they enjoy more comfort and convenience but they also have moral purpose in their life except for earning as much money as possible. Although the social and cultural perspective in Murakami's fictional world is not the same as Vietnam, there is actually somehow a similar social background whereby young people feel lost and wonder which path to take to true happiness. Hence, young people appreciate Murakami's stories, his characters' situations and may meet themselves in his works.

Murakami often portrays characters who are on a quest to find their true essence and to discover their identity. For example, Okada Tōru in *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Kafka in *Kafka on the Shore*, and Sumire in *Sputnik Sweetheart* try to journey within their spirit to explain and understand themselves, only to be confronted by their own loneliness and to realize the nothingness of the human condition. This loneliness and nothingness is a by-product of the high-tech age in which we live, in which people are attached to machines, computers, and number codes in a hyper-reality without connecting to real human beings. Nowadays, with the Internet's rising popularity in Vietnam, young people live their lives mostly attached to the computer and Internet for studying, working, connecting with friends, and entertainment. This quick and virtual life sometimes makes them feel lonely in the virtual world and they feel the absurdity of their own presence, which helps them to empathize with the characters in Murakami's fiction. Murakami helps them to name their malaise, to describe their sorrow, loneliness and the nothingness that they can only feel but can't identify.

On a personal note, I too was filled with questions about my existence, anxiety about the future, and a sense of hopelessness and nothingness in my early 20s. When I read Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, I knew that feeling was precisely the image of the dry well where his characters often sit and connect to the deeper reality of their spirit. I couldn't express my feeling and fear until I came across the dry well in this novel.

In addition, young people also empathize with the kind of love portrayed in Murakami's works. The type of noble love of the previous generation, hidden behind idealism and romanticism, is transformed in Murakami's fiction to the powerful, truthful, frank and honest love experienced by contemporary youth. The reason why so many young people in Vietnam are so enamored of the character of Midori in *Norwegian Wood* is because of her way of love. She is brave enough to express herself directly and sincerely to the one she loves. This kind of self-expression is a way to liberate the ego from engrained preconceptions of morality, Eastern tradition, and social behavior. Young Vietnamese people want to liberate love from the restrictive notions held by their elders. Due to globalization, most young Asian people's minds lean towards Western modes, and this is true of love also, so the way that Murakami portrays love is attractive to young people. Some of my younger friends told me that Murakami's novels also give expression to the simple wishes of their youth, such as a midnight call from a sweetheart or a letter from a friend far away, actions which they consider romantic in this high-tech era.

It is impossible to deny the role of sexuality in attracting Vietnamese youth to Murakami's fiction. In Vietnam, even now sexuality is not an open subject; traditional values, influenced profoundly by Confucianism, have avoided the problem of sexuality for a long time. Although our modern literature makes mention of sexuality, only a few writers have dared to write audaciously about sexuality. Hence, Murakami's novels, which contain many vivid scenes of sex, were initially a primary factor in rousing young people's curiosity about his novels. However, sexuality in Murakami's works is not a gratuitous vehicle to entice readers; rather, it is the way he lets his characters to seek their own identity. In the end, the characters seldom discover what they were looking for, and instead find loneliness. Although two persons may seem to be one in the sexual act, there is in fact a huge gap between them. Everyone has her/his own world that others cannot understand or step into. Such is the case of Watanabe Tōru and Naoko in *Norwegian Wood*. Their sexuality in this case is only a means through which they can feel that they exist, but sex just makes their loneliness more profound.

Another example is Mr. and Miss Clean, two main characters in the short story "The Folklore of Our Times," who have a strange sexuality, a "clean" sexuality. These two outstanding high-school students in the story are not mouthpieces for the Eastern ethical tradition. This story shows the absurdity of the times we live in. There are many

barriers in their own minds preventing them from “unclean” sexuality but when they can escape from this confinement, they feel desolate. This desolation is a strange feeling, far from the inertia of obedience and service. This absurdity deserves further contemplation.

A Game of Images

In addition to reflecting the hearts of younger readers, Murakami’s fiction has also allowed this new generation to discover the pleasure of reading literature. Murakami is a skilled storyteller who creates new and unexpected ways to tell his stories. To read Murakami’s novels is not only to converse with our souls, but also to participate in a game of language and images that Murakami invites us to join. This is one of the most important reasons why young readers have fallen in love with his novels.

Murakami’s metaphors present one of the most exciting challenges I have ever come across. His metaphors are new ones created by himself, and completely different to anything else in literature. Normally, A becomes a metaphor of B when there is some similarity between A and B, enabling readers to make an association between A and B and understand the meaning of the text. However, Murakami creates metaphors whereby there is seemingly no connection between the two things he wants to compare. He often uses a normal thing to express a metaphysical feeling. For example, he uses a dry well to express something close to nothingness, or spaghetti to express loneliness. Such leaps are unexpected and exciting for the reader. It almost seems as if Murakami wants to laugh at things people consider important, because in fact there are no such important things.

I am particularly interested in the spaghetti metaphor in his short story entitled “The Year of Spaghetti.” Here, food becomes a metaphor of loneliness, a peculiar way to identify human sorrow. The protagonist cooks spaghetti continuously for a year, through spring, summer and fall. He compares the madness of cooking spaghetti, tossing it into the pot like a jilted lover throwing old letters into the fire; sometimes it is like spring butterflies waiting for the night so they can fly away. Spaghetti is the presence of humankind in his house including himself in the past, his high-school girlfriend or an unknown person. All of the world, space and time, are encompassed in his spaghetti pot. And at the end of the story, he suddenly explains this metaphor in a lovely way: “Durum semolina, golden wheat wafting in Italian fields. Can you imagine how astonished the Italians would be if

they knew that what they were exporting in 1971 was really *loneliness*?”¹ This metaphor was astonishing to me, and I knew from this that Murakami had forged a new way of expressing these eternal human feelings.

On the other hand, the structure of Murakami’s novels also contributes to this freshness. For example, the structure of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *Kafka on the Shore* requires that readers to use their intelligence to follow the characters instead of just reading a linear story in order to know the final fate of the characters. Murakami’s writing style makes readers feel as if they too are contributing to the creation of the story. Finally, his writing is a clever combination of Western openness and Eastern esotericism.

Murakami Haruki has been a favorite writer of young Vietnamese readers for many years. Many young people can see themselves in his work; in reading his literature, they can better understand their own identities, confront and converse with their loneliness; and see their youth for all it is painful, splendid and peculiar.

It has been about ten years since I first read Murakami Haruki. Nowadays, as my anxiety about being a woman facing the big wide world has decreased, I find myself reading his works less and less. However, whenever I boil spaghetti, I imagine that I am boiling away the sorrow of my own youth. This is both Murakami’s metaphor and a metaphor for my youth.

1 “The Year of Spaghetti,” http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2005/11/21/051121fi_fiction?current-Page=all.