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# **QUEER MALE IDENTITIES IN MODERN VIETNAMESE LITERATURE**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

2016

Department of South East Asia  
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**Declaration for SOAS PhD thesis**

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## Abstract

*This thesis studies representations of queer, male-bodied characters in Vietnamese literature published between 2000 and 2013, taking as its first source the earliest Vietnamese novel that explicitly discusses homosexuality and examining a selection of later texts that deals with queer issues. The author catalogues the Vietnamese queer identities presented in these sources. Using popular identities and the definitions presented in the primary texts, this research presents, analyses and contrasts detailed definitions and common presentations of identities based around homoerotic inclination and gender transgression. On the basis that literature is an example of cultural discourse, this thesis reveals contemporary Vietnamese understandings of and attitudes towards these identities in contemporary Vietnamese society. Following on existing queer studies on other South East Asian contexts, this research is one of the first studies to focus on specifically Vietnamese understandings of these issues. The findings are situated within other regional queer theory.*

*Keywords:* Vietnamese literature, South East Asian studies, queer studies

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Educational HIV prevention billboards on page 26.

## Introduction

### 1. General Introduction

The following research examines portrayals of queer male Vietnamese in a selection of contemporary literary sources. As this thesis is among the first pieces of research in the field of Vietnamese queer studies, it is intended in part to serve as an introduction to queer Vietnamese literature and the issues raised therein. A selection of ten novels and short story compilations, chosen from a larger number of texts and united by a theme of male homosexuality, comprise the primary sources used in this thesis. The term male is somewhat problematic given the fundamentally gender-transgressive understanding of homosexuality throughout the primary texts, and this will be discussed in more detail later, but is used here and in the thesis' title to denote individuals who were male-bodied at birth. The decision to focus specifically on male queers was made in the early stages of research in order to narrow down the sources and to ensure more consistency in the experiences that they discuss. It was also in part due to the fact that there were more sources available that dealt with the experiences of male homosexuals at the outset of this research. Some of the primary texts studied in this thesis also describe the experiences of female homosexuals and yet others exist that focus primarily or exclusively on female homosexuals, but these representations are not presented in this thesis.

The primary sources are all either works of fiction or fictionalised accounts of real events that are ostensibly representative of the experiences of the various authors and narrators but do not claim to be factually accurate. The earliest primary source studied in this thesis, *A World Without Women* by Bùi Anh Tấn was published in 2000 and is the first Vietnamese novel to take the theme of homosexuality in a recognisable modern form as its main theme. The latest was published in 2013, at the end of the period of active research for this thesis. In addition to the eight other texts presented in this thesis, other texts dealing with homosexuality were published in Vietnam during this same period of time but are not included in this thesis for reasons of length or relevance, while yet others have been published since this research concluded and were therefore excluded. All primary texts are printed in Vietnamese and all translations are my own except where otherwise indicated.

All of these texts were commercially available in mainstream book shops with the partial exception of some texts from the compilation *Untold Stories* which are taken from an unpublished, pre-final edit version. Most have since gone out of print. One of the earliest challenges in this thesis was therefore locating copies of the primary texts. Some indication of the texts' significance outside of the mainstream market is to be found in the fact that desire for these texts has often evidently far outstripped their availability. As such one can find electronic copies of most if not all of these texts on queer Vietnamese websites and forums. In some cases, where physical copies of texts were unavailable, these electronic copies were used for this thesis.

## **2. Research Aims**

The primary research aim of this thesis is to catalogue and define the various queer identities in modern Vietnamese literature as a means to understanding how identities based on non-normative sexualities are conceived and lived in the context of contemporary Vietnam. The analysis presented in this thesis consists in the first instance of considering explicit definitions of queer identities found in the primary texts. These definitions are discussed in detail and are then analysed and compared with representations of similar identities across different texts and authorial perspectives. Conclusions are then drawn as to what elements of these identities remain consistent across different sources and as to which points are controversial, inconsistent or contradictory. The first two chapters of this thesis address specific identities while the third chapter addresses the broader issue of 'real' homosexuality as distinct from 'real' normative, masculine heterosexuality and looks at different ways that homosexuality is conceptualised as an innate quality or as a socialised, pathological condition.

The secondary research aim of this thesis is to situate these findings in the context of other Asian queer theory and the broader discussion on international homosexuality and gay identity. Accordingly, in each chapter these findings are discussed in comparison with other regional queer theory. The issue of the extent to which queer characters are seen as the inheritors of foreign, regional or domestic traditions is addressed in the third chapter.

### 3. Historical Background

Vietnamese attitudes towards sex, homoeroticism and transgenderism are not well documented either historically or in contemporary society, but research exists on traditional transgenderism in the context of religious ceremonies associated with *Đạo Mẫu*, the worship of the Mother Goddess. This tradition dates back to before the Colonial era (Tu Anh T. Vu, 2006, p. 27) and therefore predates the modern identities described in this thesis. Practice of this religion involves spirit possession associated with ritual dancing and chanting, and male worshippers participating in this ritual usually wear women's clothes and can be possessed by female spirits (Tu Anh T. Vu, 2006, p. 36).

These cases of transgenderism for specific ceremonies do not represent a widely distributed or recognised third gender category, and Vietnam has no category of “national transvestites,” as Indonesia's *waria* have been described (Boellstorff, 2003b, p. 9), or to Thailand's *kathoey* (Jackson, 2009). While this absence of a clearly defined identity certainly does not mean that individuals inclined towards homoeroticism and gender transgression did not exist in pre-Colonial Vietnam, sources dealing with these behaviours are extremely limited and there is no identity clearly associated with these behaviours in Vietnam, unlike in these other South East Asian contexts.

Colonial-era Vietnamese sexuality is better represented in research. In particular, essays by Proschan (2000a; 2000b) focusing on French perceptions of gender transgression and sexual deviance in Colonial-era Vietnam are relevant as part of the background to this thesis. In these articles, accounts of Vietnamese sexuality documented by French colonists are analysed. Proschan's research shows how the French construed Vietnamese men as effeminate and impotent and Vietnamese women as wild and highly sexual (Proschan 2002a, p. 436). This research also reveals Christian alarm at what was perceived as a lack of sufficient distinction between Vietnamese men and women, citing their long hair and the fact that the different sexes wore similar clothing as causes for concern (Proschan 2002b, p. 617). These factors supported a belief held by the Colonial French that Vietnam was a den of sexual iniquity and that unwary Europeans could easily be led astray by libidinous women and the effeminate men who were indistinguishable from the local women (Proschan 2002a, p. 438). The Colonial French revealed in these essays have predictably Orientalist attitudes towards the Vietnamese,

construing the natives as inferior, immoral, effeminate, sexually deviant and in need of colonisation for their own betterment.

These sources suggest that pre-Colonial Vietnamese society did not enforce rigid gender binarism the styling of outward appearance and that same-sex eroticism was permissible, or at least less problematised at that time than in contemporary Europe. This is consistent with sources on Chinese and other South East Asian contexts, which show that attitudes towards sex and gender were more tolerant in the past and that transgressive behaviours only became problematised with the advent of Colonialism (Drucker 1996, pp. 84-85) or modern LGBT activism, as has been argued to be the case in Chinese (Chou Wah-Shan, 2000, pp. 95-97) and Arab societies (Massad, 2007, pp. 160-162). The relevance of Proschan's work to the project of this thesis is limited by the fact that it focusses on French constructions of Vietnamese sexuality as revealed by Colonial-era French language texts. The fact that no Vietnamese language sources are used in either paper is likely an indication of the difficulty of finding Vietnamese sources on this topic.

#### 4. Xuân Diệu and Revolution-Era Attitudes Towards Homoeroticism

Nguyễn Quốc Vinh's (1997) paper, entitled *Deviant Bodies and Dynamics of Displacement of Homoerotic Desire in Vietnamese Literature from and about the French Colonial Period (1858-1954)*, deals with similar issues to those raised in Proschan's work. This is a particularly relevant source for this thesis, as both focus exclusively on Vietnamese language primary sources and deal with portrayals of homoeroticism in literature as a means of drawing conclusions on contemporary understandings of sexuality and gender. The fact that his research concerns the literature of an earlier period in history than that studied in this thesis allows his findings to provide some background to this research.

Vinh (1997) states that there exists: "A modestly growing and rather diverse range of Vietnamese materials [representing homoerotic desires in Vietnamese literature] from the seventeenth century to the present day" (p. 1). Homoerotic classical Chinese literature has been extensively documented by writers such as Hinsch, whose book *Passions of the Cut Sleeve* (1993) catalogues and analyses a broad sample of Chinese literary sources and uses these to support the conclusion that homoerotic activity was not problematised in pre-modern Chinese society. There are no equivalent catalogues of historical Vietnamese sources available to researchers interested in historical Vietnamese attitudes towards homoeroticism. Documenting earlier historical sources would require primary analysis of many texts which would first have to be found, and a further barrier exists in that these texts would also have to be transliterated from the Vietnamese demotic script *chữ nôm*, which was used until the early twentieth century, into the romanised *quốc ngữ* script used today. Clearly such a project is beyond the scope of this thesis. *Deviant Bodies* is one of the few pieces of research available that fills this gap.

Vinh's paper focuses on the celebrated poet Xuân Diệu (1916-1985), who was lauded first as a prodigious romantic poet and later as a champion of revolutionary, socialist realist poetry. Xuân Diệu was an enigmatic figure who has attracted the interest of several researchers not only for the extremely significant roles in two separate genres of Vietnamese poetry but also for his sexual and romantic inclinations. In *Deviant Bodies*, Vinh references several of his poems that deal with obviously homoerotic themes, the most blatant example of which being *Tình trai*, literally "Man Love," which is rather difficult to translate, there being no equivalent phrase in English, but is translated by

Vinh as “love of men.” This poem is referenced in both the introduction and the conclusion of Vinh’s paper, and alludes to homosexual sex and references famous foreign homosexuals Rimbaud and Verlaine. Xuân Diệu is not the only lauded Vietnamese poet to have written homoerotically themed literature, and others mentioned in Vinh’s paper include Tô Hoài, who wrote an “almost pornographic” description of his sex with Xuân Diệu himself (Nguyễn Quốc Vinh, 1997, p. 8). Huy Cận, a famous poet in his own right and Xuân Diệu’s longtime lover, wrote a poem entitled *Sleeping Together* describing in oblique terms the nighttime dalliances of soldiers sleeping in a crowded barracks (Nguyễn Quốc Vinh, 1997, p. 7), and several other poets are mentioned. A common theme connecting the homoerotic prose and poetry described by Vinh is that homoerotic encounters are described in language that presents them as hallucinatory, almost out-of-body experiences that occur in strange, wild environments and involve a loss of self-control. Huy Cận’s poem, for example, talks of soldiers using, “[S]kin for warm cover, and bone rubbed against bone to seek relief from the cold” (Nguyễn Quốc Vinh, 1997, p. 7). While the meaning of these passages remains clear, the impression remains that the writers are unwilling, firstly, to admit outright to having these sexual encounters by refraining from using any overtly sexual language, and secondly are adding further conceptual distance between themselves and their actions by attributing them to temporary, situational madness instead of any inherent desires or the pleasure that they may have obtained from one another.

Nguyễn Quốc Vinh (2015) returns to the topic of Xuân Diệu and his sexuality in a longer paper entitled *Cultural Ambiguity in Contemporary Vietnamese Representations of Homosexuality: A New Historicist Reading of Bùi Anh Tấn’s Fiction*. This paper also discusses several of the primary texts used in this thesis, but was published towards the end of my writing up period and its analyses in this regard are not discussed in depth. Once again however Vinh returns to the issue of Xuân Diệu and his tendency to characterise homoerotic inclination as something wild and tragic, reducing human beings to an animalistic state.

A final and extremely interesting paper that looks extensively at many aspects of Xuân Diệu’s life is *The Heart and Mind of the Poet Xuân Diệu: 1954–1958* (Lại Nguyễn Ân and Alec Holcombe, 2010). This seventy page essay focuses on the strange shifts and reversals of Xuân Diệu’s career, rising to fame as a romantic poet and then successfully reinventing himself as a revolutionary poet and a staunch opponent of the Humanity and

Masterworks [*Nhân Văn Giải Phẫu*] movement, a group that challenged the Communist Party's strict control over artistic expression at a time when the Communist Party insisted that only socialist realist products had value and that any other works were bourgeois and counter-revolutionary. By the mid 1950s, Xuân Diệu was in the curious position of being a vociferous opponent of the kind of poetry that had initially led to his on fame, renouncing his former romanticism as bourgeois and individualistic and writing scathing reviews of other writers in whose work he detected these same qualities (Lại Nguyên Ân and Holcombe, 2010, p. 18).

Fascinatingly however, his renunciation of his bourgeois past did not extend to a willingness to disavow his homoerotic inclinations or his love for other men. In 1952, Xuân Diệu's sexual behaviours led to his being fired from a prominent position on the Standing Committee of the Literature and Arts Association, and he was made to participate in a self-criticism session in which his sexuality was addressed. This event was particularly strange because many of the men subjecting Xuân Diệu to this criticism had themselves been his former lovers. Ân and Holcombe quote Tô Hoài, the author of the "almost pornographic" memoir mentioned above, as observing the session and noticing that at least eleven of the participants (not including Tô Hoài himself as well as "a bunch of other guys" in attendance had likely slept with Xuân Diệu but were choosing to remain silent (Lại Nguyên Ân and Holcombe, 2010, p. 11). Xuân Diệu broke down in tears, blaming his behaviour on his *tình trai*, translated by Ân and Holcombe as homosexuality but refused to acknowledge this behaviour as bourgeois or promise to rectify it.

His relationship with Huy Cận in particular is described in some detail in Ân and Holcombe's paper, which includes photographs of the two men and the house they shared with the permission of the Communist Party after the war against the French (Lại Nguyên Ân and Holcombe, 2010, pp. 13-14). Huy Cận is described as Xuân Diệu's "life-long partner" (Lại Nguyên Ân and Holcombe, 2010, p. 12). Another remarkable aspect of Xuân Diệu's story is therefore the fact that despite refusing to follow Party policy even in the face of such overt criticism, his relationship was apparently tolerated by the Communist Party in recognition for Xuân Diệu's services to the revolutionary cause. While it is impossible to know the motives of any of the people involved, a plausible picture emerges that suggests that Xuân Diệu's vociferous support of the Party

was repaid in their special treatment of him and more specifically in their willingness to overlook the issue of his romantic and sexual behaviour.

In the conclusion of this paper, Ân and Holcombe argue that an understanding of his homosexuality must be central to any analysis of his career as a Party cadre and revolutionary writer. Proponents of the Masterworks and Humanity movement alluded to his sexuality in their attacks on him and fear of being outed may have contributed to his intense need to be seen as valuable to a Party that was extremely sexually conservative but had demonstrated a willingness to look the other way in his particular instance. The need for his relationship with Huy Cận to remain a secret, albeit a relatively open secret, may have been a “constant source of anxiety” that affected much of his career (Lại Nguyễn Ân and Holcombe, 2010, p. 12).

Xuân Diệu is therefore an extremely interesting figure and is a focal point connecting several different aspects of contemporary Vietnamese society. His sexual history links him to several other famous poets who, like him, wrote homoerotic poetry and yet remained celebrated poets. Thanks to the research mentioned above, one can say with some certainty that a body of homoerotic Vietnamese poetry and prose existed long before the earliest primary text used in this thesis was published.

His self-criticism sessions in 1952 demonstrate that the revolutionary Communist Party was sexually conservative and officially intolerant of homoerotic behaviours and people who were homoerotically inclined. Finally, the fact that his relationship was ultimately tolerated (albeit tacitly) indicate some flexibility in how rigidly their conservative policies were enforced. It is worth noting that Vietnamese streets are generally named after important historical and revolutionary figures, and that there are streets named Xuân Diệu in Hanoi, Saigon<sup>1</sup>, Hue and (given the Vietnamese practice of using the same street names throughout the country) presumably many other Vietnamese cities, decades after his homosexuality (as it is described in Ân and Holcombe’s paper) has become known.

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<sup>1</sup> Saigon is generally used instead of Ho Chi Minh City in this thesis as this term is more widely used in the primary texts and is more commonly used by the residents of the city than the other, official name. Vietnamese place names are written in English without diacritics and two-part names are contracted into one word where appropriate.

No other contemporary figure's sexuality has been researched in such detail as Xuân Diệu's, and the picture that emerges from a review of the literature discussing this issue demonstrates official intolerance but a lack of motivation to actually enforce Party policy against homosexuality, though the caveat must be made that as Xuân Diệu is celebrated as both a hero of the revolution and a master of Vietnamese poetry (twice over in different genres and in his own lifetime), he was likely a very special circumstance. I feel that it is also essential to note that describing Xuân Diệu as a homosexual is extremely problematic. Based on the available evidence he was certainly a man who was attracted romantically and sexually to other men, who had at least one long-term romantic relationship with other man and who refused to back down from his intellectual stance that his romantic and sexual behaviours were not morally reprehensible. On the other hand, he was married in 1958 (Lại Nguyên Ân and Holcombe, p. 68) and lived in a geographic context where the notion of homosexuality as it is understood today did not yet exist. Based on the evidence available it seems likely that he may have identified as such had the identity been available to him, but I do not believe that acknowledging his 'love of men' equates to his self-identifying as homosexual, research has focused on the remarkable aspects of his love and sex life (with other men) while commenting little on his feelings towards women, and one should avoid applying these labels posthumously to people who are no longer able to accept or reject them. I therefore consider Xuân Diệu and his various paramours and contemporaries described above to be interesting examples of revolution-era individuals with some homoerotic inclinations but would not identify them as homosexuals and do not conflate their identities with those studied in this thesis.

If Xuân Diệu's experiences can be used to provide historical context to these identities at all, one can observe that the fact that Xuân Diệu and his contemporaries were able to publish homoerotic works before the need for socialist realist orthodoxy supports the idea presented in Proschan's papers that these issues were not problematised until comparatively recently. The problems faced by Xuân Diệu later in his career, the apparent hypocrisy implicit in the Party's treatment of him and the fact that in the fifties his past promiscuity with other men was viewed as being potential blackmail material are all harbingers of the policies adopted by the Vietnamese State, which appear to have been less tolerant of deviance than Vietnamese tradition.

## 5. Homosexuality in Nineties Vietnamese Media

The aforementioned sources deal with Vietnamese society from the early to mid-twentieth century, and it is difficult to say to what extent these historical precedents influenced the creation of the identities studied in this thesis. Certainly Vietnamese tradition has been significant in informing the terminology by which modern Vietnamese queers identify and have been identified, as shall be discussed in more detail in a later chapter, but it is worth noting that none of the queer characters in the primary sources used in this thesis refer to Xuân Diệu as an antecedent and that the prevailing sentiment throughout the texts studied in this thesis is that homosexuality is a modern phenomenon that comes from the West rather than from Vietnamese tradition.

A gap of several decades exists in the historical context presented in this introduction, beginning with accounts of Xuân Diệu and his contemporaries in the fifties (though several of the publications mentioned, such as Tô Hoài's memoirs, were not published until much later) and ending with the publication of newspaper articles homosexuality in the early nineties. The intervening decades, which included the entirety of the Second Indochina War and the Liberation (or Fall) of Saigon, must have seen great changes and would certainly be an interesting topic for future research, but as of the end of the period of active research for this thesis sources dealing with this period were unavailable. To speak in broad generalities therefore the Communist Party were sexually conservative and critical of homosexuality but did not aggressively pursue anti-homosexual policies or pass any anti-homosexual legislation. Two likely factors in bringing the issue to the public's attention were the implementation of Vietnam's Renovation and Open Door Policy, beginning in 1986, which relaxed state control of the media and allowed for greater exposure to international influences, and the HIV epidemic, which was emergent in Vietnam in the early nineties.

One book in particular is of great value in establishing a timeline for homosexuality in modern Vietnamese media, namely, *Sex in contemporary Vietnamese Society: Easy to Joke About, Difficult to Talk About* [*Tình dục trong xã hội đương đại Việt Nam: Chuyện dễ đùa mà khó nói*] by Khuất Thu Hồng, Lê Bạch Dương and Nguyễn Ngọc Hương (2009), hereafter referred to as *Sex in Contemporary Vietnamese Society*. This lengthy text is in Vietnamese and no English translation exists. It is divided into chapters addressing specific topics including extramarital sex, premarital sex, prostitution and homosexuality. The book was highly praised in a review published in the journal of

South East Asian Studies in which Newton (2012) describes it as “an essential text for anyone studying Vietnamese sexuality” (p. 171).

The chapter on homosexuality begins with an extended discussion of terminology, noting that the distinction between sex, sexuality, gender and sexual behaviours are extremely difficult to translate into Vietnamese (Khuất Thu Hồng et al., 2009, pp. 288-297). Each of these ideas are explained in detail in Vietnamese — an undertaking never repeated in the primary sources used in this thesis — and the introduction to the terminology notes that these concepts are generally understood as being an expression of gender [*giới tính*] in Vietnam. Terms such as men who have sex with men (MSM) have been adopted verbatim as translations into Vietnamese are extremely verbose, whereas other terms are used because the English terms preserve the minute but important distinctions between identifications that are lost when these terms are translated into Vietnamese. Other terms, including those used to form the framework of this thesis (*bóng kín* and *bóng lộ*) are mentioned and described in some detail, but are not used objectively within the chapter because of their perceived negative meanings and the lack of clear distinctions in how the terms are used. The authors point out, correctly in my own opinion, that *bóng* is often viewed as a pejorative term and that *kín* and *lộ* can equate to either cisgender and trans (respectively) or to closeted and open (respectively). *Bóng lộ* could therefore refer equally to a trans woman or to a cisgender out gay man, while *bóng kín* could refer equally to a cisgender gay man or to a trans woman who keeps her identity a secret. In addition to the difficulties of using such imprecise terminology, all four meanings are potentially offensive due to the popularity of the word *bóng* as an epithet. These issues are explored in some detail throughout this thesis, but the issues raised in *Sexuality in Contemporary Vietnamese Society* are extremely salient and well-argued. Ultimately, after explaining their decision-making procedure, the authors opt to use the Vietnamese term for ‘homosexual’ [*đồng giới*], with the caveat that they acknowledge that this is not the most widely used term, nor is it understood in Vietnam in the same way that it is in English. The false parity with the English term is more of a problem in this thesis because it is written in English. If I were to use the term homosexual indiscriminately, it would be very difficult to separate the uniquely Vietnamese application of the term from its English meaning. My reasons for using other terms are explained in a later section.

*Sex in Contemporary Vietnamese Society* follows the section on terminology with a section that summarises the history of homosexuality in Vietnam (Khuất Thu Hồng et al., 2009, pp. 297-305). No mention is made of Xuân Diệu and his contemporaries, nor of traditional and more permissive attitudes towards homoerotic behaviour such as those described by Proschan in Vietnam during the Colonial era. This is interesting as Proschan (and indeed most of the other secondary texts cited in this thesis as providing a historical context) is directly referenced in *Sex in Contemporary Vietnamese Society*. Instead this section serves as an introduction to the main task of the chapter, which is documenting the emergence of homosexuality as a concept with which the Vietnamese public are familiar.

The earliest discussions of sexuality presented in this book focussed on the link between homosexuality and “social evils” [*tệ nạn xã hội*] (Khuất Thu Hồng et al., 2009, p. 310), immoral behaviours prohibited by Vietnamese law. These early sources talked in open terms of homosexuality as being immoral, incompatible with Vietnamese values and possibly against Vietnamese law. These attitudes were published in moralistic newspaper articles and ratified by contemporary interviews with Communist Party officials who made it clear that they believed homosexuality was unnatural, immoral and unhealthy.

The issue of health is of particular importance in these first articles, which focussed on the question of whether or not homosexuality was a mental health issue. The consensus in Vietnam at the time was that homosexuals were mentally ill, and this belief was supported by psychiatric authorities who stated that homosexuality was both a mental illness and an acquired condition. Pathological discourses on homosexuality drew a dichotomy between ‘real’ homosexuals (who account for a very small number of the people who self-identify as homosexual) and people whose homosexuality was “fake” [*giả*] (Khuất Thu Hồng et al., 2009, p. 316) and who had acquired the condition as a result of self-delusion, a lack of moral fortitude and associating with people who were bad influences. *Sex in Contemporary Vietnamese Society* notes that these views continued to be held by Vietnamese officials after the American Psychiatric Association had removed homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses, though there is no discussion of whether or not there exists a Vietnamese Psychiatric Association or equivalent organisation that could present a definitive, official Vietnamese view. Almost simultaneously, a second health issue that was discussed in relation to

homosexuality related to the perceived role played by homosexuals in bringing HIV to Vietnam. This discourse cannot be meaningfully separated from the articles on the immorality of homosexuality, as HIV transmission was consistently portrayed as a consequence of their immorality.

A gradual shift is shown to take place between the first articles published in 1992 and those published a few years later. The articles published became more salacious and were given, given attention-grabbing headlines such as “Pavement bars; the places where gays meet,” “Gays on the hunt online,” and “An unbelievable story that took place at the cinema” (Khuất Thu Hồng et al., 2009, p. 311). A change in tone is therefore evident. Rather than focusing on the mental health of homosexuals, later articles seem more interested in tantalising their readership with scandalous stories of gays, their promiscuity and their strange sexual behaviours. The tone remains disapproving throughout, but the focus of attention shifts dramatically. Many interviews are presented in this chapter, and the authors show that almost unanimously Vietnamese respondents cite exposure to these articles as being the first time that they thought about homosexuality and as being highly influential in informing their views that homosexuality is immoral.

Later still, the focus of newspaper articles turns from homosexual promiscuity to the topic of same-sex marriage, and on this issue a further change in tone becomes evident. Publications that were previously hostile to homosexuality began reporting on LGBT rights in foreign countries, and on Vietnamese same-sex couples who lived together and desired official recognition for their unions. On this topic the Party’s official stance seemed to become more conflicted. In a 2004 interview, one official spoke in vaguely sympathetic terms of her curiosity about how same-sex marriage works in foreign countries, expressed disappointment at having missed the online coverage of an overseas same-sex marriage and said that homosexuals “deserve sympathy not condemnation” (Khuất Thu Hồng et al., p. 331). In the same interview, she said that homosexuals were unwell, that homosexuality was “sick” and that it could and should be discouraged in Vietnam through proper education, but when pressed on the issue of whether or not homosexuality should be legislated in Vietnam her response was that it should not (Khuất Thu Hồng et al., 2009, p. 331). Several similar examples follow and it is clear that, when pressed for a response, Vietnamese officials could be relied upon to

deliver a disapproving soundbite, but that these views were increasingly less representative of discourses on homosexuality as a whole.

Further confusion emerged over the legal status of trans people, particularly those who travelled to Thailand to have gender affirmation surgery. On this issue, too, newspaper publications and interviews reveal an initially intolerant stance, followed by more positive sentiments, and retractions of these sentiments in follow-up interviews. Legislation was considered allowing same-sex marriage and legally changing one's gender, but by the time of publication of this book both of these laws had ultimately been considered only to be dismissed.

Over the period of about ten years, homosexuality entered the national discourse and the tone of the debate changed massively, even though this did not result in new legal protections and validations. From being presented as an assault on Vietnamese traditions and morality, homosexuality became a civil rights issue, and the dominant discussion became whether Vietnam should do nothing about homosexuality or actively pursue a policy that was in line with sexually liberal democracies. This shift in attitude is reflected in the responses of the interviewees, with those interviewed later in the study becoming markedly more tolerant. Towards the end of the chapter, three interviews with respondents aged between 16 and 23 are quoted, and they are in unanimous agreement that homosexuality is not immoral or unnatural and that they support equality for homosexuals in Vietnam (Khuất Thu Hồng et al., 2009, pp. 333-334).

*Sex in Contemporary Vietnamese Society* therefore demonstrates the emergence of the modern Vietnamese homosexual identity as something that occurred in the early nineties as the result, largely, of domestic and international influences, stemming from greater press freedom in Vietnam and from the need for an international response to HIV. Early newspaper articles played an extremely important role in framing the terms of the debate about the morality or immorality of homosexuality, and were for most Vietnamese people the first way that they encountered the topic. Attitudes towards homosexuality in the Vietnamese media are shown to have moved from complete unawareness to a position of qualified tolerance, if not acceptance, where the most pressing issues are no longer how to punish, cure or prevent homosexuality and transgenderism but rather how the law can be interpreted to include homosexuals or

adapted to make special allowances. Clearly the reasons for these rapidly changing attitudes cannot be simply explained nor extensively documented by a few dozen newspaper articles, but *Sex in Contemporary Vietnamese Society* demonstrates significant and relevant changes taking place in Vietnam in terms of attitudes towards sexuality from the early nineties until the publication of several of the primary sources used in this thesis, and is perhaps the single most interesting, relevant and useful secondary source mentioned in this background.

## 6. Sources Related to HIV and AIDS

Other secondary sources on the topic of modern Vietnamese attitudes towards sex and gender are mostly medical and aimed specifically at HIV prevention strategy (Cao, Le and Luong 2001; Colby 2003). As such this research tends to focus on the sexual practices of men who have sex with men rather than on identity issues and social behaviours. One partial exception to this rule is Blanc's (2005) paper *Social Constructions of Male Homosexualities in Vietnam: Some Keys to Understanding Discrimination and Implications for HIV Prevention Strategy*. As its title suggests, this article looks beyond immediately medical issues and considers social aspects of homosexual behaviours and identities. This article presents a historical overview of Vietnamese (and Asian) attitudes towards homoeroticism from the Colonial period to the modern day, together with brief etymologies of gay jargon and slang and descriptions of the ceremonial role played by transexual shamans traditionally understood to have spiritual powers in some parts of Vietnam (Blanc, 2005, pp. 665-666). Blanc's paper considers important issues regarding how Vietnamese officialdom views homosexuality in the modern era, noting in particular the Vietnamese State's characterisation of homosexuality as a social evil and their unwillingness to engage with homosexuals as a group at risk of contracting and spreading HIV (Blanc, 2005, p. 662). Both points were cited in the far broader discussion of these topics presented in *Sex in Contemporary Vietnamese Society*.

On the topic of social and personal identities assumed by homosexuals, Blanc (2005) states that:

Homosexual identity is defined as an inversion of gender roles. Only men who have sex in a passive way are considered homosexual. This is the same for a lesbian woman who is acting as an active partner during sexual intercourse with a female partner. But their partners are considered and consider themselves heterosexuals. (p. 664)

She later adds:

According to their [own] naming typology gay men are one of three categories; handsome, young intellectuals who attract lots of women (*bóng kín* — 'closet gays'), effeminate transvestites (*bóng hở* or 'openly gay') or bisexuals. (Blanc, 2005, p. 668)

These statements are indicative of the nature of queer identity in Vietnam and as such are extremely relevant to this thesis. In particular, the three categories identified in

Blanc's paper are very similar to the three main identity labels discussed in this thesis, as shall become clear.

Blanc (2005) observes that, "Vietnamese society is very normative and based on a strict sexual dimorphism (female/male, yin/yang)" (p. 663). This understanding of yin/yang conflicts absolutely with Chou Wah-Shan's description of the same concept in his *Tongzhi: Politics of Same-Sex Desire in Chinese Societies*, in which he uses the concept of yin/yang to demonstrate the lack of clear gender dimorphism in Chinese philosophy.

Chou Wah-Shan (2000) states that:

Although yin is predominant in women and yang in men, every person from birth is a combination of yin and yang. Neither yin nor yang exists in an exclusive or pure form... Such a natural philosophy opens up a broad and tolerant attitude towards a variety of sexual and gender behaviours... (p. 18)

Finally, Blanc (2005) concludes that, "One can say that homosexuality was not imported to Vietnam by Westerners, but sodomy certainly was" (p. 669). Anal sex was certainly practiced in ancient Chinese societies, as Chou Wah-Shan (2000) documents extensively (pp. 22-23), and the same slang term, translating as 'chicken lewdness' or 'chicken rape,' was used to denote anal sex in Chinese and Vietnamese (*jijan* in Chinese, *kê gian* in Vietnamese). Nguyễn Quốc Vinh (1997) notes that this term was defined in a Vietnamese dictionary by 1931, and that the Chinese antecedent of this term probably dates back to the Tang dynasty circa 618AD (p. 9). While the existence of a Sino-Vietnamese term by the 1930s does not prove that anal sex was practiced in Vietnam before the Colonial era, it does at least suggest that the term and the practice to which it refers may have come to Vietnam through China and as such might predate the arrival of Colonial French by hundreds of years. The content and scope of Blanc's paper makes it extremely relevant to this thesis's project to understand Vietnamese non-normative sexual identities, and it is another useful text for considering social constructs of homosexuality in modern Vietnamese society.

Between Proschan's papers on Colonial-era sexualities, Vinh's work on Xuân Diệu and his contemporaries and modern research such as *Sex in Contemporary Vietnamese Society* and Marie Eve-Blanc's paper, only a few periods of Vietnamese history are revealed and gaps remain that are both large and conspicuous. This lack of evidence makes it very difficult to say with any certainty what sexual practices and associated

identities may have predated the arrival of Europeans to Vietnam, or what changes occurred in the intervening decades.

Outside of academic research, it is possible to draw conclusions on popular and official attitudes towards sexuality from government propaganda especially concerning HIV prevention, which is extremely widespread in Vietnam. The wording of billboards aimed at HIV prevention implicitly excludes same-sex couples, stressing that AIDS is caused by “promiscuous sex” [*quan hệ bừa bãi*] as opposed to monogamous marital sex. According to these materials, HIV is best prevented by a faithful relationship between a “husband and wife” [*cặp vợ chồng*]. In a country where same-sex marriages are not recognised, all homosexual sex would belong to the former, immoral, dangerous category.

As part of an undergraduate dissertation on I photographed government billboards dedicated to HIV and AIDS prevention in 2007, and messages of this type remain extremely widely distributed and visible even in small towns as late as 2013. One constant has been that these signs are vague on the causes of HIV, referencing only drugs, prostitution and sex, with no references to specific sexual and drug taking behaviours that pose a risk of transmission of HIV. At the time of writing, these billboards continue to display the same reticence described by Blanc and in *Sex in Contemporary Vietnamese Society* to addresses the issue of men who have sex with men as an at-risk group.



*'To Participate in HIV/AIDS prevention is to protect yourself, your family and community.'*

Taken in Hanoi, 2007



*“AIDS: Easy to catch but easy to prevent by the following means: A faithful relationship between 1 wife and 1 husband in which neither are HIV-positive or have promiscuous sex...”*

Taken in Nha Trang, 2007

The government’s unwillingness to address men who have sex with men even for such an important cause as the prevention of HIV, which is epidemic in Hanoi, Saigon and many other parts Vietnam (UNAIDS, 2014, pp. 12-18), contributes a sense that homosexuality is a sensitive or forbidden subject. Several of the primary texts used in this thesis mention that Vietnam has no laws prohibiting homosexuality. In his autobiography, *Shadow*, Nguyễn Văn Dũng states that:

In Vietnam, the situation is much more open minded [than countries in which homosexuality is illegal]. Homosexuality has never been regarded as a crime. The authorities do not put us [homosexuals] outside the law. We enjoy all the same rights as every other citizen, have no issues with paperwork, legal proceedings or daily life... There is not a single article of law that relates to homosexuals, a fact that proves that we are cannot be discriminated against. (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, p. 287)

Of course, having no issues with paperwork could be read as a veiled criticism of the Vietnamese situation, as paperwork is necessary for marriages, tax exemptions, powers of attorney, spousal privilege, anti-discrimination laws and so on. Other texts describe instances wherein police and other government agencies treat queer Vietnamese as criminals, and in particular equate homosexuality with the social evils of drug use and prostitution as well as with the HIV epidemic. Awareness of men who have sex with men as a group at risk of HIV has increased in recent years with the advent of greater LGBT activism and specialised NGOs.

This scarcity of clearly relevant secondary sources dealing with the specifically Vietnamese context means that the issue of where in the world to look for relevant secondary comparisons is extremely important. The most obvious and useful source of comparison is China, a country on which queer studies is comparatively well documented. Due to the ‘thousand years of Chinese rule’ claimed by the modern Vietnamese nation state, China is Vietnam’s closest cultural relative. Many aspects of Vietnamese culture, including cuisine, ceremony and religion have been heavily

influenced by China, and there are many Sino-Vietnamese terms in the Vietnamese language.

As in China, Confucianism has played an important role in shaping Vietnamese culture over the last millennium and is generally accepted as being the basis for the traditional familial and social models. Furthermore, both countries experienced communist revolutions in the twentieth century and are now governed by ostensibly communist governments who have laterally embraced capitalism but not democracy. These social and historical similarities are important as they influence attitudes towards sexuality and gender and therefore the challenges that queer people face in living in contemporary society. It is clear that homosexuality is culturally a difficult issue for many Vietnamese due in part to Vietnam's Confucian heritage and the importance of familial obligations and the continuation of one's family line. The difficulties of fulfilling filial duties are among the most common hardships and source of regrets found throughout the sources used in this thesis.

Neither Vietnam nor China has an established, widely recognised third gender category that predates modern discourses on homosexuality, but despite the absence of such a tradition historical Chinese attitudes towards homoeroticism have been thoroughly researched. Chou Wah-Shan (2000) provides the historical background to his book on homoeroticism in modern China by referring to a large number of premodern Chinese literary texts and other documents that describe acts of same-sex love and sex, all of which suggest that Chinese attitudes towards homoeroticism were far more tolerant before the early twentieth century than in the modern day. The aforementioned papers by Proshan (2002a; 2002b), when compared with the relatively intolerant attitudes towards homosexuality evidenced in the primary sources used in this thesis, indicate that similar changes may have taken place between Colonial-era Vietnamese society and the present day.

While Chinese scholarship is interesting, its relevance to the Vietnamese is difficult to evaluate. In particular, the French Colonial period must be taken into account. The fact that the one of the most commonly used Vietnamese words to denote male homosexuals is "*pêđê*," a verbatim and homophonous French epithet deriving from the Greek *pederast*, suggests that interaction with Europeans in this period has had a lasting effect. That China has had no comparable period of Colonial governance is therefore a

significant difference between the two contexts. Other South East Asian countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia share Vietnam's history of colonisation but lack the Confucian influences that are prevalent in countries under China's historical sphere of influence. While other regional historical sources are interesting and share points of commonality to Vietnam, the history and material conditions of each context are unique and Vietnam's similarity to other settings should not be overestimated.

## 7. Modern Social Context

One of the motivations in writing this thesis was the opportunity to work on a contemporary and changing issue, documenting and analysing queer issues at a time during which they were undergoing a sudden and unprecedented rise to publicity. Implicit in this opportunity was the challenge of writing about and categorising issues as they emerged in literature but before they acquired fixed meanings and before consensuses had been reached. An area in which the modernity of this thesis' subject area presents particular problems is in establishing a modern social context. *Sex in Contemporary Vietnamese Society* is a singularly useful source, but mainly addresses issues from the nineties and the early years of the 2000s. Dramatic changes have taken place in Vietnamese society since the commencement of this thesis in 2011, which was eleven years after the publication of the first primary source. One major change has been a massive increase in visibility for organised LGBT advocacy. Vietnam celebrated its first Pride festival in Hanoi in 2012, with an approximate budget of \$2,500 and a team of four organisers. In 2013 this budget had increased to around \$8,500 and the number of organisers, including volunteers, had increased to 45, though events were still exclusively organised in Hanoi. At the time of writing in July 2014, Pride events are being organised across a period of more than two weeks in 17 Vietnamese cities. Saigon alone has plans to celebrate four days of Pride events including a march, several public events, film screenings and appearances by popular Vietnamese recording artists. Sponsors now include the US Embassy, The Harvey Milk Foundation, UNAID and the UNDP as well as local organisations 'The Closet Hanoi' and 'The Amazin Le Thi Foundation.'<sup>2</sup> Queer issues continue to be discussed in mainstream Vietnamese newspapers.<sup>3</sup>

These developments are interesting and would likely be relevant to this thesis but fall outside of the period in which its primary sources were published. This is particularly significant in relation to the issue of transnational gay identities. In recent years, popular Vietnamese activism is very obviously influenced by international LGBT groups. Vietpride, Vietnam's most prominent LGBT activism group, is an obvious example of

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<sup>2</sup> Information taken from <http://www.vietpride.info/> accessed 8 September 2014.

<sup>3</sup> One example includes the article, "Same-sex Marriage: Why Hasn't It Been Accepted Yet?" [*Hôn nhân đồng tính: sao chưa công nhận?*] <http://tuoitre.vn/tin/ban-doc/cung-lam-bao/20130915/hon-nhan-dong-tinh-vi-sao-chua-cong-nhan/569132.html> accessed 8 September 2014.

this, and their website specifically mentions Stonewall as being the beginning of the movement that they are promoting.<sup>4</sup> As the Pride statistics show, the pace of change has increased exponentially in recent years, and the fact that a decade separates the publication of the first and last primary text used in this thesis is important. The society of Bùi Anh Tấn's *A World Without Women* in 2000 was not the same as the society of *Untold Stories* in 2013, and ongoing social changes are surely responsible for some of the differences in how these texts portray queer issues.

It is important therefore to note at the outset that this thesis is an analysis of a specific period of time and that even the two years separating the end of the period of active research from the submission of this thesis have seen significant changes. This is certainly the case when writing about issues of global influences on queer Vietnamese communities, as it is obvious that Western LGBT activism has exerted enormous influence.

It is also immediately apparent that each author brings his or her own perspective to the issues at hand, and that there is a great deal of disagreement and contradiction not only between different authors but also within individual texts. This lack of consistency makes arriving at definitive conclusions challenging. Accounting for these differences is complicated by the aforementioned social changes that have taken place in the last decade. It is therefore difficult to determine to what extent the differences between texts are due to differing authorial perspectives, to ongoing changes in how queer issues are understood in Vietnamese society, or to lack of a unified terminology. There is no clear solution to these problems, no way to arrive at simple answer from such conflicting data. A major project of this thesis is therefore to highlight points of similarity and contradiction and to look for patterns of consensus and variation across different texts.

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<sup>4</sup> Information taken from <http://www.vietpride.info/> accessed 8 September 2014.

## 8. Terminology

The issue of terminology is central the project of this thesis, and requires some exposition in this introduction. The term homosexual [*đồng tính* or *đồng tính luyến ái*] is used in several texts and has a broad range of possible applications. It also has various forms with almost synonymous meanings. Homosexual and same-sex [*đồng giới*] are used interchangeably in most contexts, and when writers mention sexual orientation this is equally likely to be referred to as ‘same-sex oriented’ [*xu hướng đồng giới*] as ‘homosexually oriented’ [*xu hướng đồng tính*]. These terms have formal, medical connotations and encompass most or all of the identities studied in this thesis, is less widely used for self-identification than other, more specific terms. Its popularity in any given source and the meanings with which it is inscribed exhibit a particularly large degree of variance. Several texts describe the experiences of men who have sex with men and make references to homosexuality as a concept related to their behaviours without clearly using the term as an identity: intolerance of homosexuality may lead characters to discriminate against people who identify as gay or who are identified using other more specific terms denoting queer identities. As previously mentioned, *Sex in Contemporary Vietnamese Society* uses the Vietnamese term homosexual throughout, and presents a persuasive argument as to why this is the least problematic term to use, but acknowledges that this term is not widely used within queer Vietnamese communities and is not understood as having the same meaning as the English word. As this thesis explores specific identities and is written in English, the term homosexual is used more selectively and the research is framed around Vietnamese terms that are more specific, more widely used, often more pejorative and therefore arguably more problematic.

Some texts portray homoerotically inclined or gender transgressive individuals using inconsistent identifications or no associated identities at all. The pejorative term *pêđê*, approximating to ‘faggot’ in its usage, is the most widely distributed and appears in most of the primary sources used in this thesis at least once. Following the convention that queer theorists use local terminology in their writing, one could argue that *pêđê* and its variations constitute the most universally understood term and should therefore be used in these analyses, but these terms are rarely used for self-identification and are hugely pejorative.

There is a strong tendency for the writers of the primary sources to use many different terms (especially those with obvious Western origins) interchangeably. Thus, words such as MSM (men who have sex with men), homosexual, third gender and gay (almost always used as a noun) are used as synonyms in many texts to indicate queers, homoerotic inclination and homosexual identities. The important distinctions that exist between these terms in English are entirely absent in Vietnamese, and this makes distinguishing between, for example, male-to-female transgender people (trans women), cisgender homosexual males (gay men) and homosexually active males with unspecified orientations (men who have sex with men) impossible using English terminology: individuals who belong to the former two categories are equally likely to be referred to as MSM, gay or third gender. This is further complicated by a tendency to use variations of the letters MSM in creative ways, such as MM and M&M, and by alternative translations of the abbreviation such as 'Men Seeking Men.' The term 'Third World' [*thế giới thứ ba*] is used in several texts as a synonym of the (far less popular) term 'third gender' [*giới tính thứ ba*]. This construction is possibly derived from the combination of the term third gender and the first popular gay Vietnamese novel's title, *A World Without Women*. It never refers to the Global South or economic status and always refers to gender transgression and/or homoerotic inclination.

Vietnamese terms which have no English equivalents are employed more consistently, and these are used as a framework for the three chapters of analysis in this thesis. The term 'queer' is used throughout this thesis with some hesitation, especially as this is not one of the aforementioned English terms popularly used in Vietnamese. This term is useful as it represents "anti-identity supraidentity" which does not clearly specify to whom it refers or to whom it cannot refer, save that queers should be in some way anti-heterosexist (Weeks, 2005, p. 194). Queer is a useful shorthand term to refer to a broad range of people who occupy non-normative gender positions and/or are homosexually active or inclined. The fact that no easy translation of the term 'queer' exists in Vietnamese is a positive, as it means that characters can be described as queer without conflicting with the identifications made in the texts themselves. I am aware that by imposing this English category I could reasonably be accused of ethnocentrism, but the issue of how to write in English about abstract concepts such as sexuality in non-English speaking contexts where these concepts have no obvious equivalents is difficult to resolve. Queer theorists have dealt with this concern in various ways. In *Passions of the Cut Sleeve*, Hirsch (1993) uses at least the terms 'homosexuality' and 'lesbian'

transhistorically in reference to Chinese sources dating back hundreds of years, and although writes of the specificity of Chinese understandings of homosexuality he does not problematise the use of the terms themselves. Chou Wah-Shan (2000) takes a different approach, avoiding the use of English sexuality jargon. He achieves through a combination of using verbatim Chinese often verbose English phrases that are nearly synonymous with the terms he eschews. PEPS, for example, is the acronym he employs for 'People Who are Erotically Attracted to People of the Same Sex'. In *Desiring Arabs*, which discusses homoerotic traditions and their interactions with transnational ideas on homosexuality in the Arab world, Massad (2007) neither uses nor appears to need substitutes for the aforementioned terms, focusing on portrayals of desire and desirers without clear identities. Both Massad and Chou are highly critical of the use of English terms in non-Western contexts.

When dealing with Vietnamese I do not have recourse to a non-English, less problematic term. The word *bóng* is perhaps the closest approximation to queer. Both terms are extremely flexible, conveying many meanings. In its literal meaning *bóng* means spirit, and its use to refer to gender-transgressive males is a reference to the traditional spirituality accorded to such people. It is also a pejorative term, conveying the implication that such people are unnatural and monstrous, but is nevertheless used for self-identification in the primary texts. *Bóng* is therefore a useful term and is employed throughout but especially in the first two chapters of this thesis, which deal with two contrasting identities that are conceived as different types of *bóng*. On the other hand, the term is still regarded as offensive in some texts wherein it is used as an epithet, and it is not popular to the extent that applying it universally to the characters described in this thesis would be unproblematic. As such, the terms queer and *bóng* are both used at different points in this thesis, and the choice of either term in relation to any specific character is generally based on the terminology employed in the texts discussed therein and the sense of whether or not *bóng* is regarded as an acceptable or merely offensive term in the context of the particular text.

## 9. Theoretical Background

### a. Representation

One issue that is relevant throughout this thesis is that of the value of this type of research, which looks at literature rather than ethnographic or sociological data. The decision to focus on such data was a practical necessity, given that my background is in Vietnamese area studies with a focus on literature. This raises some obvious issues that must be addressed. Throughout this thesis fictional characters and events are discussed and meanings are attributed to these stories. The majority of the primary texts used in this thesis are purely works of fiction, and in biographical texts there is generally an acknowledged fictionalisation of the lived experiences recounted. Furthermore, even if the biographical texts claimed to be fully accurate there would be no way of verifying the veracity of the accounts provided. Ethnographic, interview and focus-group based research would be a different approach to exploring the same issues studied in this thesis, and might yield different results that would more accurately reflect the experiences of the individuals associated with the identities described. It is obvious, for instance, that most same-sex relationships do not involve murders and associated investigations, yet these are important elements of the novels of Bùi Anh Tấn, Vũ Đình Giang and Nguyễn Đình Tú. The works of these three writers comprise four of the ten primary texts studied in this thesis. Similarly, the autobiographies of Nguyễn Văn Dũng and Phạm Thành Trung and the ostensibly biographical short story compilations of Nguyễn Thơ Sinh and the various authors of *Untold Stories*, which account for two more primary texts, are in a sense pre-screened by the fact of their publication. The writers and editors evidently thought these experiences were or could be made to be interesting enough to attract a large enough readership to justify commercial sale. A further qualification must therefore be acknowledged, namely that the experiences of the characters depicted in these stories are unrepresentative in that they deal with particularly remarkable experiences. Queer Vietnamese whose lives have never been touched by extreme or violent instances of homophobia, imprisonment, suicide, entrapment, HIV and so on might have no short stories to contribute to these compilations, let alone enough material to fill a novel-length autobiography. The question that therefore arises is what one can learn from texts such as those studied in this thesis.

The significance of cultural products including literature is described in some detail by Hall et al., (1997) in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*.

The introduction and the first chapter, both of which are written Hall himself, introduce the concepts of language and representation as they are understood within the field of cultural studies through a lengthy exposition that begins with common-sense understandings and outlines the history of these concepts and their importance within the discipline. Hall (1997) defines language as “the privileged medium” through which meaning is produced and exchanged, and common access to language as a prerequisite for communication (p. 1). Language in this context refers not just to obvious systems of formalised communication but to any media in which meaning is encoded. Hall cites music, facial expressions, photography and fashion as examples of codes of this sort, as each of these things are ascribed meanings that can be conveyed and understood. These meanings are in a permanent state of change, arising out of interactions and discourses, and the emergent collective shared understandings constitute culture (Hall, 1997, pp. 4-6). Without these shared meanings we would be completely unable to communicate with each other (Hall, 1997, p. 18).

Hall traces the concept of representation in cultural studies through three broad stages while noting that none of these sequential stages entirely superseded those that preceded it. These three systems are reflective, intentional and constructionist (Hall, 1997, p. 15). According to the reflective approach to representation, language simply reflects the true, pre-ascribed meaning of things as they exist (Hall, 1997, p. 24). The intentional approach to representation is the understanding that the speaker or writer is the arbiter of what his or her own words (or other forms of communication) mean. This approach is noted to be valid to some extent, as individual speakers can be creative and exercise some personal discretion as to how they use language, but logically flawed as an overall approach because language requires that things have fixed meanings underpinned by common understandings (Hall, 1997, pp. 25-26). The constructionist approach, which Hall presents as the dominant discourse and describes in most detail, is the final conceptualisation outlined in the chapter and is both the most complicated and the most relevant to this thesis. This approach recognises the “public and social character of language” (Hall, 1997, p. 25). The explanation of this approach begins with a discussion of the contributions of the Swiss linguist Saussure, who established a new paradigm for the role of language in representation, breaking with the intentional approach and highlighting the fact that one can only decide what one wants to say within the rules of the language (defined in broad terms as any communicative act or symbol) into which one is “born” (Hall, 1997, p. 34). Hall credits Saussure with the founding of the field of

semiology (the study of signs in society) and the foreshadowing of the field of semiotics, the study of signs in culture and of culture itself as a form of language. Hall explains Saussure's approach to representation as being based on the decoding of expressions of language (signifiers) and the mental concepts associated with them (signifieds). These combine to form what Saussure termed signs, which exist on the levels of denotation (simple, descriptive meaning) and connotation, the more complex level of meaning through which signifiers are "decoded" in an intelligible way (Hall, 1997, pp. 36-39).

Saussure's theory was largely linguistic rather than being rooted in cultural studies and was further developed by Barthes, whose work contributed to the field of semiotics and showed how representation works on a cultural level and how objects, images and practices are "read" like more conventional texts (Hall, 1997, p. 36). Barthes stressed the importance of another step of analysis for making sense of signs and their cultural meanings. In the first instance, signs can be interpreted for their denotive and connotative meanings, requiring analysis of the link between signifier and signified as proposed by Saussure. The second level of analysis is what Barthes termed the "myth" of a sign, in which the full and complex meaning is viewed considering not only the connotative and denotive meanings but also the wider social ideologies and conceptual frameworks in which the sign exists and is represented. Thus, cultural products such as an advertisements, magazines or literary works can be interpreted not only in terms of their content but also as expressions of the cultural context in which and by which they are produced.

Hall goes on to discuss Foucault's contribution to the field, adding further significance to the work of representation by refocusing the debate from language onto discourse. The term discourse is used with a different meaning in the field of cultural studies than in everyday parlance, and here refers to a combination of representation and social practices relating to specific topics. Looking at multiple representations of a topic allows the reader to discern the state of knowledge pertaining to that topic at that particular time and place, and when multiple statements drawn from the same context convey the same understanding they are said to belong to the "discursive formation" of that context (Hall, 1997, p. 44).

Discursive formations represent what is known to be true on a particular topic. This can be taken as point of common sense; reading texts (in their various forms) from a particular period in time and a particular cultural context allows the reader to find out about what is or was known to be true about that topic in that context. Foucault's contribution to the field also elucidated the intrinsic connections between representation, power and the production of knowledge, which are profound and less intuitively apparent. Foucault showed how discourse not only reflects existing knowledge but constructs the meanings that it represents and defines what can be said and even thought about the subjects to which it pertains.

What is known to be true on a subject such as sexuality or mental illness in a particular historical context defines the subjectivities of the people in question. Using the example of sexuality, living in a specific period of history and in particular place can be the difference between being a homosexual, a sodomite or a pathological sexual deviant. In the case of mental illness, the conditions that would have led to a subject being defined as a hysterical woman in the historical context of the nineteenth century were based on a knowledge of hysteria as being an affliction that commonly affected women. This understanding has changed over time to and been supplanted by new discursive formations that view mental illness as being something within the body and psyche of the patient that was capable of being observed, diagnosed and treated by doctors in accordance with medical procedures and guidelines (Hall, 1997, pp. 46-47). Pathological and criminal understandings of homoerotic inclinations have likewise been supplanted by an understanding in liberal Western societies and broad international consensus of sexual orientation as category discrete from gender and of diverse sexual orientations as a normal and healthy part of the spectrum of human sexual expressions. Thus, the sexually deviant sodomites and the hysterical woman have been replaced by the homosexual and the mentally ill person, respectively. These different labels are used to explain the same phenomena, as homoerotic inclinations and (what are regarded today as) symptoms of mental illness have doubtless existed throughout history, but the evolving discourses surrounding these topics have the power to name, define and explain the individuals in question. This constitutive power establishes drastically different truths that are enormously influential in defining the lived experiences of the people concerned. Discourse is therefore never simply reflective but always constructive. The meanings created within discourse, being a combination of social interaction and representation in all its forms, make themselves true, as the fact that they

are accepted as truths imposes these understandings on both a personal and societal level.

This point is of particular significance. Identities, both positive and negative, are not only represented in discourse but are also constructed through the discourses in which they are represented. It is impossible to separate these truths from the discourses in which they are created and expressed. Accepting this premise, the inevitable conclusion is that all discourse is powerful and that the act of representing something is intrinsically linked to the exercise of power that is both constitutive and limiting, creating subjectivities and social conventions within parameters that are known to be true and simultaneously delegitimising other understandings, identities and behaviours that fall outside of this conceptual framework. Issues such as sexuality become intelligible only through analysis of the discursive frameworks in which they are expressed.

To return to the topic of this dissertation, the primary sources used are all works of literature and examples of cultural discourse. The authors of these texts are taking part in meaningful work of stating the truths as they understand them and expressing these in a way that represents, defines, creates and disseminates their understandings of the 'truth' of queer issues in the historical and cultural context of Vietnam in the early 2000s. These texts are parts of the discursive formations that create the understandings and collectively define what is considered relevant, important and true on the topics of gender and sexuality within in the context of Vietnamese culture. Regardless of whether the texts are condemnations, plaintive pleas for sympathy and respect or something in between, these sources are examples of Vietnamese in contemporary society discussing, defining and interpreting these issues.

Literary and other fictional representations of queer Vietnamese are interesting not only because they are representations of what people say, think and know about queers in contemporary Vietnam, but also as examples of constitutive acts which create the knowledge and understanding that allows these expressions to take place. The fact that these texts are fictional does not render them irrelevant as they can be viewed as part of these important processes, and the issue of how true to life they are may be a subject for other researchers to explore. This point is expounded in this introduction as a means to answering a fundamental question about the value of this thesis as a whole, and it is not

my intention to attempt to apply Foucauldian theory throughout this thesis but rather to establish the value of literary analysis of the sort that conducted throughout and to demonstrate that what may seem to be an esoteric approach has broader implications than simply evaluating the comparative merits of different literary works.

Fortunately, there exists a significant body of theory that analyses literary texts as a means to understanding issues of queer gender and sexuality. Of most obvious relevance to this thesis are texts dealing with queer Chinese literature. *Passions of the Cut Sleeve* by Hinsch (1993) looks at issues of sex and gender in historical Chinese literature while Chou Wah-Shan (2000) presents an overview of modern queer Chinese literature in his book on Chinese *Tongzhi*. In *Desiring Arabs*, Massad (2007) offers a very extensive collection of analyses of issues of homoeroticism in Middle Eastern literature, while elsewhere in South East Asia analyses have been conducted on fictional sources in other media including Thai magazines and Indonesian cinema (Jackson 2000a); Murtagh 2010). All of these are useful to this thesis as examples of how to conduct analysis of fictional representations of queer characters and why such analyses are valuable. This thesis uses the primary sources as examples of constitutive discourses presented by and for contemporary Vietnamese as a means to answering more fundamental questions about the state of knowledge and what is known and presented as being true regarding these issues during the period in which the texts were published.

### b. Identity

A further theoretical discourse that is relevant to this thesis is the debate on the naturalness or otherwise of sex and gender categories. One of the issues that this research addresses is that of who or what is understood to be queer in the context of Vietnamese literature, and how this queerness is conceptualised. This is particularly relevant to the third chapter of this thesis, which deals with issues of gender and authenticity and looks at distinctions between 'real' homosexuals and 'real' men. Dealing with these issues requires an understanding of gender theory and specifically the debates on the nature of gender and its relationship to sex and sexual orientation.

Debates about how we gender and sex different bodies and how these differences should be understood have been ongoing for decades and have produced a large volume of notable theory. In 1949 de Beauvoir famously advocated a social understanding of gender difference when she wrote that, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman" (de Beauvoir, 2011, p. 624). This statement separates the two categories of biological sex and social gender. Thus, one may be born female, but it is only through processes of education and social indoctrination that one may 'become' a woman. In *The Second Sex* she writes of the false parity that exists between the two sexes, noting that, 'man' is seen as a universal subject while 'woman' is qualified, seen as marked and defined by things that she lacks. As such women are forced to justify themselves against accusations that their opinions are prescribed and informed by the fact of their being women while men are seldom required to make the opposite justification (de Beauvoir, 2011, pp. 41-45). This unfairness is described as "irritating" and the writer questions the value and existence of the category of woman as follows:

It is hard to know any longer if women still exist, if they will always exist, if there should be women at all, what place they hold in this world, what place they should hold (de Beauvoir 2011, p. 39).

This unease with the very category of woman forms the central topic of Luce Irigaray's essay, *The Sex Which is Not One*, the title of which refers to the fact that the universal subject (one) is conceived as male. Irigaray (1995) expresses a belief that woman is a category that is fundamentally defined by its position of otherness and lack in relation to the universal category of man (pp. 23-33). In *The Straight Mind*, Wittig expresses similar misgivings on these same issues, identifying woman as a category of socially and sexually oppressed individuals defined by their subjugation to men. Concluding that woman is therefore a term of oppression equivalent to 'slave' or 'nigger,' Wittig calls

for the necessary abolishment of the categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ advocating that a liberated feminist should break free of heterosexual oppression and identify as a lesbian rather than as a woman (Wittig, 1977, pp. 51-57).

The other side of this debate roots gender difference and inequality in nature and biological anatomy. This idea is explained as a counterpoint to her argument in a paper by Ortner (1974) who discusses the pervasive belief that female oppression by men exists universally and transhistorically and must therefore be explained by universal factors rather than factors that are culturally specific. This argument is supported with reference to differences in male and female anatomy and in particular the roles that the latter plays in reproduction and childcare. Given that women menstruate, bear children and breastfeed infants, Ortner (1974) notes that despite de Beauvoir’s “fair and accurate” assessment of “woman’s physiological situation,” many have continued to attribute gender inequality to the understanding that:

It is simply a fact that proportionately more of woman’s body space, for a greater percentage of her lifetime, and at some — sometimes great — cost to her personal health, strength, and general stability, is taken up with the natural processes surrounding the reproduction of the species. (pp. 74-75)

Arguments of this sort, positing social differences as being based on essential biological and anatomical distinctions between males and females have been described by “biology-as-destiny” (Butler, 1990, pp. 11-12), which is to say accepting the inevitability of gender difference by conceding that one’s anatomical body dictates one’s role in society. These theories have generally fallen out of favour as modern queer and gender studies tends to favour a social constructionist understanding of gender roles. In particular the theory of performativity first proposed by Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* offered a new way of understanding how gender exists and works. This theory has become the dominant paradigm and is the main theoretical approach to gender applied in this thesis, as it is in many others.

Butler argues that gender identity is not an innate or natural characteristic and is not programmed by our biology or anatomy, and coined the term ‘performance’ to describe how gender is constructed, learned and acted out. Butler (1990) characterises gender as:

The repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. (pp. 42-43)

The regulatory framework in this context is society, which through its various formal and informal institutions imparts our understandings of the correct and supposedly natural ways that someone who belongs to a specific gender should behave. By learning and adopting this gender-consistent behaviour and accepting its legitimacy as natural and normal we reinforce these understandings and perpetuate these processes.

Arguing that gender identity is not an innate or natural characteristic but is given the “appearance of an abiding substance” through the acting out of gender coherent behaviour, Butler concludes that gender identity is created, maintained and made to appear substantive through the very actions which are mistakenly perceived to be its natural effects (Butler, 1990, pp. 27-33). These acts create only the appearance of substance because the idealised forms of masculinity and femininity to which people aspire exist only conceptually and are never fully embodied by any particular person. Normative masculinity and femininity are therefore formed around ‘mythical’ original identities, with the effect that all gender is constructed through processes of “imitation without origin.” The concepts of masculinity and femininity represent unachievable, hyperbolic notions of characteristics popularly imagined to belong to men and women which are not in fact reflections of — and may bear very little resemblance to — ‘real’ men and women at all.

Other theorists to write on this same topic include Donaldson (1993), author of *What is Hegemonic Masculinity?* This paper observes popular ideas of masculinity are based around ideal figures such as action heroes, who exist either only in fantasy, or in the form of heroes “remote from the lives of the unheroic majority” (Donaldson, 1993, pp. 648-649). If examined closely enough, Donaldson suggests, even individuals viewed as paragons of masculinity such as world-class athletes, would reveal that they fall short of the expectations of hegemonic masculinity in some aspects of their lives.

A final insight from *Gender Trouble*, which has since been extensively developed elsewhere in gender and queer theory, is the problematising of the very concept of biological sex as a category separate to social gender. While a common-sense understanding is that sex refers to one’s anatomical makeup when one is born while gender refers to a social role, Butler (1990) famously wrote that: “If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the

consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all (pp. 9-10).”

To return to the topic of this thesis, Vietnam has no popular term for biological sex which is separate from gender. Indeed, of all the sources used in this thesis, only *Sex in Contemporary Vietnamese Society* draws a distinction between sex and gender, and this is only possible after lengthy explanations and as a means to translating the Western concepts for a Vietnamese readership. Already therefore there is an obvious agreement in how Butler describes the false distinction between sex and gender and how these ideas are understood in Vietnam, where sex is indeed always gender and no terminology exists to draw a meaningful distinction between the two concepts.

Though there exists a term for sexual orientation [*xu hướng tình dục*], this is a literal translation of the English term and is used infrequently. The most common way that queer Vietnamese refer to what makes them different from their normative counterparts is as having a different gender. In the context of Vietnam, homosexuals are neither men nor women but belong to a nebulous category of third gendered or ‘Third World’ individuals. Throughout this thesis, it will be shown that this third gender is a heterogenous term that means extremely different things to different authors and is applied to a wide range of subjectivities that have very little in common with one another. Understanding that Vietnamese queer identities are commonly conceived as genders, or rather a single and poorly defined gender position, allows for the application of gender theory in this analysis. In a few of the primary texts used in this thesis, homosexuality is portrayed in terms consistent with liberal Western understandings as an issue separate from gendered behaviours. In other words, there are a few examples of characters who identify both as men and as gay, homosexual or some other synonymous term. These are highlighted and given special attention. In the clear majority of cases, however, sexuality is conceived not as a separate category but as a gender position. As such, insights from gender theory are useful to analysis of queer Vietnamese identities. As gender theory is not my academic background, this thesis does not attempt to critique these theories but rather to use the dominant paradigm, that of performativity, as a way of analyzing the clearly gendered queer identities that are prevalent in the literary sources studied in this thesis. This entails looking at patterns of variance across the primary sources. Accepting that queer identities are gender positions and that gender is constructed and performed through beliefs and social practices, this thesis uses

contemporary Vietnamese literature to look at what beliefs inform these constructions and what actions are constitutive of these identities and understood to be their expressions. The first two analytical chapters of this thesis focus on addressing these questions in relation to two specific identities.

Finally, debates within queer and gender theory as to the naturalness or otherwise of sex and gender categories offer other relevant criteria to consider. The third analytical chapter of this thesis looks at how Vietnamese writers present the nature and origins of these gendered/sexual identities as genetic, socialised, learned, contracted or voluntary, as these distinctions represent an important part of how these identities are understood. Though queer Vietnamese are generally not considered to be men, they are defined in a large part by the ways in which they deviate from what is expected of a man: they are not 'normal' and it is this abnormality that defines them as queer. In some examples, they are defined by their desire of normative men, in others they return to normality. In other cases the normality even of 'normal' men could be called into question, and in many places the definitions presented in chapters one and two are challenged and the distinctions between normal men and third gender queers become unclear when queers have long-term romantic and sexual partners who are, for various reasons, understood to be normal men. Analysing this normality is therefore an essential part of understanding why and how queer Vietnamese are seen as deviant, and the third chapter of this thesis considers these broader issues of what it means to be normal or queer in the context of contemporary Vietnamese society as presented in literature.

The theoretical backgrounds of representation and gender studies described above share a constructionist understanding of their subject matters. In this thesis, gender is accepted to be constructed based around imitation and aspiration towards unrealistic ideals rather than a natural state of being. Particular attention is paid to discussions of who or what can be considered masculine, feminine and transgressive in the primary texts, as these discourses are understood not only to represent but also to play a constitutive role in determining the meaning of these concepts and, in turn, creating queer identities and affecting the lives of queer Vietnamese. Similarly, the process of representation can be understood on one level to be an expression of cultural ideas and values, but from the cultural studies point of view accepted in this thesis it also has a deeper level of meaning and cultural products like those studied in this thesis play a part in the formation of the ideas that they represent. In either case, the identities discussed are

considered as both expressions of the authors' views on the subject matter and as a means understanding these constitutive processes in the context of contemporary Vietnam. These insights are applied in this thesis through textual analysis that looks at the surface level of details such as plot and character but focusses on the deeper level of meaning by grouping texts together by theme, intention and the particular understandings of gendered and sexual identities presented across different texts. By arranging the analysis in this way, this thesis aims to highlight these processes at work.

### c. Global Queering

A final theoretical discourse that is relevant to this thesis is the discussion on the extent and nature of international (particularly American and European) influences on the development of ideas, attitudes and practices of homosexuality throughout the world, a debate that is also referred to as Global Queering (Jackson 2000a; 2009). The historical context of the Global Queering argument is the proliferation of new queer identities in many societies that took place during the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> Many of these identities bear obvious similarities to the LGBT identities that had become popular in the West during the same period of time. The Global Queering argument was expressed succinctly by Altman, who offered an explanation of these phenomena. Framing his observations specifically from 1995 Manila, he noted that images originating in Western gay magazines had been imported to the Philippines and were being used for the advertisement of services targeting local gay men (Altman, 1996, p. 77). This observation introduces the topic of globalisation and Westernisation in non-Western queer scenes, and this paper lists many points of similarity between modern Western and non-Western understandings of homosexuality, noting that lesbians and especially gays are conceptualised worldwide:

In terms that are very much derived from recent American fashion and intellectual style: young, upwardly mobile, sexually adventurous, with an in-your-face attitude towards traditional restriction and an interest in both activism and fashion. (Altman, 1996, p. 77)

This paper contains numerous examples of subjectivities associated with Western LGBT identities that are now found globally, such as “lipstick lesbians” in Bangkok and Thailand, MSM who are nonetheless normative and homophobic in the USA and Philippines, and between effeminate “fags” in the former and transgender *bakla* in the latter country (Altman, 1996, pp. 77-78). The paper proceeds to detail in more specific terms the spread of gay bars and gay publications which had increased dramatically in non-Western countries in the previous years and especially since (the Stonewall riots of) 1969 (Altman, 1996, p. 86) All of these observations are useful to the discussion of the extent to which gay can now be understood as a global category.

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<sup>5</sup> An obvious example is the term ‘gay,’ variations of which are used in Vietnam, Indonesia (Murtagh 2007; 2010) Thailand (Jackson 2000a) the Philippines (Johnson, 1998) Brazil (Colic 1998) China (Yanhai 2001) , etc.

Post-Stonewall gay rights movements, cultural imperialism and the West's position of hegemonic power over much of the so-called Third World lend extra significance to Western ideas and foster an aspirational image of Western lifestyles that is conducive to processes of asymmetrical cultural exchange. The interaction of these outside influences with local customs, norms and conceptualisations of sex and gender produces varied and uneven results.

The Global Queering argument has been examined extensively both before and especially after Altman, and opinions have differed as to how the emergent identities should be explained. Altman's interpretation favours a high estimation of the role of globalising forces, and this paper concludes that:

The more I see, the more sceptical I am of sharp divides between Western and non-Western experiences of sexuality, and the surer I become that we cannot discuss sex/gender structures independent of larger socio-political ones.

(Altman, 1996, p. 91)

The observation that Global Queering is far less evident in China than in South America "suggests that there are social and cultural factors involved" (Altman, 1996, p. 78).

Quoting Peter Jackson, who argues that Thai homosexual male identities are largely uniquely Thai, Altman (1996) adds that, "I am less convinced that this formulation applies in other countries, where there is probably more of a rupture between traditional and modern forms of gay identity" (p. 88).

Drucker (1996) accepts a larger degree of Western influence in the formation of Third World homosexualities but looks at factors associated with culturally specific identifications in certain societies, writing that forms of sexuality that have their origins in Europe have since been exported to many Third World settings and that, "The range of sexualities that exists in the Third World today can be understood as a product of this combined and uneven development" (p. 83). In Drucker's estimation, these sexualities came from the West and their modern forms in Third World settings are European ideas adapted to their local culture. Areas that have experienced colonisation by Europeans are especially heavily influenced by Western ideas. Exemplifying this point in reference to South America, Drucker (1996) writes that:

Naturally, imported sexualities have been most significant in areas of greatest European settlement such as the Southern Cone, while indigenous sexualities have persisted most vigorously in Mesoamerica and the Andes... In South Asia,

by contrast, ruled by the British for only two centuries... imported sexualities are relatively less important. (p. 84)

Theorists contributing to the debate on Global Queering accept that clearly there are both international and local cultural influences at work when people in a non-Western context begin identifying themselves using labels and adopting cultural trappings associated with Western LGBT movements, and the disagreements are in reference to the extent of these forces.

There has a strong trend since the nineties for researchers to emphasise the cultural specificity and uniqueness of different cultures' conceptualisations of queerness. Writers including Kulick (1998), Massad (2007) and Chou Wah-Shan (2000) are among those to focus on the specificities and diversity of understandings of gender and sexuality in different contexts, positing that terms such as gay and lesbian, when applied in non-Western contexts, are the result of processes of transcultural reevaluation, appropriation and negotiation of ideas rather than of Western exportation and non-Western importation.

The debate on Global Queering is extremely well represented in South East Asia. Boellstorff's (2003a, 2003b) work on Indonesia Sinnott (2004) and Jackson's (2000a, 2000b) work on Thailand and Johnson's (1998) research on the Philippines have all highlighted the specificity and diversity of the forms that queerness takes in the region. Boellstorff (2003a) proposes that Indonesians come to view themselves as *gay* or *lesbi* through a process of what he calls 'Dubbing Culture.' As American cinema that is dubbed into Indonesian maintains its outward foreign appearance while being rendered intelligible to an Indonesian audience, so too are apparently foreign words such as *gay* and *lesbi* reinterpreted and inscribed with new meanings in the Indonesian context. Neither the film in which American stars appear to speak Indonesian nor the identities *gay* and *lesbi* can be understood to be either products of Western culture or indigenously Indonesian. There is no single authentic origin, Western or Indonesian, to the dubbed film or the global sexual identities, as both consist of asynchronous elements of two cultures and can only therefore be understood as products of cultural interaction (Boellstorff, 2003a, p. 226).

Similarly, on the topic of globalisation in the context of modern Thai queer identities, Jackson (1996) notes that:

The mere existence of the word 'gay' in the contemporary Thai language does not indicate that a global gay identity or a transnational homogenization of human sexuality is a necessary outcome of the impact of yet another universalizing world culture... Western notions of homosexuality and gay identity are also being accommodated within the Thai cultural framework, in the process becoming as much Thai as Western, if not more so. (pp. 118-119)

Readings of Boellstorff and Jackson's research have been influential in the formulation of the research aims of this thesis. Their work on Indonesian *gay* magazines (Boellstorff, 2004) and Thai queer identities (Jackson, 2000a) serve as models for this thesis, which is in part an attempt to transpose the issues raised in such existing research to a Vietnamese context.

The existence of research addressing similar issues to those examined in this thesis, while undoubtedly useful, is potentially a challenge to the value and originality of this research. This problem was posed by Johnson (1998), whose paper on transgender identities in the southern Philippines begins:

Traditionally, anthropologists have contributed to debates on gender and sexuality by indicating that such-and-such a society values and valorizes the practice of same-sex sexuality [differently from other societies including the anthropologist's own]. At best, such scholarship helps disrupt the universalization of the binary distinction between [homosexuality and heterosexuality, masculine and feminine]. At worst it is a kind of 'butterfly collecting' ... in which classification is a principal objective. (p. 695)

As this thesis documents and classifies Vietnamese sexualities, this concern is relevant and must be addressed. Clearly to anyone with an interest in Vietnam specifically, the existence of similar research in Chinese or Thai studies is of limited value, especially when the similarities that may exist in queer and gender issues between Vietnam and its neighbours have not yet been examined. These issues are well documented in Thai, Chinese, Filipino and Indonesian research but have been almost completely ignored in the Vietnamese context. It is certainly not for a lack of available sources that research of this sort has yet to be conducted, and this thesis is intended to begin to address this deficit. Though this goal in itself could potentially be considered classification for its own sake, other objectives in this research demonstrate a broader relevance beyond the fields of Vietnamese literary and queer studies. The Global Queering argument is a clear example of this. Though this research specifically focuses on how identities related to

sexuality and gender are adopted, appropriated, localised or rejected in the Vietnamese context, these processes are also interesting as examples of transnational flow of cultural ideas in general. As such, studies of this sort help to contribute to a broader understanding of how globalisation works and of Vietnam's relationships with its neighbours and with the West.

## Chapter 1

### ***Bóng Kín*: ‘Secret’ Queers and Dynamics of Desire Within Same-Sex Relationships**

#### **1.1 Introduction**

The following chapter considers examples of *bóng kín*, an identification that is made directly in relation to several characters and can be inferred in reference to many others in the primary sources used in this thesis. The individuals discussed herein are united by the fact that they present themselves socially as men, using predominantly masculine pronouns, generally wearing masculine clothes, largely eschewing makeup and jewellery and so on. This outward masculinity conceals (to varying degrees) the fact that they are *bóng*, the aforementioned term that loosely equates to ‘queer’ and denotes inclination towards gender-transgression and/or homoeroticism. The contradiction between outward appearance and inward nature is implicit in the term itself, as *bóng kín* literally means ‘secretly *bóng*’ and contrasts with *bóng lộ*, which means ‘openly *bóng*,’ a more obviously transgender category that is discussed in chapter two.

Given that *bóng kín* present as men while *bóng lộ* present as women, there are some similarities between these terms and the Western concepts of cisgender (i.e., male-bodied and masculine-gendered) gay men and trans women (male-to-female transgender people), respectively. However, the difference between *lộ* and *kín* implied in the terminology is only one of visibility and of openness versus invisibility and secrecy. Whether they are *lộ* or *kín*, all of these individuals share a *bóng* identity that becomes obvious [*lộ*] when (s)he dresses as a woman but is merely hidden [*kín*] when (s)he presents as a man. The terminology therefore suggests a fundamentally trans identity for all *bóng* which is distinct from the concept of a cisgender gay man, implying that their natural state is to present as women and that doing otherwise represents a deliberate attempt to conceal their feminine natures. Simultaneously, *bóng* who are *lộ* are conceptualised as having the same homosexually-inclined *bóng* identity as *bóng kín*, and therefore being sexually and romantically oriented towards men, which is distinct from the Western understanding of trans as a gender identity rather than a sexual orientation. The distinction between these two terms is therefore rather different to the distinction between cisgender gay and transgender, and these English terms are not adequate translations for the Vietnamese identities.

This chapter is divided into two sections, each based on a different conceptualisation of *bóng kín*. Though the ambiguous gender identity of the characters described herein is largely consistent throughout both sections, their interpretations of this identity and how it determines what relationships they pursue as a result of this identity are significantly different, as shall be shown.

## 1.2 *Bóng kín* who desire ‘real’ men

### 1.21 Shadow: Autobiography of a Homosexual [*Bóng: tự truyện của một người đồng tính*]

The first understanding of *bóng kín* is most clearly presented in explicit definitions throughout *Shadow: Autobiography of a Homosexual* (2008), hereafter referred to as *Shadow*. Despite its full title the authorship of this text is accredited to Hoàng Nguyên and Đoàn Trang rather to the subject of the biography, Nguyễn Văn Dũng, from whose first-person perspective the novel is written and whose picture appears on the book jacket but who is otherwise uncredited. This text is a long autobiography of a man born in Hanoi in 1967. Dũng’s being homosexual is obviously intended to be the main selling point of the book and the narrative focuses primarily on his romantic experiences and the problems that he faces on account his being *bóng* rather than on other aspects of his life.

*Shadow* offers many thorough and detailed explanations of queer issues, exemplified through Dũng’s own experiences and those of his peers. The terms gay, MSM, *bóng*, homosexual, third gender and Third World are all present in this text and are used synonymously. *Bóng*, the Vietnamese title of the text, is used most frequently, and the concepts of *kín* and *lộ* are central to Dũng’s explanations of queer identities. Dũng states that, “Male homosexuals are divisible into two groups, namely *bóng lộ* and *bóng kín*” (Hoàng Nguyên and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 68). *Bóng kín*, the group to which Dũng himself belongs, are defined as follows:

*Bóng kín*... are not extravert and are therefore difficult to recognise. You will be surprised the first time you meet a very masculine man with a thick chin-strap beard and hard muscles, dressed like a Western cowboy, and he turns out to be gay and only likes men. That, that’s what a *bóng kín* is. I’m a *bóng kín*. (Hoàng Nguyên and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 69)

In describing the inconspicuousness of *bóng kín* in Vietnam, the example of a muscular, bearded man dressed as a cowboy is perhaps poorly chosen. Such men are hardly a common sight in Hanoi, and would be highly conspicuous today, let alone during the period of time recounted in the novel, before the implementation of the Renovation and Open Door policies in the mid-eighties that opened Vietnam up to foreign tourism. The stated message in the passage is nonetheless clear; *bóng kín* are outwardly masculine

and difficult to distinguish from 'real' men. The fact that he mentions muscles, beards and masculine clothing conveys the point that *bóng kín* may appear not only to be men but to be stereotypically masculine men. This idea is explicitly affirmed elsewhere in the text when Dũng writes that *bóng kín* are different from normal men “in only one respect, that we have a different romantic orientation from everyone else” (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 19).

Dũng is a far more relatable example of *bóng kín* than that of the muscular cowboy. He is described by one of the text's ghostwriters as having dark skin (associated in Vietnam with people who do manual labour), a deep voice, and as looking “nothing like how I imagined a gay” (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 323). The editors also note that, “Compared to the majority [of *bóng*] in society, Dũng is an extremely normal individual” (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. ii). He is described as masculine in his outward appearance, being large and strong, a fact that is viewed as incongruous with his identity as *bóng* (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 127). Dũng generally uses masculine pronouns, and is therefore referred to as masculine in this thesis.

On the topic of *bóng* gender, Dũng writes that, “*Bóng kín* like me are still men but we love other men,” and contrasts this with *bóng lộ* who think that they are women (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 265). These statements indicate that the difference between *bóng lộ* and *bóng kín* is simple, that *bóng kín* are cisgender homosexual men while *bóng lộ* are trans women. This definition of *bóng kín*, predicated as it is on the separation of gender and sexuality as components of identity, is of course consistent with popular, liberal, Western understandings.

These explicit statements are contradicted by the way in which queer characters are represented throughout this and other texts. Dũng, and indeed all the *bóng* characters in *Shadow* without exception, are portrayed as being feminine. Dũng's femininity is emphasised from the very beginning of the novel, in a scene wherein he describes how he and one of his friends like to gossip about their relationships and recounts a conversation about Dũng's then boyfriend, Nhân. Dũng and his friend chat about their husbands, laughing and crying as they share their experiences and discuss strategies to avoid losing their husbands. Dũng's unnamed friend addresses him using a feminine pronoun, and the passage concludes:

We were just like any other pairs of ladies whispering gossip to one another. There was only one difference: we are not women. And Nhân was not a woman either. (Hoàng Nguyên and Đoàn Trang, 2008, pp. 14-15)

This fact is presented as being surprising, differing from the reader's presumed expectations. Their emotionality, predilection for gossip and the fact that they talk about their 'husbands' are all therefore expected to lead the reader to believe that they are women, establishing early in the text the fact that Dũng and his friends are men who seem like women.

One of Dũng's first explicit references to his own femininity comes early in his text when he strikes his then boyfriend Hùng. Seeing the anger on Hùng's face, Dũng finds himself even more attracted to him, and remarks that, "I was still angry but I still loved him, and that's what was so upsetting for the woman's heart inside me" (Hoàng Nguyên and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 31).

When he is depressed after Hùng leaves him, Dũng seeks out his mother for comfort, and notes that:

They say that when a girl has a lover she thinks only of him, and when her lover abandons her she immediately thinks of her mother. How right they are. (Hoàng Nguyên and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 32)

In the next paragraph Dũng refers to himself as his mother's "*only son*," using italics to draw attention to this contradiction between his conflicting identifications as a son and yet also a girl in need of maternal comfort on account of losing her boyfriend (Hoàng Nguyên and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 33).

*Bóng* in *Shadow* are therefore characterised as being men with the hearts of women. Dũng's feminine heart is used to explain his behaviour at times when he is emotional and also accounts for his feminine tastes and personality traits. These include the fact that he is fond of music, particularly the traditional Vietnamese folk opera *cải lương* (Hoàng Nguyên and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 113), and he enjoys cooking, boasting that he can cook better than any woman he has ever met (Hoàng Nguyên and Đoàn Trang, p. 256). Conversely, he is uninterested in typically masculine hobbies such as sports (Hoàng Nguyên and Đoàn Trang, p. 324). These factors are understood by Dũng himself and other characters in the text to be an expression of his artistic, sensitive and

therefore feminine nature and as proof of his lack of opposing masculine traits. These characteristics are typical of how *bóng* characters are described throughout *Shadow* and indeed throughout queer Vietnamese literature in general.

Though Dững does not dress in feminine clothes he does wear jewellery and grows his fingernails long. One of the story's editors draws attention to Dững's lack of masculinity when he notes with apparent amusement that Dững is a forty-year-old man who still likes receiving presents (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 337). Dững's friends at times address him as "aunt" [*di*] and one of *Shadow*'s editors observes that Dững's family address him using the same feminine pronoun, which Dững evidently enjoys (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 334). It is apparent therefore that despite Dững's masculine appearance, upon spending time with him the editors find him to be camp, to exhibit feminine behaviours and interests, to style his outward appearance in a manner that is feminine and to prefer that people he is close to address him using feminine pronouns. It is impossible therefore to reconcile the explicit statement that *bóng kín* are normative men with this text's portrayal of Dững himself.

The characteristics described thus far are representative of how *bóng kín* are described throughout queer Vietnamese literature. *Shadow*'s presentation of *bóng kín* personality traits and gender identity apply equally to all the texts analysed in this chapter, and the lack of consistency when describing the gendered behaviours of *bóng* is also highly typical of the primary sources used in this thesis. One aspect of *Shadow* which is remarkable, however, is its explanation of how *bóng kín* form relationships, and it is here that the distinction between the two categories of *bóng kín* arises.

Dững's understanding of these matters is shared by a relatively small number of texts, and these will be addressed first before considering other examples whose desires and behaviours are based around different criteria.

In *Shadow*, *bóng* are said to be unsuitable partners for one another. Relationships between two *bóng* are regarded by Dững as "cannibalism" [*ăn thịt đồng loại*], that he is repulsed rather than attracted to other *bóng*, a trait that he believes is "highly typical of *bóng* in general (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 221). This is explained by the fact that *bóng* have feminine spirits or essences. They are said to be unsuitable partners for one another because they lack in themselves the masculine essences that

they desire in their partners. Desire for masculine partners is therefore conceived as an innately feminine trait, and by extension anyone who is feminine enough to be attracted to men is too feminine to be attractive to *bóng*.

Unlike the explicit statements on the masculinity of *bóng kin*, this particular observation is shown to be accurate throughout the novel. There are many same-sex relationships in *Shadow*, ranging from brief sexual encounters to cohabiting arrangements that last for months (though seldom years), but all are between one partner identified as *bóng* (and its various synonyms) and another identified as a real, normal or 100% man. The feminine essences of the *bóng* in this text are not sufficient to make them viable partners to 'real' men who desire 'real' women, and as such they are not valid objects of desire to the men that they themselves desire. The partners of all the various *bóng* in *Shadow* are willing to enter into homosexual relationships only temporarily and in exchange for financial or other practical considerations. The fact that these *bóng* desire only 'real' men who by definition do not return these desires is therefore extremely significant in shaping the dynamics of the relationships concerned.

Dũng's lovers are mostly younger men who have travelled to Hanoi from their home provinces in rural areas of northern Vietnam. Separated from their families, they lack support networks in Hanoi, have low levels of education, limited incomes and no stable employment. They are under pressure to support not only themselves but also their families, to whom they are expected to regularly send money. Dũng is older, has his own business, owns his own house, is a native of Hanoi and is well-connected in various professional circles. He is therefore able to take advantage of their relative financial and social statuses by offering his prospective lovers accommodation, buying them expensive products, taking them to restaurants which they could not otherwise afford, and by directly giving them money in exchange for being his lover. This is not a cynical interpretation of these relationships, as Dũng himself characterises them in exactly this way. Describing the process through which he contrives to keep a prospective lover in Hanoi, Dũng writes succinctly of how offering money is "the method that gays always use to attract their lovers" (Hoàng Nguyên and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 24).

For the duration of their relationships, Dũng's boyfriends agree to live with him, have sex with him and be monogamously romantically and sexually faithful to him. Being in

an exclusive homosexual relationship poses some obvious problems for his young, heterosexual lovers, and they face gradually increasing pressure from two sources as their families expect them to fulfil their filial duties by getting married and having children while Dũng becomes extremely and increasingly jealous and hostile towards any perceived attempt to leave him or to have relationships with women.

In order to solve this latter problem, Dũng relies on his feminine heart, which allows him to predict and (in his estimation) outwit the women with whom he is in competition for his boyfriends' affections. This idea is expressed most clearly in one passage in which Dũng, with convoluted logic, decides that to protect his relationship with his boyfriend, Nhân, he must win the approval of Nhân's best friend, Quang, who has been making homophobic remarks. Dũng identifies a course of action as follows:

To achieve this I would have to behave very cleverly, and there was no better way than bribing Yến, Quang's girlfriend. Within myself I am fifty percent female, so I very clearly understand the psychology of a woman. (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 66)

In this situation Dũng's feminine essence works to his advantage as he is able to empathise with Quang's girlfriend and deduce a course of action that would not be obvious to a 'real' man. Similarly, when Dũng encounters Nga, Nhân's prospective girlfriend, he attempts to dissuade her from contacting Nhân by lying to her. Nga is not fooled: "Women are like that, so sensitive. To whatever extent I understood [Nhân], that's how much she could understand him too" (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 69).

Nga therefore shares Dũng's intuitions and is able to deduce his intentions despite his dissembling. In either circumstance Dũng conceives of himself as having feminine intuition, shared with 'real' women but not by 'real' men, and views the exercise of this intuition as crucial to his maintaining relationships with his lovers. Dũng's *bóng* identity is therefore associated with his understanding of female psychology and having emotional intelligence on par with that of women and superior to that of 'real' men.

Within his relationships, Dũng conceives of himself as being a wife or girlfriend and desires to be "cared for" (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 192). He enjoys taking over domestic responsibilities such as cooking for his boyfriends and tending to them while they are ill and speculates with ominous foreshadowing at one point that his

ideal boyfriend might be one who is paralysed and unable to leave his sick bed (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 220). The age difference in his relationships is significant because it affects pronoun use. Ordinarily, an older man addressing a younger man would use the pronoun combination *anh/em* (older masculine/younger gender neutral respectively), which is the same pronoun pairing used by heterosexual couples. This is uncomfortable for Dũng as it casts him in the specified masculine role in the context of relationships wherein he desires to be regarded as feminine. To avoid this association Dũng instead refers to his boyfriends using the gender neutral *minh*, used by husbands and wives, though when they are angry they call him grandfather [*ông*], emphasising both his masculinity and his age to annoy him.

Even Dũng's mother, who is aware of her son's romantic relationships but pretends that his various boyfriends are just his "adopted brothers" [*anh em kết nghĩa*] is said to understand that his relationships are based around his desire to play the role of a wife (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 55). Dũng remarks that his mother understood that he did not want a wife like other boys but instead wanted to find a man to be his husband. One image used in many of the sources studied in this thesis describes a same-sex couple riding through the countryside on a bicycle. Variations on this scene are remarkably common, always with the same implied meaning. In each case the more masculine partner controls the bike while his more feminine partner rides behind as a passenger. This romantic image is particularly associated with young, rural couples, and is always described as a scene of happiness from the point of view of the queer character. The significance of these scenes is always that they convey the sense that the more masculine partner is playing the traditionally male and more physically demanding role of driving or pedalling and allowing his more feminine partner to experience being 'taken care of' as a passenger, as Dũng and other homosexuals are said to desire. In *Shadow*, Dũng is older and lives in the city, but an urban recreation of this scene takes place as he writes specifically of his pleasure at driving around the city, hugging one of his boyfriends (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 47).

Another particularly interesting passage in *Shadow* describes Dũng's pride at having been physically struck by one of his jealous lovers, and how he subsequently boasts of this fact to his *bóng* friends. From Dũng's perspective the fact that his boyfriend cared enough to become violent, putting Dũng in the (assumed feminine) position of having an angry boyfriend was a demonstration of the kind of genuine emotion that is usually

lacking in his relationships. He explains, for the benefit of the novel's heterosexual readers, that the pleasure he experienced at perceiving this emotion was more significant than the pain of the blow itself. His *bóng* friends, he notes, would understand his feelings on this matter intuitively (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang 2008, pp. 202-203). Once again therefore this scene conveys the sense that Dũng's main priority in his relationships is being able to play the feminine role of girlfriend, and that the ability to play this role is more important than the specific form that the role takes.

For all that Dũng desires to be treated or even mistreated as a girlfriend, the practicalities of his relationships and their fundamentally transactional natures conspire to make this dream largely impossible. Dũng's financial obligation to his partners means that he is the primary or sole earner, paying for all of his lovers' living expenses. His relationships are threatened by the possibility of his boyfriends becoming financially independent or meeting women. As a result of these fears, Dũng is strongly opposed to his boyfriends looking for jobs, speaking to women or even leaving the house unattended. In economic terms therefore, Dũng occupies a traditionally masculine role and expects his boyfriends to stay at home and depend on his income. His desire that his boyfriends should constantly be chaperoned is similarly inconsistent with his desire that they behave like 'real' men and relate to him as they would with their girlfriends.

The fact that Dũng's partners are not ostensibly homoerotically inclined means that he is generally (though not always) in the position of making the romantic and sexual advances. His advances are often unwelcome, but Dũng is extremely persistent. During compulsory military service, Dũng fondles a superior officer in his sleep (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, pp. 44-45). When one of Dũng's earliest lovers is seemingly revolted by their first sexual encounter and threatens to break off further contact with him, Dũng sets the precedent for his behaviour in future relationships by refusing to take no for an answer. He instead begins to monitor the other man's movements, following him home from work and professing his love long after his advances have been repeatedly rejected. This causes angry confrontations (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, pp. 133-134). A further inconsistency with the conceptualisation of Dũng and his boyfriends as playing feminine and masculine roles respectively is therefore the fact that Dũng takes on the traditionally masculine role of initiating and pursuing his prospective lovers, and does so with great persistence, forcefulness and occasional violence.

Finally, Dũng's increasingly intense jealousy repeatedly results in him physically assaulting his lovers in the later stages of their relationships. Dũng may be feminine in his behaviour, heart and psychology, but his body is that of a large, strong man and he is generally able to overcome his boyfriends in physical fights. The fact that his boyfriends are usually much younger than him and also financially dependent upon him likely works to his advantage, impairing their ability and limiting their willingness to defend themselves. These fights occur frequently and publicly, and Dũng takes deliberate advantage of the humiliation his partners feel as he beats them in the street, tearing at their clothes and shouting details of their sex lives for the amusement of onlookers in what Dũng describes flippantly as a "*Nude exhibition on the street*" [*Triển lãm nude trên phố*] (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, pp. 145-151). One of his relationships ends with the literal escape of his boyfriend, who breaks down their locked door from the inside of their shared house while Dũng is at work (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 49). In the latter stages of his relationships Dũng uses threats of violence and humiliation to coerce his boyfriends into continuing to sleep with him. The anecdote about being struck by a jealous boyfriend shows that Dũng enjoys conceiving of himself as a girlfriend who has to be careful around her tough, masculine partner, but in this respect, as in several others, the opposite is true and it is in fact Dũng's boyfriends who are physically intimidated into acquiescing to the demands of their jealous and abusive lover.

The gender dynamics of same-sex relationships are therefore highly convoluted in cases of individuals such as Dũng. Conceiving of himself both as a normative man who differs only in his sexual orientation and also as a female soul in a man's body, Dũng wants to be loved as a wife, but only by a man who exclusively desires women. For a man to actually offer Dũng this love would reduce their relationship to "cannibalism," and would disqualify him as a potential partner. Within a relationship he wants to play the part of a wife, to be protected and provided for even as he takes over traditionally male duties and forces his partners to accede to his wishes through deliberately contrived economic dependence, emotional abuse and threats of physical violence. His partners, meanwhile, are constantly plied with gifts to maintain their interest and are expected to play the role of husband, but must simultaneously respect his highly restrictive rules, avoid contact with the opposite sex and stay at home while he earns their keep.

Dũng is aware that his own criteria for selecting potential partners preclude him from ever having a relationship in which his feelings are reciprocated, or indeed in which his partners could realistically be content. The first half of the novel is devoted primarily to Dũng's tries to find relationships in which all of these desires can be reconciled, but by the end of the novel has resigned himself to having a string of short relationships with men who are willing to be with him only until they become financially independent and can begin looking for wives. Any longer-term or reciprocal relationships are, in Dũng's estimation, impossible for *bóng* to obtain, and he writes of the sadness and loneliness that are a common feature of *bóng* identity as a result. This sense of despair and the impossibility of having the kind of normal family life that he desires leads him to remark that:

If there is such a thing as reincarnation, please God let me be a normal man, or a normal woman, any gender is okay as long as I'm normal like everyone else. It sounds like a simple wish, but God knows to me and my friends normality is something that we can never have. (Hoàng Nguyên and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 93)

The relationships described in *Shadow* are to some extent unique, and none of other primary sources used in this thesis state that *bóng* exclusively desire heterosexual men, nor characterise two *bóng* loving each other as cannibalism. Nonetheless in several other texts a correlation between normative masculinity and attractiveness to *bóng* can be inferred, as the characters in question seek out relationships with 'real' men preferentially to relationships with other *bóng*, and these examples are discussed hereafter.

### 1.22 AC Kinsey's Method [*Phương pháp của A.C. Kinsey*]

Other significant representations that suggest *bóng* exclusively desire 'real' men occur in *AC Kinsey's Method* by Bùi Anh Tấn (2008). This novel follows several interlinked storylines, presented in non-chronological order, which are connected by themes of homoeroticism and gender transgression. The title of the novel refers to Alfred Kinsey, the famous American sexologist and founder of the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction. The subject matter of the book deals with issues of sex and gender, but no one in the text utilises or even explains what is meant by 'AC Kinsey's Method,' so it is unclear why the novel was given this title.

One relatively minor queer character in this novel is Pho, who is the proprietor of a brothel. Pho shares several traits with Dũng and other *bóng kìn*, identifying primarily as masculine but with feminine traits and affectations. Pho's behaviour is far more transgressive than Dũng's, and he will be considered as potential example of a *bóng lộ* in chapter two. It is difficult to say with any certainty which English pronouns are most appropriate as his (or her) preference is never expressed, though he is referred to as the 'madame' of his brothel. Masculine pronouns are used in this thesis on the basis that *bóng kìn* generally use masculine pronouns.

Pho is promiscuous and overtly sexual, running a successful brothel and flirting outrageously with his staff, with whom he also has sex. His main failing is said to be his weakness for men [*cái tội mê trai*]. This is explained as follows:

His fatal flaw was that whenever he met a handsome man, the stronger and more *Man* [sic] they were the more Pho wanted to die on the spot, wanted to have private time with him just once and was willing to spend any amount of money. (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, p. 49)

Pho's main priority in seeking out lovers is therefore that they should be masculine. The fact that his attempts to woo such individuals are quantifiable in financial terms and successful only temporarily indicates that these relationships are transactional. As the wealthy owner of a lucrative and unscrupulous brothel, Pho's employees include many young sex workers who are heavily indebted to him financially, are in some cases addicted to drugs which Pho supplies, and are generally available to him sexually. Pho has no shortage of available sexual partners, but chooses to seek out masculine 'real' men who require inordinate amounts of money in exchange for temporary indulgences.

This indicates that, like Dũng, he regards negotiating sex with a 'real' man as preferable to having non-transactional sex with another *bóng*.

Other than these transient and transactional encounters, Pho has a more long-term arrangement with a masculine gangster named Hoàng Long. Hoàng Long is identified as a 'real' man and works as an enforcer for Pho's illegal enterprises. He also has a managerial role in Pho's brothel and is Pho's preferred sexual partner (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, pp. 55-56). He does not reciprocate Pho's feelings, but is paid well for his services and regards having sex with Pho on rare occasions as part of his job. Their relationship is therefore transactional but not overtly so, as Hoàng Long's sexual availability to Pho is part of a broader negotiated living arrangement. Hoàng Long, like Dũng's boyfriends, is a homosexually active 'real' man who has a relationship that involves having sex with *bóng* in return for practical benefits. In this respect, too, Pho's sexual behaviour therefore fits with the definition of *bóng* identity presented in *Shadow*. The most notable point of distinction between the two understandings is the fact that while Pho prefers his men to be as "Man" as possible, he is nevertheless also sexually active with other queers without apparently finding this behaviour logically problematic. The issue of whether or not this 'cannibalism' is seen as morally problematic is not addressed, and is difficult to assess particularly considering the fact that Pho's behaviours are generally highly immoral.

In addition to his other duties, Hoàng Long has sex with the prostitutes who work in Pho's brothel for the purposes of training. They are obliged to have sex with him without financial recompense and to be receptive to his instruction. More specifically, when the young protagonist Trung begins to work for Pho's brothel he is asked whether or not he has ever had anal sex, with the understanding that Hoàng Long will demonstrate if Trung has no prior experience (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, pp. 151-167). Hoàng Long is so unanimously desirable to the *bóng* who work in the brothel that no one resents this obligation, and opportunities to have sex with him are not regarded as impositions but are instead the subjects of jealous gossip. Hoàng Long's dealings with *bóng* in general therefore support the idea that the ideal partner for *bóng* is a masculine, heterosexual man. This too is consistent with the definition presented in *Shadow* of *bóng* predominantly desiring 'real' men.

The third and final character in this text who demonstrates a similar inclination is Rich Phạm, a masculine and successful businessman. Rich is a desirable man, being wealthy, athletic, handsome and intelligent. One of the characters in the text describes him as being, “The perfect man, so perfect that it was difficult to find anything about which to criticise him” (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, p. 114). He is shown to be attractive to both men and women and is followed to Vietnam by his younger personal assistant and lover, a foreigner by the name of Luca Toni who is mentioned only briefly (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, p. 344). Rich is also the object of lifelong unrequited love by an effeminate *bóng* named Bằng. Neither of these characters are seemingly of interest to Rich, however, and he spends the majority of the book pursuing an older, heterosexual, man named Cường, who is the story’s main protagonist and is engaged to be married. Cường is described in similar terms to Rich as masculine, intelligent and desirable, and is specifically complimented by Rich on his athletic physique (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, pp. 128-129). Cường seems oblivious to Rich’s intentions until he and Rich have a drunken sexual encounter. When he has sex with Rich, Cường is drunk and is described as having “lost control” (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, pp. 141-150).

In spite of the apparent ease with which Rich could attract willing partners, he chooses to pursue a long, ethically dubious and highly impractical relationship with a masculine man who is unavailable to him on account of his inclinations and his relationship status. There is therefore evidence that Rich is another example of a *bóng* who, like Pho and Dũng, is willing invest a lot of effort, time and money into obtaining temporary, transactional encounters with masculine men.

The representations of Pho, Rich and Hoàng Long all support the idea that the ideal partner for a *bóng* is a masculine heterosexual man. Rich fits the explicit definition of *bóng kín* presented in *Shadow* as being masculine men indistinguishable from 'real' men, and is a stronger example of queer masculinity than any of the characters in *Shadow*. Pho is feminine in his behaviour and affectations, and is therefore similar to how all *bóng* characters are actually represented in *Shadow*. The portrayal of Hoàng Long indicates that masculine 'real' men represent the ideal partners of *bóng*. In each instance the characters demonstrate a preference for masculine heterosexuals over other homosexuals.

### 1.23 Draft [*Nháp*]

Finally, *Draft*, by Nguyễn Đình Tú (2011) involves a minor queer character whose romantic and sexual inclinations are consistent with the definitions studied in this section of this chapter. This novel describes an enduring friendship between two men named Thạch and Đạt, who are childhood friends and whose personal, professional and romantic lives are entwined. At the beginning of the novel Thạch is relatively wealthy while Đạt is poor, and Thạch works as a journalist while Đạt goes to prison. By the end of the text their fortunes are reversed and Đạt has become professionally successful while Thạch faces a custodial sentence after committing murder.

Neither of the protagonists are identified as homosexual, but there is persistent evidence that Thạch is to some extent homoerotically inclined. As a teenager, he makes some subtle sexual advances towards Đạt, expressing an interest in watching pornography and masturbating with him (Nguyễn Đình Tú, 2011, p. 47). As an adult, Thạch has a foreign girlfriend named Meloni, whom he regards as beautiful but with whom he has difficulty performing sexually. Thạch also keeps a forum dedicated to phallic linga art, and through this website he meets and befriends a homosexual man who claims to be a doctor who tells him on their first meeting that penises “are [his] profession” (Nguyễn Đình Tú, 2011, pp. 79-81). From this description Thạch assumes that the doctor may be a urologist. The doctor uses the online name of ‘Galacloai’ [*gã lạc loài*], which translates as ‘Out of Place Guy.’ The term ‘out of place’ [*lạc loài*] is also used in the title of an earlier queer autobiography of Phạm Thành Trung, *Not Out of Place* [the Vietnamese title being *Không lạc loài*]. The doctor’s online name therefore serves as a clue to his sexuality. Upon their first meeting, Thạch observes that the doctor is “gay *chìm*,” literally an “undercover gay,” and notes the doctor’s soft, cool hands, his beautiful eyes and his expensive toiletries as being entirely consistent with his assumptions about gays (Nguyễn Đình Tú, 2011, pp. 213-215).

Thạch initially resists the doctor’s requests to meet in person, but eventually agrees to visit him at his home to obtain medicine to help him perform sexually with Meloni. The medicine in question is specifically some kind of supplement which helps Thạch to sustain an erection and makes his penis bigger, and Thạch believes that he requires both of these effects in order to satisfy his girlfriend. At the doctor’s house he is plied with sake until he is drunk enough to agree to have sex. This sets the precedent for their subsequent encounters. Thạch begins to visit the doctor at home regularly with the

express purpose of obtaining this medication, but always agrees to drink with the doctor and then has sex with him in a state of lowered inhibitions (Nguyễn Đình Tú, 2011, pp. 217-218). Thạch is extremely unhappy with this arrangement and talks repeatedly of how he feels tricked by the doctor, whom he despises. His anger and resentment build throughout the story, but do not result in a change in his behaviours until the conclusion. His explanation that he is tricked is not therefore reasonable, as Thạch continues to visit and have sex with the doctor long after the pattern of their sex-for-drugs relationship has become established. He also speaks of feeling coerced, which is more plausible given his dependence on the medication that the doctor provides, but he does not make any apparent effort to source his medication elsewhere, to find alternatives or to go without. For the purposes of this chapter, the most interesting scene in their relationship occurs during the final confrontation, when Thạch demands to know why the doctor continues to force Thạch to have sex with him, reasoning that it would be easy for the doctor to find partners of either gender. The doctor replies only vaguely that he is drawn to cold individuals such as Thạch, and their story culminates in Thạch murdering the doctor and subsequently being sent to prison (Nguyễn Đình Tú, 2012, pp. 314-317).

The doctor therefore exhibits similar behaviours to the queer characters previously discussed in this chapter. Unlike Dũng, but in common with Pho and Rich Phạm, the doctor's desires are shown to be purely sexual, and he expresses no obvious interest in having a romantic relationship with Thạch. He uses alcohol to overcome Thạch's resistance to his advances, and in this respect his behaviour resembles Rich Phạm's approach to having sex with Cường in *AC Kinsey's Method*. Unlike Cường, however, Thạch regards this as rape. It is unclear in the case of the doctor whether his dealings with Thạch constitute his typical sexual behaviour or whether this relationship is unique. None of the doctor's other partners, if they exist, are described and it is unclear whether or not he is also sexually active with other queers or exclusively pursues 'real' men.

The doctor, like the other queer characters described in this chapter thus far, is evidently attracted to a 'real' heterosexual man and is willing to go to extreme lengths to satisfy this desire. His interactions with Thạch imply that he regards transactional or even coercive sex with a 'real' man as preferable to consensual sex with another *bóng*. He also resembles these characters in that he is willing to pay a high price and engage in unethical behaviours in order to satisfy a desire for partners who would otherwise be

unavailable. Simultaneously however Thạch's reaction, demanding to know why the doctor chose him over other homosexuals, indicates an understanding of queer sexuality wherein queers are logical partners for one another rather than exclusively desiring 'real' men. The doctor's behaviours are therefore similar to those of the other *bóng kín* characters described in this chapter, but Thạch (from whose perspective the story is recounted) evidently does not share this understanding, and views the doctor's behaviour as illogical and confusing.

### 1.24 Conclusions

The *bóng* discussed in this chapter thus far are united by the fact that they demonstrate desires for men who are masculine and heterosexual. Each of the *bóng* characters examined have been shown to pursue relatively unavailable heterosexuals in spite of the obvious practical issues implicit in these relationships. In several cases the characters' pursuits of these uninterested men result in immoral behaviour and sexual encounters that could accurately be termed rape, utilising coercion, drugs and alcohol to overcome a lack of consent. These actions are not always presented as being rape within the texts themselves. In other instances, arguably in every other instance, these desires are fulfilled through various forms of prostitution, though again this is not always how these exchanges are characterised in the texts.

The degree to which these desires are a driving force that shapes the characters' relationships and sexual experiences varies considerably between different sources. In *Shadow*, attraction to 'real' men is afforded the greatest importance. In spite of the author's claim to speak from a position of authority on behalf of *bóng* in general, the understanding of these issues presented in this text is unique in several respects, and one of these is that this text alone posits masculine heterosexuality as an essential prerequisite for being the object of *bóng* desire.

The various *bóng* in *AC Kinsey's Method* are sexually active with other *bóng* in spite of the fact that they are evidently willing to go to great lengths to obtain the temporary affections of 'real' men. The male prostitutes working in Pho's brothel in this text swoon at the sight of the masculine Hoàng Long, as does Pho himself, but the brothel caters primarily to homosexual customers who seek *bóng* companions. Hoàng Long might therefore be conceived as the ideal partner for *bóng* individuals, but they are also shown to desire each other sexually and to have sexual relationships with one another.

Similarly, Rich Phạm's pursuit of Cường seems indicative of some degree of preference for masculine men over other homosexuals, but Rich also has a homosexual-identified lover in the form of Luca Toni, his personal assistant. In *Draft*, the doctor pursues a longwinded and uncertain relationship with Thạch, which becomes sexual only because Thạch feels that he needs specific medication that the doctor can provide and is grudgingly willing to offer sex in exchange. Here too however this is not accepted as a matter of course, and his behaviour is directly challenged as being illogical. It never

becomes clear whether or not the doctor generally seeks out men who are like Thạch as opposed to other homosexuals.

Almost every primary text studied in this thesis describes at least one relationship between two *bóng*, including the texts discussed so far in this chapter. Even Dũng's own partners, who are accepted as 'real' men according to his interpretation, will be considered in a later chapter as potential examples of masculine homosexuals rather than homosexually active heterosexuals. The relationship model presented in *Shadow* is therefore not widely replicated, and is never accepted as being the normal form that relationships based upon homoerotic desires take in other texts. Nevertheless, the logic that feminine *bóng* naturally and logically desire masculine, heterosexual 'real' men is based upon an understanding of sexuality and gender that is evident throughout much of queer Vietnamese literature, as shall be shown hereafter.

Similar understandings have been demonstrated by queer theorists working elsewhere in South East Asia. In the Philippines, Johnson's (1998) ethnography on *gay* identities reveals same-sex relationships based on ideas similar to those discussed thus far. The individuals in Johnson's study self-identify as gay, but are also identified as transgender and are not therefore the cisgender homosexual men generally associated with the term in English. The specific conceptualisation of this identity as both a sexual identity and a gender position is identical to that presented by Dũng in *Shadow*; the individuals in question are understood to have women's hearts inside men's bodies. This feminine essence determines the gender (and sexuality) of the objects of their desire. Johnson (1998) writes that, "Like 'women,' the object (*krush*) of gay sexual desire is said, both by gays and others, to be men, not women or other gays" (p. 697).

In Johnson's article, as in the examples discussed so far in this chapter, the individuals in question are shown to pursue relationships with 'real' men. Johnson distinguishes between various forms that these relationships take. In some cases, these relationships are blatantly transactional, consisting of short-term purely sexual relationships between gay men and the straight men and boys that they pay directly for sex (Johnson 1998, pp. 701-702). These are relatively simple, and reflect the behaviour of characters such as Pho, who spends lots of money to have sex with 'real' men for just one night.

The gay individuals discussed in Johnson's ethnography actually desire to be treated as a wife or as a girlfriend by their masculine boyfriends, but these desires are impossible to realise on account of several factors that closely resemble the issues implicit in Dũng's relationships in *Shadow*. These include the fact that they must be the sole or primary earner in order to maintain their partners' interest, and must take an active role in initiating their relationships, both of which are traditionally roles that men are expected to play in relation to their girlfriends (Johnson, 1998, p. 705). The heterosexual partners of these gays may present their feelings as being romantic, pretending to return the affections of their gay lovers, but this is understood by the gays in question to be disingenuous (Johnson, 1998, p. 702). The gay partners hope to form cohabiting relationships with their straight boyfriends, an arrangement that affords them the opportunity to inhabit the feminine roles that they desire to fulfil at home by taking over the traditional domestic duties of wives and girlfriends. Such arrangements are however said to be rare and short-lived, and these relationships are understood to ultimately doomed by the fact that the two partners have such incompatible desires. Young gay Filipinos pursue these romantic relationships with unrealistic expectations of long-term and reciprocal love, while older and more experienced gays are pragmatic and limit their expectations to more transient and transactional relationships.

In all of these respects, the relationships described by Johnson exactly reflect the concept of homosexuality and its associated desires as defined in *Shadow*. The transgender identification, its resulting configuration of genders and desires, and the complicated and conflicted nature of the relationships it produces bear extremely strong resemblances to Dũng's experiences of these same issues. Dũng's relationships could all be characterised as commoditised but not overtly transactional, he is likewise frustrated by his partners who indulge his desires for ultimately selfish reasons, and as he grows older he becomes resigned to the fact that his desires are impossible to fulfil and he must therefore settle for the short-term relationships that are still available to him. There is therefore evidence that the relationships described in this novel resemble those from this other South East Asian context, and these are markedly different from popular Western understandings in spite of the shared jargon.

One important aspect of the gendered dynamics of these identities in the Philippines that is absent from the Vietnamese examples discussed thus far is a sexual component, and more specifically the assumption that sexual roles are divisible into masculine and

feminine desires consistent with the broader social identifications. In other words, the respondents in Johnson's ethnography understand that feminine gays desire to be penetrated and their masculine boyfriends desire or are only willing to take the penetrative sexual role. Johnson (1998) wrote:

Gays say that "like women" they desire to be penetrated or "worked" by a "'real' man": they distinguish between "'real' men" and gays by their respective positions as penetrating and penetrated partner in sexual intercourse. (p. 697)

Ostensibly 'real' men who demonstrate a willingness to engage in sexual acts where they are penetrated, such as giving oral sex or receiving anal intercourse are suspected of not being 'real' men at all. Specific epithets are applied to such individuals to convey the sense that gays penetrating one another (when one is claiming to be a 'real' man) are unnatural and immoral, and sex of this sort is characterised as incest (Johnson, 1998, p. 697). Here too therefore there are similarities between Filipino concepts of homosexuality and the definitions discussed thus far. In *Shadow*, sex between two *bóng* is also weird, unnatural and characterised as cannibalism, which conveys a similar meaning.

There is a general lack of detailed information as to what sexual acts the queer characters discussed in the primary texts perform. The paucity of information on specifically sexual acts is not limited to any particular identities or texts but is characteristic of all of the primary texts studied in this thesis, which tend to refer to sex only obliquely or euphemistically. Many do not refer to sex at all. There are a few references to Dũng's sexual behaviour that suggest that he takes the penetrated role during sex, which would be consistent with the role he desires to play as a wife and girlfriend. Specifically, he writes of one of his partners being able to, "keep going for a long time" as a result of his dependency on "heroin" [sic] (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, p. 214). The fact that the duration of their sexual encounter was determined by the other man's stamina suggests that Dũng played the passive role in their intercourse. On the other hand, during some of his sexual encounters with his partners when they are drunk and not inclined to have sex, Dũng is able to obtain his gratification from them while they lie still and are otherwise uncooperative, suggesting that Dũng took the active role and his partners allowed themselves to be penetrated. Neither of these characterisations are conclusive, however, and at most one could deduce that Dũng is implied to play both roles at different times.

Similar ambiguities are present in the other examples described in this chapter. In *AC Kinsey's Method*, it is not specified what role Pho prefers to take with the 'real' men that he entertains, but his preferred partner, Hoàng Long, teaches the young *bóng* in the brothel about anal sex, inquiring if they are virgins and then demonstrating having sex with them (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, p. 262). Much like Dũng's heroin dependent lover, during sex Hoàng Long is praised for his remarkable athleticism and stamina, which again suggests that he plays the active, penetrating role consistent with his general masculinity. Pho also disparages post-operative trans women, stating that they will never be able to compete with 'real' women and that they will still have to make love in the "traditional" [*cổ điển*] homosexual fashion (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, p. 152).

Presumably this refers to his understanding that trans women are either unable to have vaginal sex or unable to find partners who want to have vaginal sex with them, and that they must continue to have receptive anal sex as a result, as clearly post-operative trans women could not continue to play the penetrative role. It is strongly suggested therefore that Pho plays the passive role in sex, and regards this as normal behaviour for *bóng*.

Rich Phạm in *AC Kinsey's Method* and the doctor in *Draft* share a similar approach when it comes to seducing straight men, plying them with alcohol. There is no clear indication of what role the doctor and Rich take in these scenes, or if they have anal sex at all, but in either case the *bóng* characters are able to have sex in spite of — or more accurately because of — the fact that their partners are intoxicated to the point of insensibility. This suggests that they take penetrating roles, exploiting their partners' inability to resist rather than attempting to persuade or seduce or them. Thạch's account of his sexual encounters with the doctor are vague and euphemistic, indicating a nightmarish, fugue-like experience, but the specific metaphor that he chooses to describe their sexual contact is being covered in snakes (Nguyễn Đình Tú, 2008, p. 217). Presumably the snakes here are a phallic metaphor, and his being covered in them might therefore be an indicator that he was penetrated by the doctor. While some of the examples above support the notion that active and passive roles in penetrative sex are consistent with these masculine and feminine identifications, evidence is very limited and this distinction is not presented as being important. This is therefore a point of distinction between these *bóng* identities and similar identities recorded in the Philippines, China and elsewhere in South East Asia.

The works discussed so far are typical of the books used in this thesis in that sex scenes are almost entirely absent and sex is almost never described in any detail. The fact that these masculine and feminine, husband and wife roles are rooted explicitly in social behaviours and lack the sexual component referenced in research on other contexts may be significant, or may simply be an indication of the relatively conservative standards of Vietnamese literature and the result of censorship and editing in texts that were intended to be commercially available. It is entirely possible therefore that ethnographic research would show a clearer link between masculine and feminine social roles and penetrating and penetrated sexual roles, thereby demonstrate further similarities to the other Chinese and South East Asian queer identities.

In summary, the identifications studied in this section are clearly different from the liberal Western notion of the cisgender gay man and the trans woman, as the queer characters are conceived as inwardly transgender but outwardly normative. The specific criteria that drive these individuals to seek masculine, heterosexual partners is intrinsically linked to this trans understanding of their identities, as masculinity and femininity are both conceived as being attractive to individuals whose essential being is that of the opposite sex. In a sense therefore none of the relationships discussed thus far are homosexual, as all are conceived being between two individuals with different genders, albeit the same biological sex. As there is no distinction between sex and gender in Vietnamese and as *bóng* is conceived as a gender position, the relationships discussed thus far are all between opposite-gendered individuals.

The model presented in *Shadow* is shared by a relatively small number of texts, and all examples of this understanding outside of *Shadow* are qualified by the fact that attraction to 'real' men is never again shown to be either a necessary criterion for defining homosexuality or the only form of desire that homosexual characters have. Judging by the primary texts used in this thesis therefore, the model of queer relationships as being primarily and necessarily based around transactional exchanges with heterosexual partners does not represent a popular understanding of these issues. The understanding of *bóng kìn* identity presented by Dững nevertheless closely resembles other queer identities from non-Western contexts. While the specific dynamics of queer desire discussed in this section are not widely distributed, the understandings of sex, gender, homosexuality and masculinity represented in this

section are useful for analysing other conceptualisations of queer identities throughout this research, as shall be shown.

### 1.3 *Bóng kìn* who desire one another

#### 1.31 Introduction

Outside of the examples described in the previous section, queer characters in Vietnamese literature are shown to form romantic and sexual relationships with one another, with no implication that 'real' men are preferable partners let alone the only partners logically available. This distinction is obviously significant as it allows for the possibility of requited love and relationships based upon mutual affection rather than overtly or tacitly transactional arrangements. Love, loss, jealousy and heartbreak are extremely common themes in queer Vietnamese literature, and almost every primary text used in this thesis includes at least one relationship between two *bóng* individuals. The difference between *bóng* who desire each other and those who only desire 'real' men is therefore very profound in shaping the experiences of the characters concerned, as their relationships are not limited to transactional arrangements. In spite of these significant differences however, same-sex relationships continue in most instances to be based around similar understandings of masculinity and femininity as an attractive pairing. In the context of relationships between two *bóng* this binary is embodied through distinction between relatively masculine and relatively more feminine *bóng*, who are in several texts conceived as logical partners for one another.

Whereas *Shadow* offers clear definitions of the author's understandings that are not widely shared, the notion of a gender divide within same-sex relationships is widely distributed throughout the primary sources used in this thesis but seldom defined or named. This leads to a different set of challenges for the purposes of analysis, as examples are plentiful but meanings must always be extrapolated. As in the previous section, this chapter begins by considering explicit definitions in one text before comparing this understanding with how these issues are represented throughout queer Vietnamese literature, and concludes by considering these examples in the context of other regional queer theory.

### 1.32 Not Out of Place [*Không lạc loài*]

The clearest definitions of binary gender dynamics within in the context of relationships between two queers are found in *Not Out of Place*. This text bears many similarities to *Shadow*, being an autobiographical novel detailing the experiences of an individual who identifies both as *bóng kín* and as a man. In *Not Out of Place*, as in *Shadow*, the book is described as an autobiography but the subject of the biography is not credited as a writer of his own autobiography. Rather strangely the opening lines of the book read, “**I WROTE THÀNH TRUNG’S AUTOBIOGRAPHY**” (capitalisation and bold in original) in a foreword by the ghostwriter Lê Anh Hoài. This seems particularly unusual given that Trung is himself a professional writer, albeit a journalist rather than a novelist. It is nevertheless narrated in first person from Trung’s point of view. There are also many stylistic and structural similarities between the two texts, as both are fictionalised accounts of a *bóng kín* Vietnamese growing up in a large city and dealing with issues of acceptance, stigma and romance. In either text, the narrative is presented in non-chronological order, with more significant relationships being described towards the beginning of the text and the narrators’ life experiences being grouped together by theme rather than chronology as they explain various aspects of queer life and *bóng* identity for the benefit of a reader who is explicitly assumed to be heterosexual.

Trung is a gender-normative man whose *bóng* identity is not immediately apparent. He wears masculine clothes without the jewellery and long nails that Dũng favours, uses masculine pronouns and enjoys sports (Lê Anh Hoài, 2008, p. 16). Trung therefore appears more masculine than Dũng, without the camp behaviours and feminine identifications which the editors of *Shadow* observe, but both are examples of *bóng kín* and Trung specifically references Dũng’s earlier text when making this self-identification (Lê Anh Hoài, 2008, p. 58).

As in *Shadow*, Trung uses several terms including gay, homosexual, third gender and Third World interchangeably. The distinction between Trung and the characters described in the previous section becomes clear when Trung writes of what he looks for in a boyfriend. Trung’s partners are not ‘real’ men but other *bóng*. He states, “I am a top. And so naturally I love bottom[s]” (Lê Anh Hoài, 2008, p. 59).

Trung uses the verbatim English terms (though without pluralisation). He does not explain these words to the reader, but translates them as [on] top and under[neath]. It is

clear that these terms refer, as they do in English, to active and passive anal sex because this same text contains by far the most explicit description of homosexual sex found in any of the primary texts studied in this thesis. Recounting his first sexual encounter with his boyfriend, identified only by the initial, K, Trung writes that, “K squeezed his eyes shut as I entered deep inside him. Without any discomfort, he accepted me readily and easily” (Lê Anh Hoài, 2008, p. 19).

This description is the only time any of the primary texts used in this thesis describes anal sex with the slightest degree of mechanical detail. Though he does not specify what part of K’s anatomy he is entering easily, taken alongside the author’s explanation of top and bottom roles his meaning is clear.

Trung states explicitly that top and bottom are only sexual roles, that some bottoms are masculine and that many *bóng* perform both roles at different times and with different partners, potentially being ‘top’ in relation to some partners but ‘bottom’ in relation to others. According to these definitions therefore, top and bottom describe transient sexual preferences rather than essential identities. Simultaneously however he states that, “Of course” lots of bottoms are feminine, conveying that it is logical and obvious that individuals who prefer being penetrated sexually will tend towards effeminacy, but that there are “also other bottom[s]” who are masculine, implying that these represent a smaller, exceptional part of a larger group (Lê Anh Hoài, 2008, pp. 58-59). Trung’s explicit definitions of these terms therefore show a correlation between top and bottom sexual roles and masculine and feminine social behaviours, respectively. In this text, as in *Shadow*, the explicit definitions presented are stated to be simple but are contradicted by the broader understandings presented in the narrative.

The notion of a gender divide that goes beyond purely sexual roles is certainly evident in Trung’s own experiences. He has several long-term relationships, which are regarded as informal marriages (Lê Anh Hoài, 2008, p. 26). His partners are considerably younger and less wealthy than Trung himself, being students while Trung is employed. He is therefore the breadwinner in their cohabiting relationships while his boyfriends take primary responsibility for domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning. The masculine and feminine social roles played by Trung and his boyfriends are affirmed in several scenes that are repeated in other texts, such as when Trung falls ill and his boyfriend cooks for him and otherwise cares for him at home (Lê Anh Hoài, 2008, pp.

183-184). When Trung moves to a new house and his friends who are also tops help him with the heavy lifting, their bottom partners observe and chat (Lê Anh Hoài, 2008, p. 26). In *Not Out of Place*, as in other texts in which similar scenes are present, moments when Trung and his boyfriend are able to actively demonstrate masculine and feminine social roles are an obvious source of satisfaction.

Trung's partners are generally feminine while he is masculine (Lê Anh Hoài, 2008, p. 111). The distinction between Trung and his partners in terms of their masculinity is addressed directly in *Not Out of Place* in language that is not repeated elsewhere. Trung writes that he is *bóng kín* while his boyfriends are generally *bóng lộ* (Lê Anh Hoài, 2008, pp. 58-59). This is presumably a reference to the fact that his boyfriends are easily recognisable as being *bóng*, which is to say that their being *bóng* is *lộ*, or obvious, while Trung's being *bóng* is *kín*, meaning secretive or hidden, on account of the fact that he appears to be masculine and is not therefore immediately recognisable as being *bóng*. This distinction is not consistent with the more commonly accepted definition of *bóng lộ* as trans women, which is discussed in detail in a later chapter. Trung's partners address him using the masculine pronoun *anh* and he addresses them with the neutral pronoun *em*, which is consistent with these male and female roles but also with Vietnamese convention given their relative ages. They also use the terms husband and wife and his boyfriends are comfortable being referred to as his wives among their *bóng* friends. Finally, following his statement that he is naturally attracted to bottoms, Trung goes on to write that he finds other masculine individuals, including both tops and 'real' men, to be "boring" by comparison (Lê Anh Hoài, 2008, p. 59). Bottoms are therefore conceived as being more feminine than tops and 'real' men, and it is these relatively feminine men that the relatively masculine Trung naturally desires.

The fact that these social husband and wife roles and the top and bottom sexual roles mentioned above are equated with one another is evident throughout the novel, but is shown most clearly in one scene wherein Trung describes encounters with an older, wealthier, married man who wants to take the penetrated (bottom) role during sex. Trung finds the discrepancy between his social and sexual behaviours hilarious and remarks, "He's already happy as a husband and father and he... wants to be my wife" (Lê Anh Hoài, 2008, pp. 58-59). At this point he stops responding to the man's requests to meet.

Several factors identify this businessman as masculine in relation to Trung. His age would usually dictate that the businessman would be addressed using the masculine *anh* while Trung would identify with the neutral *em*. The businessman is also wealthy, and would therefore be able to provide for his younger lovers (including Trung) in the same way that Trung is able to provide for his own. The businessman is married and is a literal husband as well as a father. He is therefore *bóng kín* in both possible senses of the term, being a masculine *bóng* as well as being someone whose *bóng* identity is a secret. Trung, on the other hand, is *bóng kín* in the sense that he is relatively masculine but is ‘out’ with his peers and colleagues. All of these factors are the reverse of those which identify Trung as the husband in his relationships with his various partners. According to Trung’s own uncommon usage of the terms, by which *lộ* and *kín* primarily describe the relative visibility and openness of *bóng*, Trung is more *kín* than his effeminate boyfriends. The businessman, whose homosexuality is a closely guarded secret, would therefore logically be more *kín* than Trung.

There is a clear assumption evident in this encounter that the more masculine partner will desire to penetrate rather than be penetrated, again contradicting the idea that top and bottom are purely sexual roles devoid of social significance. The correlation between the sexual and social roles is obvious to the point that deviating from this pattern invites rejection and ridicule, and this is not dissimilar to the accusation of ‘cannibalism’ in *Shadow*. The businessman is a particularly strong example of the conflation of these social and sexual roles because he does not express any interest in taking on social behaviours associated with the feminine role, only desiring to take the bottom sexual role and even then only in the context of sex with Trung, who identifies as a top. “Being the wife” is therefore shown to describe both the social behaviour and the sexual role, combined in a single term. The distinction between active and passive partner is understood as one of several factors including age, financial status, occupation and whether one is ‘open’ or ‘closeted’ which are expected to align to create generally consistent masculine and feminine identities.

There are therefore profound similarities between Trung’s relationships and those described in *Shadow*. Though both writers identify as *bóng kín*, the role that Dũng desires to play in his relationship is explicitly feminine whereas Trung’s desired role is masculine. The relationships in *Not Out of Place* would appear to offer everything that Dũng desires: romantic love, sexual desire and a masculine partner who treats him as

his wife, but the fact that Trung is not a 'real' man makes relationships of this sort impossible for Dũng to accept. Mutually gratifying relationships between *bóng* are common in *Not Out of Place*, and the experience of being *bóng* is markedly less characterised by loneliness and despair. The violence that characterises the other texts described in the first section of this chapter is largely absent in *Not Out of Place*. Whereas *bóng* in *Shadow* understand intuitively that they are doomed to never find a partner, often resorting to extorting sex from 'real' men rather than engaging in 'cannibalism' with one another, there are several apparently content same-sex relationships in *Not Out of Place*, wherein the partners live together as husband and wife without the coercion and bribery that are an unavoidable part of similar relationships in *Shadow*.

The top and bottom roles presented in *Not Out of Place* are exceptional in that they clearly define masculine and feminine identities within same-sex relationships and for the fact that they demonstrate so clearly the correlation between social and sexual roles in spite of explicit statements to the contrary. Similar understandings are evident throughout queer Vietnamese literature, albeit without such clear and concise definitions, and examples of these are considered in the remainder of this chapter.

### 1.33 A World Without Women [*Một thế giới không có đàn bà*]

Bùi Anh Tấn's first queer-themed novel and the earliest primary source used in this thesis, *A World Without Women* (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000) is a detective novel that presents several interlinked narratives connected by a theme of homosexuality. The main plot concerns an investigation hunting the perpetrators of a series of sadistic murders that are seemingly committed both by and against homosexuals. This novel is a particularly useful source on many topics, and presents the earliest example of a pairing between masculine and feminine queers in the form of the characters Hoàng and Trung.

Hoàng is identified as homosexual, gay, having gender issues, and less frequently as *bóng*. He is also referred to as *pêđê*, and although he does not use this word to self-identify he is described as such by the third-person narrator, who uses all of these terms interchangeably. Hoàng wears masculine clothes, uses masculine pronouns and does not present himself as or seek to become a woman. His femininity is nevertheless established from the very first time that he appears in the narrative. He is described as having “a handsomeness similar to that of the famous American singer Elvis, sexy but effeminate, as Americans say” (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, p. 190). His behaviour and manner of speech are described as feminine and he is recognisably camp, a fact that causes discomfort to the 'real' men who interact with him. He is also emotional and prone to crying (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, p. 196). These qualities are understood to be expressions of his being homosexual. He therefore broadly fits the definition of *bóng kín* presented in this chapter as someone who is homosexually oriented and is largely masculine in his outward presentation but has feminine characteristics.

Hoàng is an aspiring singer who runs a gay bar, and is popular with but mocked by his patrons, who call him “Prince Hoàng” on account of the fact he is extremely desirable to his clientele but spurns their advances and is therefore regarded as being aloof and arrogant (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, p. 186). While other *bóng* characters in this text are implied to be promiscuous, Hoàng does not have sex until he falls in love. When Hoàng disastrously comes out to his family, his father dies and this death is blamed on the shock and disappointment caused by Hoàng's disclosure. His older brother beats him into unconsciousness in retaliation, necessitating that Hoàng be hospitalised (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, p. 431). Hoàng feels guilty rather than angry as a result, and spends the novel waiting for his brother's forgiveness and worrying about the harm that he has caused. His brother, meanwhile, continues to state his desire to kill him (Bùi Anh Tấn,

2000, p. 151). Hoàng's prominent virtues are therefore his chastity, patience, and forgiveness, which are traditionally feminine.

Trung, in contrast, is physically strong, tough and aggressive. He is described as "young and strong with a radiant, handsome, masculine face and a tall physique" (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, p. 187). He is thought to be attractive to women and is shown to be attractive to male homosexuals. There is some ambiguity around Trung's identity, as he presented as a 'real' man but is arguably an example of a masculine queer. This issue will be addressed in more detail in chapter three, but for the purposes of this chapter it is relevant to note that Trung is not homosexually inclined until he meets Hoàng, and that his homoerotic desires are specifically for the feminine Hoàng rather than for masculine men or for other *bóng*. There is no indication that Trung's desire for Hoàng is motivated by practical, material gain, no element of coercion or transaction, and their relationship is not commoditised in any way.

Trung plays an active role in pursuing a relationship with Hoàng, making the first advances in their relationship and therefore taking on the role of the masculine, 'top' partner (like those described in *Not Out of Place*) rather than that of the 'real' man in a relationship with a *bóng* (as in *Shadow*). Trung also takes an active role in driving the story, as a detective whose work is crucial to the murder investigation. Hoàng is far more passive, being beaten by his brother, expelled by his family, courted by Trung and finally abducted by the story's antagonists. At the end of the novel, Hoàng is kidnapped and Trung conducts a daring rescue to save him from captivity (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, pp. 422-428). Trung succeeds but is injured in the attempt. Their masculine and feminine roles are therefore particularly clearly implied at the end of their narrative arc when Trung becomes an action hero and Hoàng is his feminine love interest and plays the part of damsel in distress.

Their use of pronouns reflects the same gender distinction, with Trung using the older masculine pronoun *anh* and Hoàng using the younger neutral pronoun *em*. As in the majority of examples considered in this thesis, this may be consistent with Vietnamese convention depending on their respective ages. Though they apparently have a sexual relationship their sex is never described and there is no indication, even through innuendo, as to what roles they play or what sexual acts they engage in. Homosexual sex is discussed in this novel, but in a clinical context, as a psychiatrist in the novel

explains various aspects of homosexuality to assist the detectives in their investigation. Gay sex is characterised as frightening and both oral and anal sex are said to be disgusting, practiced in the West but largely unheard of and regarded with revulsion in Vietnam (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, pp. 245-253). It is not therefore clear whether the reader is intended to assume that Hoàng and Trung are having sex at all, given that they are both positively portrayed characters, but they do at least kiss and cohabit for a time.

Hoàng and Trung do not live together for an extended period of time, neither is dependent on the other's income and their relationship is still relatively new by the end of the text. The combination of these factors means that some of the clearer signifiers of gendered behaviours, such as division of domestic tasks, are largely absent from this relationship. Nevertheless, Hoàng and Trung are clearly examples of a same-sex couple that consists of one masculine-identified partner and one equally feminine-identified partner, and these social roles apply consistently throughout various aspects of their behaviours and their relationship.

### 1.34 AC Kinsey's Method

In addition to the examples discussed in the first half of this chapter, the second gay-themed novel by Bùi Anh Tấn analysed in this thesis, *AC Kinsey's Method*, also has several queer relationships in which a masculine/feminine binary is evident. Two significant examples of these involve Trung, an educated, effeminate young man and who works in various occupations throughout the course of the story.

Trung shares many characteristics with Hoàng in *A World Without Women* and with queer characters in Vietnamese literature in general. He is consistently portrayed as being handsome, good-natured, likeable and feminine. As a teenager Trung is forced to work as a prostitute in Pho's brothel, and it is here that he meets the characters of Pho and Hoàng Long described earlier in this chapter. He is driven to sex work by the necessity of paying his mother's medical bills and supporting his family. These are obviously laudable motivations, and contribute to the general impression that Trung is a sympathetic character. At the brothel, he seems out of place on account of the fact that the other prostitutes are lascivious and flirtatious while Trung is naive and innocent, seeming temperamentally unsuited to sex work (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, pp. 154-157). The same distinction therefore exists between Trung and the other prostitutes as exists between Hoàng and the patrons of his gay bar in *A World Without Women*, as he is relatively chaste and interested in romantic love while the less sympathetic queers are primarily (or at least additionally) interested in sex outside of the context of romantic relationships.

Later in the story the brothel is shut down and Trung pursues higher education, eventually beginning to work as an architect. He then forms a relationship with a wealthy CEO named Trần Anh, but this is discovered and used as blackmail material by a corrupt private investigator. Trung is forced to have sex with the private investigator in exchange for the other man's silence and in order to protect his boyfriend's family (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, p. 358). At the end of the novel, Trần Anh stands accused of the investigator's murder and Trung attempts to take the blame (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, p. 379). Trung is therefore highly positively portrayed throughout the novel. In addition to the fact that he seems effeminate, the virtues he embodies, patience, devotion and romanticism, are traditionally feminine. Despite circumstances that force him to work as a prostitute, he is shown to be inclined towards chastity and seeks sex only in the

context of a loving relationship. In this respect to one of his many admirable qualities is traditionally associated with feminine virtues.

Several aspects of Trung's relationship with Trần Anh cast Trung in a more traditionally feminine role in relation to the other man. Their use of pronouns is consistent with the idea of a masculine and feminine divide, as Trung addresses his boyfriend using the masculine pronoun *anh* and is himself addressed by the feminine or neutral pronoun *em*, though again this is consistent with Vietnamese convention given their relative ages. Trần Anh is much wealthier than Trung, and would be in a position to play the traditionally masculine role of the primary earner in their relationship. Their relationship is not obviously commoditised in any way, however, and they do not cohabit, so their relative economic statuses are less important in this case than they are in other more financially interdependent relationships. Trung is open about his sexuality with his peers and colleagues, identifying as homosexual, whereas his boyfriend's sexuality is a closely guarded secret. As in the case of the businessman in *Not Out of Place*, whose masculinity is inconsistent with his desire to be a bottom, Trần Anh is also a husband and father and therefore fulfils masculine roles in his daily life outside of his relationship with Trung. All of the social factors that distinguish the protagonist of *Not Out of Place* (also named Trung) as a masculine top in relation to his feminine, bottom partners also therefore apply to this relationship. Their sex life is never described, and it is unclear whether these generally masculine and feminine social roles are also reflected in their sexual roles, or even if they have penetrative sex.

Trung also has interactions with Khảo, a corrupt private investigator who is the story's principal antagonist. Khảo extorts money from Trần Anh and sex from Trung in exchange for keeping the secret of their relationship. Khảo is consistently described as being masculine but apparently has some repressed homoerotic inclinations. He is therefore potentially another example of *bóng kín*, being generally masculine but in fact a closeted homosexual. The issue of Khảo's identity will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter. It is not until he meets Trung - an attractive, younger, feminine *bóng* — that he begins to act upon his apparently nascent homoerotic inclinations. There is therefore evidence that, like the protagonist of *Not Out of Place*, Khảo is not interested in 'real' men or masculine queers such as Trung's boyfriend, making him an example of a masculine homosexual whose homoerotic inclinations are specifically for feminine queers such as Trung himself.

Khảo's desires for Trung are initially purely sexual but gradually become romantic. Towards the end of the story Khảo begins to talk to Trung as though he was his lover rather than his victim. Once again the more masculine partner, in this case Khảo, is addressed using the masculine pronoun *anh* while Trung is addressed as *em*, though again this is consistent with their relative ages. Khảo realises that his encounters with Trung are a result of coercion rather than any reciprocated feelings from Trung, but nevertheless wishes that Trung would respond in kind, and talks to the younger man as though he was his romantic partner (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, pp. 361-363). There is also unusually clear evidence of what sexual behaviour Khảo forces Trung to engage in. In one rather graphic passage Khảo makes Trung perform oral sex, forcing him to his knees and feeling the wetness of the tears on Trung's cheeks as they come into contact with Khảo's groin (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, p. 358). It is certain therefore that Khảo plays the penetrating role during oral sex, and though anal sex between Trung and Khảo is never mentioned, it is also certain Trung plays the penetrated role during anal sex in the context of his work at the brothel.

There are therefore clearly gendered dynamics associated with Khảo's desire for Trung. Both socially and sexually, Khảo evidently wishes to take on masculine roles and wants Trung to play (and desire to play) the corresponding feminine roles. Their ages, the fact that Khảo is generally masculine while Trung is generally feminine, the social relationship that Khảo imagines and the specific sexual act that he forces Trung to perform are all consistent with the characterisation of Khảo as masculine and Trung as feminine. As in *Not Out of Place*, the connection between the social and sexual roles is not explicitly affirmed, but the sexual roles implied are consistent with the broader masculine and feminine identifications of the two characters.

Though Trung's relationship with his boyfriend is never described in detail and his interactions with Khảo are violent and abusive, in both instances social factors, their relative ages and the dynamics of their relationship cast Trung in a more feminine role and the other men as more masculine. Both of the men who desire Trung are shown to be more masculine than Trung himself. Trung, who is an effeminate *bóng*, is therefore shown to be the logical partner of more masculine men. In the case of Khảo it is implied that masculine homosexually oriented men desire more feminine men, whom they

desire to penetrate. These understandings are therefore entirely consistent with the notion of masculine tops and feminine bottoms as presented in *Not Out of Place*.

### 1.35 I'm Sorry, I Love Him! [*Xin lỗi em, anh đã yêu anh ấy!*]

*I'm Sorry, I Love Him!* by Nguyễn Thơ Sinh (2007b; 2011), hereafter referred to as *I'm Sorry*, tells the story of two rural Vietnamese men, named Hà and Hiên, who fall in love as adolescents and maintain a romantic and sexual relationship for about thirty years until Hà's apparent death at the end of the story (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2011, pp. 276-277). The main plot of this narrative follows their romance and how it is challenged by various aspects of their lives, the most persistent and problematic of which being the fact that Hiên also has a wife and child and must therefore balance his desire to be with Hà with his duties as a husband, father and son. *I'm Sorry* is the longest narrative used in this thesis both in terms of page count and in terms of the period of time over which it occurs. This fact, together with the fact that the main plot of the two-part novel deals exclusively with the relationship between the two men with few other significant subplots, means that the reader is presented with exceptionally detailed representations of these characters' personalities, aspirations and personal and family lives. This level of detail makes *I'm Sorry* a useful text for this thesis, and is one of several ways in which this narrative is exceptional.

The relationship between Hà and Hiên is also arguably the most successful homosexual romantic relationship described in any of the primary texts used in this thesis. It endures in spite of many trials. In addition to the challenges posed by the simple fact that Hiên is married, Hiên's family meet with a series of misfortunes throughout the two novels, all of which require urgent and expensive resolutions. Ultimately however the relationship between the two protagonists comes to be accepted by everyone concerned, including Hiên's wife and son and Hà's parents. This relationship is also entirely fictional, with no claim of being biographical. Hà and Hiên are therefore an interesting (though not necessarily realistic) example of a long-term, successful homosexual relationship, as imagined by the text's author.

Both Hà and Hiên present themselves as men and use masculine pronouns accordingly. They come from similar backgrounds, live in the same village and are of similar age. They also share a homoerotic inclination, albeit perhaps only for one another. This desire is both romantic and sexual and is the basis for the first and most enduring relationship in both of their lives. Hiên and Hà are both highly positively portrayed, and like other sympathetic queer characters discussed in this chapter they are not promiscuous and have sex only in the context of their romantic relationship.

In spite of the similarities between the two characters, Hà is stated to be homosexual while Hiên is ostensibly not. Identity labels are almost entirely absent from this text, which does not talk of homosexuality or being gay, though the term *bóng* is used occasionally. Hiên's identity as a homosexually active 'real' man will be discussed in more detail in chapter three. It is relevant to note here that the clearest proof of Hiên's heterosexuality is the fact that he gets married and has children: his ability to fulfil these traditional male roles is therefore viewed as antithetical to his having a homosexual identity in spite of his having a decades-long sexual and romantic relationship with another man.

Hiên and Hà's relationship is arguably therefore another example of a relationship between one *bóng* and one 'real' man, resembling those described in the first section of this chapter rather than a relationship between two *bóng* as described in *Not Out of Place*. As previously mentioned these do not represent different identities in the literature itself but rather represent different ways that the authors conceive of *bóng* and *bóng kìn* identities. Hiên and Hà are included as examples of a top/bottom dynamic for various reasons, including the fact that their relationship is based on mutual desires that are both romantic and sexual as well being passionate and enduring. There is no indication that their relationship is in any sense paid for or commoditised. Hiên, the more masculine partner, takes an active role in seducing Hà and resists Hà's threats to end their arrangement. In this respect their relationship more closely resembles a top/bottom pairing in which both partners are mutually attracted to one another rather than a pairing between a *bóng* and a 'real' man who must be seduced and paid.

In most respects Hà is characterised in ways that are consistent with the other *bóng kìn* characters described throughout this chapter. He is effeminate, physically weak and is described as emotional and prone to crying. Several of Hà's feminine characteristics are established on the first occasion that Hà and Hiên meet. In this scene Hà is beaten up by a woman who is jealous of his mother, and avoids drowning in mud only because of Hiên's assistance. In addition to being humiliated, physically hurt and narrowly escaping death, at that point in the text Hà is also dealing with the fact that he and his mother have recently been abandoned by his father. He therefore has many reasons to cry, but Hiên shows little sympathy, remarking that Hà is weak as a girl and that: "A boy who cries a lot seems like a girl. That's why they call you *bóng*, right enough" (Nguyễn Thọ

Sinh, 2007b, p. 36). As a child, Hà is recognisably feminine, and this fact leads the other children to deduce that he is *bóng*. All of these factors are consistent with descriptions of *bóng* in general as being male-bodied but having feminine spirits or essences that are evident in their behaviours.

Hiền is as masculine as Hà is effeminate. His masculinity is demonstrated by the fact that he is physically strong. He is handsome, being attractive to women as well as evidently attractive to Hà, and is able to protect Hà from the bullies who would otherwise target him for him being *bóng*. As an adult, Hiền grows into a large, strong man who works in a physically demanding job, drinks heavily and smokes *thuốc lào*, an extremely thick Vietnamese tobacco pipe (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2011, p. 126). Hiền's masculinity is established as early as Hà's effeminacy, and this contrast remains consistent throughout both parts of the novel. In terms of their personalities therefore, Hà and Hiền are clearly an example of a masculine and feminine pairing.

There is also evidence that this implied gender divide determines their respective roles in their relationship. Hà addresses Hiền using the masculine *anh*, while Hiền addresses him with the feminine or neutral *em*, which is consistent with this gender divide but may also be conventionally correct based on their respective ages. Hà's feelings for Hiền are clear from the outset, but Hà is initially shy and believes that Hiền is a normal boy who is incapable of returning his affections. Hà refuses to admit that he is attracted to Hiền, who is far more confident. Hiền declares his interest in Hà and persists in doing so in spite of Hà's shy and insincere rejections. In their early relationship therefore Hiền takes the traditionally masculine role of approaching and pursuing his prospective partner, while Hà plays a more traditionally feminine role, being passive and ultimately allowing himself to be courted.

As they age the dynamics of their relationship change and Hà no longer needs Hiền's more formidable physical presence to protect him. They do not cohabit or share incomes, and the fact that Hiền lives with his wife and child means that most traditional domestic wife's duties are fulfilled by his official wife and not by Hà. Nevertheless, Hiền refers to Hà on one occasion as his wife (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007b, p. 100) and their behaviour in scenes wherein they are able to treat each other openly as romantic partners and do not have to hide their relationship indicates that Hà generally performs tasks associated with being a girlfriend, such as cooking, and Hiền acts as his boyfriend.

Throughout the text, Hà makes sacrifices on Hiên's behalf. The first of these involves forcing Hiên to marry Oanh (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007b, p. 34). Hà regards Hiên's being married and having a family as key to his future happiness. Though he and Hiên are in love and Hiên does not want their relationship to end, Hà recognises the importance of Hiên's having his own biological children and believes that they will never have the acceptance of Hiên's family if they stay together. Maintaining his belief that Hiên is a normal boy who will be capable of being a husband a father, Hà resolves to force Hiên to get married, and threatens to stop seeing him altogether if he does not acquiesce. Hà expresses a belief that he and Hiên are not the same in some unspecified way which means that Hiên is able to become a father and a husband while Hà is not. His decision is therefore selfless, as he demonstrates a willingness to prioritise Hiên's happiness over his own. His understanding of this issue is therefore similar to that outlined in *Shadow*, as he knows intuitively that homosexual relationships are not a viable alternative to having a wife and child and that he is therefore destined to be alone.

Throughout the text Hiên's family meet with a series of misfortunes, each of which require expensive medical treatments. In each instance, Hà makes personal sacrifices to provide them with the money that they need. These include selling his house (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007b, p. 118), coming out to his father in order to ask for money for Hiên (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2011, pp. 110-115) and finally donating a kidney (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2011, p. 191). Hà, in common with queer characters in other texts discussed in this chapter, demonstrates traditionally feminine virtues are shown not through acts of personal bravery but through his loyalty, selflessness and his willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the man he loves. There are therefore various aspects of Hiên and Hà's social behaviours and the social roles that they play in relation to one another that are consistent with the characterisation of Hiên as masculine and Hà as feminine.

Their relationship is sexual throughout the majority of the two novels. Hiên initially raises the subject of sex by asking if Hà has started masturbating yet (when they are both in their mid-teens). When Hà refuses to answer, Hiên offers to demonstrate how it is done (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007b, p. 91). Hiên also sits on an ants' nest and, being bitten, takes off all of his clothes and asks Hà to help in removing the offending insects, directing him to concentrate on picking off the ants that are biting his penis (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007b, p. 59). Hà continues to deny that he is attracted to Hiên or to believe

that Hiền is genuinely attracted to him until Hiền demonstrates his sincerity by inviting Hà to touch his erection (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007b, p. 82). Their lovemaking is never described in detail, but *I'm Sorry* presents one relatively clear implication as to what sexual roles they play. In a scene wherein Hiền's son spies them having sex, he observes Hiền "lying on top" of Hà (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007b, p. 94). This might suggest that Hiền was playing the penetrating role, though unlike in *Not Out of Place* this 'top' description is in Vietnamese rather than in English. Furthermore, during their early relationship, as described above, Hà's attention was repeatedly drawn to Hiền's penis and never the other way around. This could also be indicative of the (insertive) role that Hiền was intending to take during sex. There are therefore some suggestions that Hiền takes the penetrating role during sex, and no suggestions to the contrary. This too is consistent of Hiền as playing a masculine in relation to Hà.

To conclude therefore, in terms of their relative personalities and their implied sexual roles, characterisation of these two individuals consistently shows that one partner is masculine and the other is feminine. Though they never explicitly identify as such, Hiền and Hà are consistent with the top and bottom roles presented in *Not Out of Place* and discussed in this chapter.

### 1.36 Untold Stories [*Những câu chuyện chưa kể*]

Finally, the short story compilation *Untold Stories* (Tuờng Vy, Lộ Lộ, Moon, Hòa Hồ, Đinh Nhung, Trai Miền Biển, Bín, Tiểu Nhật and Mộng, 2013) contains several examples of relationships between masculine and feminine same-sex partners. This book is a collection of stories by queer writers, and explicitly positions itself as being part of Vietnam's LGBT activist community, having sponsorship from international NGOs and including their logos on its promotional material. Most of the texts in this collection are very brief, and many deal with very similar experiences. This book quickly became unavailable commercially, but electronic copies remained available online for some time. The analysis of *Untold Stories* presented in this thesis draws on both the final, published version of the collection and a longer, pre-final edit version, obtained through private correspondence with one of the collection's authors, Hòa Hồ. In particular, this collection focuses on experiences of intolerance, bullying and abuse. The stories in this compilation are ostensibly autobiographical, though like the other autobiographical texts considered in this thesis they are stated to be representative of the experiences of the characters in question rather than literally true. In several instances, no explicit identifications are made in the texts themselves, and in many others the only explicit identity labels used are epithets such as *pêđê* and *bóng*, used as insults in the context of homophobic and transphobic abuse. The introduction to the compilation, the conclusion, the book jacket and the associated organisations all specify that the texts in this collection deal with the experiences of homosexuals. The identification of the characters in question as homosexual can therefore be inferred even when they are not made explicitly in the texts themselves. Many of the texts in this collection focus on the experiences of trans women, and as such are relevant to second chapter of this thesis. For the purposes of this chapter, only one representative text will be examined.

a. Ancient Dreams [*Giấc mơ cổ tích*]

This text describes the experiences of a protagonist named Phúc, and is typical of texts in this compilation in several respects. The protagonist is identified throughout the text using the gender-neutral pronoun *nó*, which can be translated as either he, she or it. Phúc is assumed to be a ‘real’ boy, and he does not know the meaning of the word homosexuality. He is however effeminate, and is bullied by the other children at school for this reason. He is therefore another example of an effeminate queer who presents socially as masculine (at least by default) but whose feminine essence is discernible through his behaviours and interests.

The protagonist is in love with one of his male classmates, with whom he has a close friendship. The other boy is masculine, strong and protects him from bullies but is unaware of the extent of the Phúc’s feelings for him. The story is extremely short, but includes one scene wherein Phúc and the boy with whom he is secretly in love share a bicycle ride through the countryside together, the stronger boy pedalling while Phúc sits behind as his passenger (Tường Vy et al., 2013, p. 7). As in other texts in which similar scenes takes place, this is a source of happiness for the protagonist as it affords him an opportunity for physical intimacy with the other boy. He specifically admires the other boy’s strength and enjoys breathing in his masculine aroma. In his imagination, the bicycle is a horse, Phúc is a princess, and his classmate is his gallant young knight.

Later in the text the protagonist’s infatuation with the other boy is revealed by a malicious teacher, who reads his diary for their class to hear and expresses her disgust and contempt. He is ostracised by the other children in his class, his parents react angrily by locking him in their basement and beating him, and the most painful consequence of this revelation is not the beating that he receives but the look of revulsion on the face of the boy with whom he is in love after his feelings are made known. As he waits in the basement, the protagonist once again imagines himself as a princess, this time locked in a dungeon and awaiting rescue by his brave knight. As “fairy tales aren’t true,” this does not happen and he is eventually released only when he promises not to be a *pêđê* any more (Tường Vy et al., 2013, p. 11).

Though the narrator is identified as a homosexual by his inclusion in this compilation, he does not explicitly identify as such in the text, and is identified only as *pêđê* by his tormentors and as a princess in his own imagination. In the context of his interactions

with the other boy, he conceives of himself as feminine and his attraction to the other boy is part of a masculine/feminine pairing, unusually articulated here as being a knight and a princess, respectively. Aside from the unusual nomenclature, the imaginary relationship that the protagonist has with his 'knight' is typical of other masculine and feminine pairings discussed in this chapter. The protagonist is effeminate and has a homoerotic desire that is viewed as incongruous with his anatomical maleness. The other boy is masculine, and it is specifically his masculine qualities that the protagonist admires. In common with other feminine *bóng*, the role that he desires to play with his prospective lover is that of his girlfriend, as is evident during their ride through the countryside together. It is unclear precisely whether this character is an example of a queer who desires 'real' men, like the *bóng* described in *Shadow*, or one who desires to have a top/bottom partnership, as described in *Not Out of Place*. Whatever the interpretation however, his conceptualisation of himself as a princess and his classmate as a knight affirms the understanding of homoerotic desires as being based on a binary division of gender roles, as discussed throughout this chapter.

### 1.37 Conclusions

The texts discussed in this section are united by a common understanding of homoerotic desires as being based around a binary division of gender roles. The queer characters discussed throughout this chapter share a *bóng* identity that is feminine and arguably transgender. All are distinguished from masculine 'real' men, even in cases where the *bóng* characters themselves are relatively masculine, and in each case this identity informs the gender of the people to whom they are attracted.

These Vietnamese conceptions of gender binary within same-sex relationships studied in this section are consistent with trends shown in queer theory in several other Asian contexts. In particular, the *gay king* and *gay queen* identities in Thailand bear similarities to those discussed in this chapter (Jackson 2000a). *Gay kings* are conceived as being relatively masculine, a fact that leads them to desire femininity in their partners, and they therefore desire feminine gays, identified as *gay queens*. These roles are conceived as first and foremost sexual preferences, with the *king* partners taking the penetrating role during sex, but are also understood to have a social component. Similar identities based around masculine and feminine roles have been discussed by Sinnott (2004) in the context of same-sex female relationships in Thailand, with masculine *toms* performing masculine social roles and their feminine, *dee* (from the last syllable of lady) partners performing feminine social roles. As in Vietnam, these identifications both belong to a broader category of gay which is feminine and distinguished from 'real' men.

In the context of Vietnamese literature these issues are not generally framed around obvious identity labels or signifiers. The top and bottom roles described in *Not Out of Place* are useful indicators of a wider understanding but are extremely limited in their distribution, occurring only in one of the primary texts used in this thesis. They are further qualified by the conceptual ambiguity of what, precisely, these roles represent, as the explicit definitions are contradicted by the experiences of the characters in question. In spite of these issues, the conceptualisation of homosexuals as consisting of (usually unnamed) categories of relatively masculine and relatively feminine individuals who desire, have sex and form relationships with one another is evident throughout the majority of the texts used in this thesis.

#### 1.4 Chapter Conclusions

The texts discussed in this chapter are separated for the purposes of analysis, but the concepts of homosexuality as it applies to *bóng* identities are characterised more by similarity than by difference. The first group comprises examples of characters who are understood to desire 'real' men. In texts other than *Shadow* they are shown to be somewhat flexible in this regard, having sexual and romantic relationships with other *bóng* while demonstrating a preference for, 'real' masculine heterosexuals. One can infer from each of these examples that the *bóng* in question may be willing to have sex with other *bóng* situationally but 'real' men are more satisfactory partners, and offer them something that they cannot find in other *bóng*.

The characters described in the second section demonstrate an understanding that *bóng* are valid partners for one another without the implication that 'real' men are more desirable. It is evident throughout these examples that relatively masculine *bóng* are understood to naturally desire more feminine partners and vice versa, and this mutual attractiveness forms the basis for the resultant sexual and romantic pairings. Though the top and bottom identity labels presented in *Not Out of Place* are unique to that text, these understandings are widespread and account for the majority of texts analysed in this thesis.

The objects of the desires of the queer characters in either section are therefore different, and this difference is extremely influential as it determines their available options and the nature of their relationships and sexual encounters. Whether they pursue 'real' men or other *bóng*, however, the characters discussed in this chapter agree on several points. All are biological males whose homosexuality is conceived as fundamentally feminine, and all seek to form relationships with other males in which one partner plays a masculine role and the other plays a feminine role. None of the *bóng* in question understand themselves to be 'real' men, and their homosexual inclinations are part of what makes them distinct from these men.

Within same-sex relationships the division of gender roles is expressed in a variety of different ways. Pronoun usage is always used to convey which partner is masculine and which is feminine, and is consistent with these broader social identifications in every example discussed. There are no examples of texts wherein a masculine individual addresses his feminine partner using the masculine pronoun *anh*. This is usually

consistent with the characters' respective ages, meaning that its significance in any given text is debatable, but the fact that this distinction is universal is further indication of a binary division of masculine and feminine roles. Domestic tasks such as cooking and cleaning tend to fall to the feminine partners, while the masculine partners tend to be the principal earners. A few scenes, such as the two characters sharing a bicycle ride and the feminine partner cooking for and otherwise tending to the masculine partner when he is ill, occur repeatedly in different forms in different texts but with the same emotional meaning. In each instance these are scenes of happiness, affording at least one of the characters involved the opportunity to behave like a traditional, opposite-gendered boyfriend or girlfriend to his partner. The desire to act out these boyfriend and girlfriend roles, made difficult by the context of their society and issues of acceptance, is a universal feature of these representations.

Evidence of sexual roles is far more limited, likely because Vietnamese literature tends not to be sexually explicit and sex is generally absent from these narratives. The evidence of sexual roles that exists however tends to support the idea that masculine and feminine partners take penetrating and receptive sexual roles respectively.

Characters who deviate from this binary model by forming masculine-masculine pairings or pairings between two feminine *bóng* are at times regarded as disgusting and unnatural (as in *Shadow*) or as ridiculous (as in *Not Out of Place*). Counterexamples in the form of masculine queers who desire other masculine queers are rare and usually qualified, occurring in only a few texts that shall be discussed in more detail in a later chapter.

This binary understanding of attraction is implicitly problematised by the fact that *bóng* are themselves a non-binary category, comprising effeminate males and (relatively) masculine men who nevertheless have the hearts and souls of women. Third gender and Third World are both terms consistently used to describe all *bóng* individuals regardless of their degree of gender transgression. *Bóng* are therefore conceptually positioned outside of binary gender in spite of the fact that they seek to form relationships based on this binary. As they are not clearly and definitively either men or women, there is a consequent lack of clarity as to with whom these individuals should form relationships in order to produce pairings based on binary attraction. The contrasting understandings discussed in this chapter highlight this issue. Both claim to be authoritative but present

different models for how it is possible (or why it is impossible) for these individuals to find the husband/wife or boyfriend/girlfriend relationships that they desire.

Based on the characters discussed in this chapter, Vietnamese conceptions of queer male gender identity are significantly different from Western understandings and have more in common with other regional understandings. The characters are not united by a sexual orientation as such, and do not conceive of their romantic and sexual orientations as a separate category to their gender identity. Instead they are united by having non-binary gender positions which are understood to have logical associated objects of desire. The forms that this attraction takes vary significantly, but the notion of mutually attractive binary genders is affirmed in each instance.

**Chapter 2*****Bóng Lộ* - ‘Openly’ *Bóng* Trans Women****2.1 Introduction**

The following chapter looks at examples of *bóng lộ*, an identity label applied to trans women. None of the longer texts used as primary sources in this thesis deal with *bóng lộ* protagonists, but there are minor *bóng lộ* characters in several novels and the short story compilation *Untold Stories* deals extensively with the experiences of *bóng lộ*. The same lack of clear definitions that typifies literary portrayals of queer Vietnamese identities in general is also evident in depictions of *bóng lộ*, and a relatively small number of texts offer explicit definitions or address issues of *bóng lộ* identity directly. Nevertheless, representations of these characters have far more in common with one another than their *bóng kín* counterparts, as shall be shown. This chapter begins by considering explicit definitions of *bóng lộ* identity before considering a range of examples presented across different texts.

## 2.2 Shadow

*Shadow* is an especially useful source through which to approach the issue of *bóng lộ* identity because of the concepts of *kín* and *lộ* are central to the author's explanations of homosexuality in general. As discussed in the previous chapter, the writer presents clear, unambiguous definitions of these terms. His definition of *bóng lộ*, unlike that of *bóng kín*, is generally shown to be representative of understandings throughout not only *Shadow* but all of the primary texts studied in this thesis. Following on from his description of *bóng kín* as men who are attracted to other men but are otherwise masculine and are therefore difficult to recognise, Dững writes that:

*Bóng lộ* are people whose orientation is obvious. They like to dress as women, pad their chests and wear jewellery and makeup. The more they resemble women, the happier they are. (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, pp. 67-68)

Returning to this topic later in the text, Dững notes:

*Bóng lộ* think that they love men because they are really women, and the desire for unity between body and soul leads them to have [gender affirmation] surgery. (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 265)

*Shadow* therefore presents three criteria to distinguish *bóng lộ* from *bóng kín*: they are easily recognisable as *bóng*, they feel gratified by being recognised as feminine, and they desire to transition and become women anatomically.

The pronouns used in *Shadow* to refer to *bóng lộ* vary, but in this thesis they will be consistently identified using feminine pronouns. There are several *bóng lộ* characters in *Shadow*, the most prominent of whom is Dững's friend Trung, who is introduced as the former partner of one of his lovers. There is initially little to distinguish Trung and Dững from one another in terms of the identifications that they make. Both are largely masculine in the way that they present socially and therefore at least appear to be 'real' men or *bóng kín*. They also have similar priorities in their relationships and are interested in similar men, as evidenced by the fact that they have one lover in common.

It is eventually revealed that Trung is *bóng lộ*. Unknown to her friends, while she was presenting socially as a masculine *bóng kín* Trung kept a nighttime habit of dressing in silks and jewellery and dancing while admiring herself in the mirror (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, pp. 248-250). Dững explains that she was forced by societal pressure to present herself as masculine in her daily life, and that being home alone late

at night afforded her the opportunity to present as a woman, albeit only to herself. Trung eventually has gender affirmation surgery in Thailand and returns to Vietnam as a woman, at which point Dũng describes her beauty and how she has now become the object of the male attention that she had always coveted but which her male body previously prevented her from attracting (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 249). Ultimately, Trung is said to be much happier after her transition because now her “body matches her spirit” and Dũng guesses that after her surgery she does no longer has to dance alone in front of her mirror (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 272).

Trung is therefore a relatively clear example of *bóng lộ* identity, behaving in a way that is entirely consistent with Dũng’s definitions. She understands herself to be a woman, prioritises beauty and femininity, and transitions to become a woman anatomically. Other characters in *Shadow* who are identified as *bóng lộ* do not obviously fit all of these criteria, and in particular it is often difficult to distinguish *bóng lộ* from *bóng kín* based on the definition provided.

The first criterion, that *bóng lộ* are easily recognisable as *bóng*, is difficult to apply because *bóng* in general are shown to be feminine. This fact has already been examined at length in the first chapter of this thesis. It is difficult to say how to distinguish between a *bóng* who is easy to recognise on account of her *bóng lộ* identity and one who is easy to recognise because, like Dũng, he or she wears jewellery, grows his or her fingernails long and uses feminine pronouns. Cross dressing and feminine identifications have already been shown, in *Shadow*, to be characteristics of *bóng kín*.

That *bóng lộ* desire to transition is perhaps the most obvious distinction between Trung, who has gender affirmation surgery, and Dũng, who does not. However, *Shadow* also contains several examples of *bóng lộ* who do not transition and whose acts of gender transgression are as limited as those of Dũng himself. Cách Cách, another of Dũng’s friends, is an example of a *bóng lộ* who chooses not to transition. Cách Cách is extremely feminine in her outward behaviour, dressing as a woman and using feminine pronouns. Her name is also said to sound feminine, and was given to her in prison. Cách Cách found being in prison horrifying because she was “a flower lost in a forest of swords,” an expression used on several occasions in *Shadow* to denote a feminine individual surrounded by men (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 229). It was

nevertheless a formative and in some ways positive experience for her, as her femininity was recognised and acknowledged by the other inmates. In addition to giving her the nickname that she would come to use exclusively in favour of her original, masculine name, they allowed her to cook for them and addressed her using feminine terms of endearment. Being able to take on a feminine role in relation to a group of men was apparently a pleasurable experience for Cách Cách, and gave her the confidence to live a more feminine lifestyle after she left prison. She is said to be easily embarrassed, like a girl, and to think only about “money and men, men and money” (Hoàng Nguyễn and Doan Trang, 2008, pp. 228-229).

Her boyfriends are gender normative heterosexual men and include one man she met in prison, whom Dũng describes as a call boy (Hoàng Nguyễn and Doan Trang, 2008, p. 204). This is a reference to the fact that, like the lovers of all of the *bóng* in *Shadow*, the man’s affections are attained through financial incentives rather than reciprocated affection. Cách Cách dislikes masculine pronouns, and when Dũng is struck by his jealous boyfriend it is Cách Cách who witnesses the blow and shares in his secret gratification (Hoàng Nguyễn and Doan Trang, 2008, pp. 237-238).

Other *bóng lộ* characters in *Shadow* include one unnamed character who presents socially as masculine and is revealed to be *bóng lộ* only on account of her fondness, bordering on obsession, with cosmetics. This leads her to spend large amounts of money on feminine beauty products, and Dũng notes that a stranger, looking at her collection, would imagine that it belonged to a wealthy woman and be surprised to learn of its true owner (Hoàng Nguyễn and Doan Trang, 2008, p. 254). Another character in the text is said to be *bóng lộ* based on the evidence that she enjoys shopping (Hoàng Nguyễn and Doan Trang, 2008, p. 252), spending hours in the market chatting to the women who work there and examining products that she has no intention of buying. Cách Cách is an example of a trans woman who for unspecified reasons chooses not to transition, while the other two *bóng lộ* engage in behaviours that are interpreted as indicative of trans identity when they act like women, but present themselves as men (and are *kín* in that the sense that they are closeted) in their daily lives. Considered alongside these other *bóng lộ* characters, Trung is unique in that she chooses to transition.

This fact does not necessarily pose a challenge to the definition of *bóng lộ* identity described above, as it is desire to transition rather than the financial and social ability to

do so that is said to characterise this identity. However, an examination of the reasons that Dũng and other characters choose not to transition suggest that *bóng kín* and *bóng lộ* attitudes towards transitioning are not significantly different. In spite of his own transgender identifications, Dũng has reservations on the subject of individuals who choose to transition. Some consistent evidence of this is his habit of misgendering post-transition *bóng lộ*, using either masculine pronouns or feminine pronouns in quotation marks, and changing the pronoun used from one paragraph to another.

The tone of the passage wherein Dũng describes *bóng lộ* who have gender affirmation surgery conveys a sense of unease and disapproval. *Bóng lộ* who choose to transition are repeatedly characterised as attempting to “grab the power of creation,” a phrase that is used as a chapter title and which, combined with the perceived unhappy outcomes of the stories, suggests that the characters are being punished for their hubris (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, pp. 263-265). When imagining the scene of Trung admiring herself in the mirror before her transition, Dũng writes that she must have appeared “monstrous” and that any normal person who witnessed her behaviour would have thought she was a demon or ghost (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, pp. 248-250). This is rather a strong reaction to seeing a male-bodied person wearing lingerie and makeup, especially given that Dũng himself wears jewellery and uses feminine pronouns and might therefore be expected to be more sympathetic. After transitioning Trung is said to become a beautiful woman and to be happy with her body, but an incongruous passage follows in which her continued gender ambiguity is described and Dũng says that she remains unhappy because she is “unable” to grow her hair long or wear makeup and must therefore resign herself to continuing to wear a shirt and tie (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang 2008, pp. 250-251). The idea that Trung looks masculine after her transition is at odds with the descriptions of her as an attractive woman that immediately precede and follow this passage, and her inability to grow her hair or wear makeup is neither explained nor mentioned again in the text. This passage is therefore difficult to reconcile with the rest of the account of Trung’s transition and is another example of a statement in *Shadow* that seems to be directly contradicted elsewhere.

Trung’s story, like that of all the *bóng* in *Shadow*, is interpreted as being tragic because Dũng believes that any partners she meets will ultimately leave her. The same expectations are expressed in relation to another *bóng lộ* character, mentioned only

briefly, who passes so convincingly that her wedding guests and her new in-laws are ignorant of her gender history. Dũng recalls hearing her new mother-in-law remarking happily on how beautiful her new daughter-in-law is and predicting the handsomeness of her future grandchildren (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, pp. 270-271). Clearly the would-be grandmother is destined to be disappointed in this regard, and Dũng's interpretation of the situation as tragic is easy to understand. On the other hand, this anecdote describes a highly positive situation from the perspective of the *bóng lộ* bride. The impossibility of finding a husband with whom to start a family is perhaps the single largest problem that *bóng* face according to the understanding presented in *Shadow* and is part of the broader problem that *bóng* cannot find 'real' men who desire them and are willing to make long-term commitments, as described in the previous chapter. Furthermore, the lack of an opportunity to wear a beautiful wedding dress is raised in several texts, including *Shadow*, as a particular source of pain to *bóng lộ* and a reason that they feel jealous of 'real' women. Trung and this other *bóng lộ* have at least partially overcome these obstacles, but their achievements in this respect are largely disregarded by the narrator. Instead of expressing happiness for his friend on her wedding day, Dũng focuses on what he perceives as her inevitable loneliness and the disappointment that will stem from her inability to bear children. Dũng also believes that *bóng lộ* who have gender affirmation surgery: "At most live to be 45 (they usually start their operations at 30). And if they have surgery earlier they will die sooner" (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 267)

Dũng therefore regards gender affirmation surgery as a process that lowers one's life expectancy to around fifteen years. Simultaneously, he expresses a belief that *bóng lộ* who transition will continue to be unable to find long-term satisfying relationships, or to be accepted as 'real' women by their prospective partners and their families. Taken together, one can conclude that Dũng regards transitioning as entailing a very high degree of personal sacrifice (to say nothing of the financial cost) and offering very limited benefits. Dũng states elsewhere in the novel that if it were possible then he (and indeed all *bóng*) would choose to become "either a man or a woman" even if they had to travel to "any planet in any galaxy" in order to do so (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 180). His desire is to become a man or a woman but not a post-transition *bóng lộ*. It is therefore unclear how to distinguish between *bóng kín* and *bóng lộ* where both express the desire to become women and neither necessarily act upon these desires. The

criterion that *bóng lợ* wish to transition while *bóng kín* do not does not seem to be applicable to most of the characters in the novel.

The final criterion outlined above is that *bóng lợ* feel happier the more feminine that they look. Here too there are some issues with applying this as a criterion for distinguishing *lợ* from *kín*. Dững, as previously noted, enjoys being addressed as “aunt Dững” by his friends and family. Cách Cách’s desires are satisfied initially in prison and later in her free life by being allowed to cook for and otherwise look after her boyfriends and being addressed using feminine affectionate names. These desires are consistent with how *bóng* are generally portrayed as seeking either husband or wife roles in the context of their relationships. Cách Cách’s desire to be a wife to her masculine, 'real' man lovers is the same as the desire expressed by Dững himself and the desires evident in the other characters discussed in the first chapter of this thesis.

However, Cách Cách has the added desire to wear makeup. While wearing makeup and feminine clothing, she asks Dững to tell her that she looks like a beautiful woman, and is pleased to hear Dững’s reassurances even though their insincerity is apparent. Dững’s friend who spends inordinate amounts of money on women’s beauty products does so because they make her feel feminine and attractive. The *bóng lợ* who enjoys shopping at the market is said to do so because when she is conversing with the women who work there she feels that she is behaving like a woman and being accepted as such by her female peers. Fondness for scented soap and shopping are relatively minor acts of gender transgression, but they are evidence consistent with the logic of the definitions presented in this text when they are explained as the means by which these otherwise masculine-identified characters are able to feel feminine.

This idea is clearer in relation to Trung. Before her transition she is sexually active. It is not specified whether she is a top or a bottom, but Dững indicates a belief that Trung will be unable to have sex after her transition. This presumably represents a significant sacrifice, but was evidently one that Trung was willing to make in order to satisfy her desire to present herself publicly as being beautiful and feminine rather than being able to satisfy these desires only alone and in secret. While the success of the other outcomes of her transition are called into question by the narrator, the clearest positive outcome is that she is finally able to wear her beautiful dresses in public. Ultimately the most consistent aspect of *bóng lợ* identity distinct from *bóng kín* and evident across numerous

examples is the desire to be feminine taking precedence over other romantic and sexual desires, and this aspect of the *bóng lộ* is shown to be unambiguously true in every instance.

In conclusion therefore, the definition of *bóng lộ* presented in *Shadow* describes a category of trans individuals who understand themselves to be women and who desire to appear and be recognised as feminine. Close examination of the specific issues presented reveals that distinctions between *lộ* and *kín* are difficult to determine, as many of the qualities said to characterise *bóng lộ* are shown either to apply selectively or to also be true of *bóng kín*, and ultimately only the third criterion, that of prioritising beauty and outward femininity over other concerns, is true throughout. The definition presented in *Shadow* is applied throughout most of the primary sources used in this thesis, and in particular the author's reflections on the relative importance of physical beauty instead of romantic and sexual desires is consistently a strong indicator of *bóng lộ* identity throughout queer Vietnamese literature, as shall be shown in this chapter.

### 2.3 AC Kinsey's Method

#### a. Chị

Another early example of a *bóng lộ* character in the sources studied in this thesis is to be found in *AC Kinsey's Method*, published in the same year as *Shadow* (2008). As previously discussed, the narrative of this text comprises several interlinked stories that involve a group of characters whose lives are interlinked across several decades. The connection between plots is not immediately apparent, and is hidden by the facts that the characters' names are not revealed and the chronology is not initially obvious. One of the story's plots involves two unnamed characters, a boy and a person from Hue who has recently moved to Saigon. Over the course of the story the boy is revealed to be Khảo, the corrupt private detective and the story's principal antagonist mentioned in the previous chapter as Trung's blackmailer and rapist. The person from Hue is never identified by name, but is addressed by Khảo as older sister [*chị*], and addresses him as *út*, which translates as smallest or youngest (as in youngest son or sibling). For the sake of brevity and lacking any more obvious descriptor to refer to her succinctly, the 'man' from Than Kinh is referred to in this analysis as *Chị*, which is not a name at all but rather a gendered pronoun. She is referred to using feminine pronouns in English because she wants to be accepted as a woman, but the pronouns used in the text itself vary between scenes and chapters.

Immediately following her introduction to the text for the first time, *Chị* is described as having feminine characteristics common to several of Bùi Anh Tấn's *bóng* characters. She is described as follows:

A man from Than Kinh who was gentle, laconic, urbane and always spoke to whomever he met in a soft, musical Hue accent that made him sound like he was reciting poetry... He stood one metre six and was very thin, with a pair of glasses and a long, bony, extremely erudite face that always wore a sad smile. (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, p. 61)

She is repeatedly described as gentle, and she is prone to crying. *Chị*'s interests and talents reflect her femininity. She keeps her house immaculately clean and beautifully decorated and she is an excellent cook, deriving great pleasure from looking after Khảo, who at this time is a young teenager. Her feelings for Khảo are explicitly characterised as feminine:

Looking at [Khảo's] cute, chubby face, the feelings of a woman rose up inside of him and he wanted to take care of the child. He leaned down, kissed him gently on the cheek and turned out the lights. (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, p. 127)

Chị is therefore consistent with the portrayal of *bóng* in general as being effeminate, having feminine interests and personality traits and demonstrating her maternal instincts. The first clue that she is *lộ* and not *kín* is presented when Khảo is forbidden to enter her bedroom without permission, causing him to wonder if perhaps she is hiding a princess in there.

When Khảo enters her bedroom, it is described as beautiful and gaudy, being decorated with pink drapes, violet lighting and fake orchids on the wall. All of this elicits surprise from Khảo, as it clearly does not match his (or presumably the reader's) expectations of a bachelor's bedroom. When Khảo begins to notice items that are definitively associated with women, the language of the text begins to change. He first notices that it is "strange" that there are "weird-looking" bottles in a glass case and a woman's silk pyjamas draped over a table, and then talks of his "fear" as he notices a thin, silk nightgown (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, pp. 117-125).

When Chị feels that her secret has been revealed and that she is therefore able to be her true self around Khảo, she begins to behave in a way that is more overtly feminine than Bùi Anh Tấn's *bóng kín* characters. Strangeness is the common theme that connects most of Khảo's observations about her from this point on. First her voice is said to have changed and become totally strange. Then Khảo wonders why her mannerisms have become weird and abnormal. Her laughter is described as sharp. When she picks up a pink nightgown and smiles, holding it against her face, Khảo once again feels strange looking at her effeminacy. The word effeminacy in this context, *uốn éo*, could also be translated as 'wriggling' or 'writhing,' and though it is often used to describe effeminate men it conveys rather a stronger image than its English equivalent. At this point her voice totally changes a second time, becoming soft and sweet. Khảo continues to be shocked with each new revelation, and he almost cries out at the strangeness of seeing her in makeup and woman's clothes for the first time. Once again she is said to *uốn éo* in front of Khảo, though this time it is a verb and might be translated as "wriggle effeminately." Thereafter everything that is described about her conveys delicacy and effeminacy. Her kisses are wet, she is described as sweet-smelling, she giggles and

moves around gently. None of this is dissimilar to how *bóng kín* characters are described in this and other books, but Chì is more effeminate than any of the characters described as examples of *bóng kín*. In this respect she is consistent with the distinction between *bóng lộ* and *bóng kín* as being between feminine and relatively more masculine homosexuals. Chì feels that it is her nature to enjoy wearing woman's clothes and comes to regard her situation as fate that she is powerless to struggle against (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, pp. 117-125).

The novel's narration initially identifies her as male, which is appropriate as at that point she is presenting as a man and neither the reader nor any of the other characters in the book have any reason to believe otherwise. When she makes feminine identification clear, and begins dressing as a woman, Khảo (from whose point of view these chapters are narrated) begins to refer to her using the older feminine pronoun *chị*, but always in quotation marks. For one scene towards the end of her story arc the quotation marks are dropped and she is referred using feminine pronouns, but as soon as she is discovered (wearing a dress and makeup) by Khảo's mother the gendered pronouns change again and she becomes 'him,' 'the man,' and 'the guy' until 'his' death shortly thereafter. Her own preference in gendered pronouns is clear, and the fact that masculine pronouns continue to be employed suggests that the author doubts the legitimacy of assuming a social gendered identity that conflicts with one's anatomical sex.

Chì talks to Khảo about her desire to live in a woman's body, telling him that that she has always dreamed of being a woman (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, p. 122). Gender affirmation surgery is never discussed as an option. As in the examples discussed in *Shadow* therefore, there is evidence that Chì desires to become a woman but no evidence that this desire would lead her to transition. The same difficulty therefore exists in distinguishing between Chì and Bùi Anh Tấn's *bóng kín* characters as exists in distinguishing between the *lộ* and *kín* characters presented in *Shadow*. In either instance both groups are conceived as having feminine essences inside male bodies and neither express a desire to transition. The character of Chì is therefore consistent with other examples of *bóng lộ* discussed in this chapter, and the criterion of desiring to transition as a signifier for *bóng lộ* identity cannot be applied to this example.

As a child Chì begins stealing clothes from her mother and sisters, and derives a strange pleasure from interacting with their things. She repeatedly risks discovery by going out

at night dressed in women's clothes, relying on her makeup and the cover of darkness to protect her identity. Her secret excursions are eventually discovered by her mother, and together they agree that it is in everyone's best interests for her to leave Hue and move to Saigon where she does not risk embarrassing her family. Her mother is supportive, and this decision is not interpreted as being a rejection but rather as a way for Chị to have the opportunity to live the life that she desires without risking the pain that she will feel if her behaviour inadvertently hurts her family. In Saigon, Chị is more cautious. The compromise that she strikes between her desire to present as feminine and the social necessity of presenting as masculine is the same as that struck by the closeted *bóng lộ* in *Shadow*. She keeps an extensive collection of cosmetics, like Dũng's unnamed *bóng lộ* friend, and like Trung, Dũng's *bóng lộ* friend who transitions, she presents as a woman at home, alone and in private. Her growing relationship with Khảo eventually affords her the opportunity to present as a woman and be addressed as feminine in his company. When he has been allowed to discover her secret, Khảo begins to address her using the feminine pronoun *chị*, to compliment her on her beauty and to talk of his desire to marry her. Looking after Khảo becomes a way in which she satisfies her sisterly or maternal instincts. The division of pronouns is significant as unlike the romantic couples, who call each other *anh* and *em*, the same pronouns used by opposite-sex partners, Khảo and Chị address each other as though they were brother and sister.

The pleasure that she derives from these interactions contrasts with her comparative lack of interest in sex. Chị makes no explicit identifications as *bóng* and states outright that she is not homosexual. As a child, she believes herself to be homosexual because of her attraction to woman's clothes, accepting the logic that, as an effeminate person, she will be attracted to 'real' men. This would be consistent with the understanding of *bóng kìn* identity discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. After experimentation as an adult, however, she discovers that she is not aroused by men, regardless of whether they are heterosexual or homosexual, and is even less aroused by women, leading her to conclude that she is possibly "frigid" (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, pp. 179-188).

Chị has a clear transgender identity and derives great pleasure from cross-dressing and being recognised as feminine but not from sexual intercourse. As a trans woman who wants to present herself socially as feminine and whose primary desires are not sexual or romantic but are instead concerned with being recognised as beautiful and feminine, the character of Chị is consistent with the definitions and representations of *bóng lộ*

characters presented in *Shadow*. She does not express a desire to transition but conceives of herself as already being a woman and expresses this understanding through cross-dressing and acts of gender transgression, which is consistent with how *bóng lợ* characters are represented in *Shadow* but contradicts the explicit definition presented in this chapter and does not necessarily distinguish her from *bóng kìn* characters. Chị is therefore a clear example of the *bóng lợ* identity presented in *Shadow*, albeit one with the same contradictions as are evident in the *bóng lợ* characters in other texts.

b. 'Madame' Pho

The other character in *AC Kinsey's Method* who is arguably an example of *bóng lộ* is Pho. A far weaker example of this identity than Chì, Pho is potentially an example of *bóng kín*, and as mentioned in the previous chapter he is an effeminate homosexual who sexually desires masculine men. Some of the gender transgressive behaviours that he displays are common to *bóng kín*, such as the fact that he paints his nails, wears jewellery and uses ambiguous pronouns, but Pho is generally more effeminate than *bóng kín* characters.

Pho is referred to as the 'madame' [*má mi*] of his brothel, sometimes abbreviated to simply *má* (mother). He is generally addressed by his first name with no pronoun, and as mentioned in the previous chapter he is referred to as masculine in this thesis because his behaviour more closely resembles that of *bóng kín*, who generally use masculine pronouns. Pho is however stated to be *bóng lộ* in an interesting passage that occurs when the young protagonist, Trung, goes to work in Pho's brothel. The narrator in the passage observes that:

In his fifty or so years Pho had become a swollen *bóng lộ* to the extent that he could no longer hide it at all, or so it seemed, in his speech, behaviour and actions. All that was missing was for him to go for an operation and get it over with. But if Pho did go for surgery he would certainly turn into a trembling mound of meat that was half male, half female but still trying to writhe around... 'Madame' Pho understood that all too clearly, and so didn't waste thousands of dollars going to Thailand for that nonsense. Only a very stupid person would do that, (s)he said. There was no point in the surgery, God created women to be women, everything in its place and no amount of scalpels and scissors could recreate you. The 'girls' who thought they had become women were mad, at night they still made love to men in our 'traditional' fashion, she would laugh, that other hole wouldn't make them a living and was just for decoration. (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, pp. 151-152)

This long, transphobic diatribe makes several interesting points and is broadly consistent with the understanding of *bóng lộ* presented in this chapter. The fact that Pho is only 'missing' an operation to complete his being a *bóng lộ* suggests that Trung understands *bóng lộ* to desire to transition. Whether or not Pho actually desires to become a woman is unclear, but a desire to become a woman is assumed to be part of

*bóng lộ* identity by Trung, who as noted in the previous chapter is *bóng* (and might therefore be expected to be knowledgeable) and highly sympathetic. His opinion of gender affirmation surgery is similar to that expressed by Dững in *Shadow*. Pho evidently believes that post-transition *bóng lộ* are not in fact women. His vivid mental image of Pho struggling to writhe around as a bloated mass of flesh clearly emphasises how unattractive, gender ambiguous and even inhuman a post-transition Pho would appear. This is reminiscent of Dững's reflections on the mad and terrifying appearances of *bóng lộ* who are recognisably men but behave and dress women. Pho's remark that *bóng lộ* vaginas are "just for decoration" presumably indicates that he believes they cannot have vaginal intercourse. Given that Pho is sexually active, to transition and lose his functional penis for a purely decorative vagina would represent a significant sacrifice on his part. In the case of Pho the cost of the operation is measured in thousands of dollars rather than in reduced life expectancy, but in both *Shadow* and *AC Kinsey's Method*, gender affirmation surgery is presented as involving a large personal sacrifice for small potential benefits.

The fact that Pho is extremely promiscuous, as described in the previous chapter, is a significant distinction from the definitions presented in *Shadow* and representations of *bóng lộ* characters in general. Pho's desires are evidently carnal rather than related to his feminine appearance. There is no indication that he derives satisfaction from being recognised as beautiful, though given that he is hideous this would be difficult to determine. Unlike Cách Cách in *Shadow*, who styles her outward appearance in a similar manner to Pho, he does not seek affirmation of his beauty of femininity. There is similarly no evidence that he desires or attempts to pass as a woman in spite of his feminine personality and affectations such as painting his nails and wearing jewellery. While the definition of *bóng lộ* presented in this passage is broadly consistent with how these individuals are conceived in this and other texts, Pho himself is not a clear example of this identity and is in fact more similar to the definition of *bóng kín* presented in *Shadow*. Pho is an unusual example of a queer character in that he does not seem to fit with the one identity label that is explicitly applied to him, but his apparently erroneous identification as *bóng lộ* is nevertheless evidence of a similar understanding of this identity to that which is discussed in this chapter.

#### 2.4 Untold Stories

The final text studied in this thesis which deals with *bóng lộ* identities is *Untold Stories*. The experiences of characters who are explicitly or implicitly identified as *bóng lộ* account for around half of the stories in this compilation. Like *Shadow* and *Not Out of Place*, *Untold Stories* is specifically intended to promote sympathy and empathy for queers. Unlike the other texts examined in this chapter, the *bóng lộ* characters in *Untold Stories* are generally the protagonists of their own stories, which are told primarily from their points of view. As such this is a useful source of *bóng lộ* perspectives on their own identities.

a. First Time Doing LỘ [Lần đầu làm lỘ]

Perhaps the most interesting example of *bóng lỘ* identity in this compilation, *First Time Doing LỘ* appears only in the unpublished, pre-final edit version of *Untold Stories* and is an account of a young *bóng lỘ* and her first experiences as she experiments with cross-dressing and becomes a member of the *bóng lỘ* community. The narrator in this story is identified only using the gender-neutral pronoun *nó*, using the writing device employed throughout this compilation in relation to characters with ambiguous gender identities. She is identified as feminine in this thesis as this is consistent with the *bóng lỘ* identity which she comes to recognise during the events recounted in the text.

At the outset of this story the narrator presents herself socially as masculine and identifies by implication as *bóng kín*, seemingly without ever having considered that she might be *bóng lỘ*. The text begins by describing her misapprehensions about *bóng lỘ* in an interesting passage that is worth quoting at length:

Only a few years ago, the world of *bóng lỘ* was still very foreign to her. She only vaguely knew about these people through stories, satire and sometimes insults. Even though they were also homosexual, their reputations and stereotypes were very different. On the one hand there were *bóng kín* who had signs of masculinity and on the other side were *bóng lỘ* who were feminine in the way that they dressed, the words that they used and the way that they thought. So the distinction between *kín* and *lỘ* was an invisible division that separated the world of homosexuals into two opposing sides. The confrontation between *bóng kín* and *bóng lỘ* might be subtle, but it was not lacking in fierceness and intensity. (Tường Vy et al., unpublished, p. 57)

There is therefore a clear distinction between *bóng kín* and *bóng lỘ* and *bóng kín* are outwardly masculine while *lỘ* are not, and both are homosexual. The distinction is said to be 'invisible' but has outward signifiers in the form of dress and pronoun use as well the truly invisible signifier of "way of thinking." The distinction between outwardly masculine *bóng kín* whose homosexuality is difficult to detect and feminine *bóng lỘ* is of course consistent with the definitions presented in this chapter.

The narrator gradually comes to reconsider her opinion of *bóng lỘ* because of her positive experiences with her *bóng lỘ* acquaintances. In particular, she cites the example of her *bóng lỘ* friends who volunteer at an orphanage. Upon seeing how kind they are

with the children and how quickly the children take to their ‘big sisters,’ the narrator concludes that her reservations were misplaced.

The narrator later attends a beauty contest called Miss Angel which is organised by a ‘Third World’ online forum. At this event one of her *bóng lậ* friends invites her to try ‘doing lậ.’ She finds that the invitation “touched a private corner very deep in her soul,” and subsequently allows herself to be dressed in feminine clothes and have makeup applied. She finds that she is unable to convincingly behave as effeminately as her *bóng lậ* friends, and her masculinity immediately reveals itself through her movement and behaviour. The *bóng lậ* taking part in the competition seem to be able to behave in a feminine manner spontaneously and naturally while the narrator feels uncomfortable by comparison. This leads her to reflect on the nature of masculinity and femininity, and to conclude that:

Becoming *bóng lậ* was not just a question of makeup and costume but was an essential characteristic that had to come from deep inside their soul with a desire to live authentically. (Tuồng Vy et al., unpublished, p. 58)

Her new friends are very welcoming and begin to help her to ‘transform,’ a process that is described as follows:

They taught her the basics, and helped her a lot, taking her shopping, buying wigs, helping her to apply makeup and showing her how to stand and walk... They started to view her as ‘one of the sisters,’ in the way that *bóng lậ* always regard each other. (Tuồng Vy et al., unpublished, p. 58)

Having come to the realisation that she is *bóng lậ*, the narrator understands that she needs to learn to present as feminine and buy the clothes and makeup that will allow her to live authentically and become one of her adopted sorority of *bóng lậ* sisters.

However, her first attempt to ‘do’ lậ leads her to conclude that it is surprisingly difficult in spite of the benefit of her *bóng lậ* friends’ instruction. Clearly the contestants of Miss Angel, who have practised, are far better at ‘doing’ lậ than she is, and they presumably received similar instruction and encountered similar challenges during their early forays. The narrator’s experiences therefore demonstrate that cross-dressing and presenting as a woman socially are an integral part of *bóng lậ* but not of *bóng kín* identity, as her previous identification as *bóng kín* did not require any of these skills.

The depiction of *bóng lộ* presented in this text is typical of portrayals of these characters in this compilation and also consistent with the understandings discussed in this chapter. In common with representations of *bóng* in general, the narrator is conceptualised as having a man's body but a woman's soul. After she comes to the realisation that she is (and always has been) *bóng lộ*, she understands that one authentic outward manifestation of her *bóng lộ* identity is to present herself as feminine socially. As is typical *bóng lộ* characters in general, the narrator's desires are concerned with beauty and femininity. The fact that the story is framed around participation in a beauty contest underscores this point. Her gratification derives from wearing makeup, participating in the contest and ultimately being accepted as a sister by her *bóng lộ* friends. In spite of her identification as homosexual, she makes no references to having romantic or sexual desires at any point in the text, and her homosexuality is demonstrated only through her gender transgressive behaviours. This too is consistent with the understanding presented in this chapter that *bóng lộ* primarily desire to be seen as beautiful and feminine.

The only point of distinction between the definition of *bóng lộ* presented in *Shadow* and the experiences described in this text are that the narrator makes no reference to desiring to become a woman anatomically through gender affirmation surgery. Instead the process of becoming a woman that is undergone by the narrator and her friends is limited to more cosmetic changes and to being accepted in various feminine roles as a sister (by one another), a beautiful woman (by the participants of the Third World beauty contest) and as an older sister by the younger orphans for whom they volunteer. Once again therefore the issue of transitioning and gender affirmation surgery is not mentioned. Given that this text presents a relatively detailed account of the narrator's experiences and desires, one can deduce that this is not a crucial part of her identity.

b. *Days Past* [*Những ngày đã qua*]

Another text that was removed from the final edition, *Days Past* recounts the experiences of an individual who is bullied as a child and the effects that this bullying has on her emotional state and her later life. In terms of its content this text is typical of the stories in *Untold Stories*, and it is notably similar to *Ancient Dreams*, discussed in the chapter on *bóng kín*. Once again the gender-neutral pronoun *nó* is used in Vietnamese, but the narrator will be referred to using feminine pronouns in this analysis.

At the outset of the story, the narrator has been identified as being effeminate by the other children in her primary school class on account of the fact that she does not take part in boys' games such as football and playing with guns. They call her *pêdê* and *bóng*, as is common in *Untold Stories*, but also “*xăng pha nhớt*” [petrol mixed with oil], a derogatory term implying that she is transgender and that her nature is a mixture of two different elements (Tuồng Vy et al., unpublished, p. 11). They also abuse her physically, and the violence that ensues takes a specific form:

The bullying did not stop [at verbal abuse]. Sometimes they would get excited and the whole group of them would tear off her trousers to see if she was the same as a boy or a girl. When they finished, the whole group would fall over laughing, so pleased with what they had just done, and take a war trophy in the form of her underpants, which they would throw away. (Tuồng Vy et al., unpublished, p. 11)

The protagonist refers to this treatment as rape, and tries to resist but is unable to defend herself against so many assailants. She is unable to turn to adults for support, as her parents only advise her to fight back to “prove that (s)he is a man” (Tuồng Vy et al., unpublished, p. 11). This is not how she identifies, however, and she eventually comes out to her mother as homosexual. Her mother responds as follows:

You are a disgusting child. I would rather I had laid a chicken egg or a goose egg that I could have sold for money than given birth to you. You're a boy but not actually a boy, but definitely not a girl. What pack of people are you impersonating? I remember that you were healthy when I gave birth to you, why are you so disgraceful? If I'd known I would have held your nose and suffocated you to death to save on the money I've spent on rice for you up until now, instead of having all the

neighbours say how unlucky I was to have given birth to a disgusting *pêđê* like you. (Tường Vy et al., unpublished, pp. 11-12)

Years later she is successful personally and professionally while many of her former bullies have led unsuccessful lives. Recognising her daughter's achievements, her mother eventually accepts her back into the family. The details of their reconciliation are not described, and *Days Past* is very brief, but the narrator notes that her mother even helps her to choose material to make a dress in which to compete in a 'Third World' beauty pageant. The protagonist ultimately wins the competition, but the story ends with her observation that by the time of her reconciliation with her family she is no longer a child, implying that their acceptance came too late and with too high a cost.

The protagonist in this text identifies as homosexual, and the only other identity signifiers in this text, *bóng* and *pêđê*, are used as epithets by her abusers rather than for the purposes of self-identification. When she comes out to her mother and is called a *pêđê* in response, she does not refute her mother's use of the term. As an adult, the protagonist lives as a woman, and as a child it is her gender transgressive behaviours that are noticed by her bullies and her pretending to be a girl that is condemned by her mother. Her bullies express a malicious desire to inspect her genitals as a means to determining whether or not she is *pêđê*, and her mother uses the fact that she was born with normal male anatomy as a reason for rejecting her identification as homosexual. All of these factors indicate a common understanding, shared by both the protagonist and her various antagonists, that she is homosexual and that homosexuality, also negatively referred to as being *pêđê*, is a transgender or intersex category.

These understandings are shown to be accurate in the experiences of the protagonist, as her gender transgressive behaviours were indeed evidence of what she refers to as her homosexuality. Significantly however her homosexuality is expressed by her "living as a woman," which involves presenting as a woman socially and using feminine pronouns, while her romantic and sexual desires are totally unspecified. She is bullied at school for playing girls' games, her successful participation in a specifically transgender beauty contest as an adult is a source of great pleasure and her mother's symbolic acceptance of her identity occurs when they work together to help her make a beautiful dress. Throughout the text her desires, the obstacles that she faces and her overcoming of these obstacles are exclusively limited to cross-dressing and presenting herself socially as feminine.

Given that she identifies both as a woman and as a homosexual, these terms used with their English meaning would indicate an attraction to other women, but this is unlikely to be the intended meaning in this text. Her sexual and romantic desires are not mentioned at all, either as a child or as an adult, and the only indication that sexual orientation is part of her homosexual identification is made when she observes that she has not contracted HIV while some of former bullies have become drug addicts and subsequently contracted that disease. This indicates at most a tenuous hint at her sexual behaviour, as presumably the fact that she mentions HIV at all is due to the connection between men who have sex with men and HIV transmission. All of the texts in *Untold Stories* deal with the experiences of male-to-female transgender people or of male homosexuals, and none of the texts deal with female homosexual protagonists or indeed characters of either gender who desire women. As such it is certainly not implied in the text that the protagonist is a woman who desires other women, and this understanding would conflict with the use of the terms *bóng* and *pêđê* as used throughout this collection and other texts.

The identification of homosexual made in this text is conflated with *pêđê* and shown to be a category of gender transgressive males who make feminine identifications and grow up to become women. By the end of this text the narrator has achieved the transformation that she desired to effect when she was still a child. As in other examples from this collection, this is limited to dressing as a woman and participating in beauty contests. There is no indication that she requires or desires gender affirmation surgery in order to become a woman. Once again therefore the criterion of transitioning as an element of *bóng lộ* identity is not evident, and the social transformation is shown to be sufficient. Though she does not specifically identify as *bóng lộ*, as a trans woman who identifies as feminine, lives as a woman and attaches importance to beauty and femininity over romantic and sexual desires, the protagonist's experiences are entirely consistent with how *bóng lộ* are described throughout this chapter.

c. After the Rain [*Qua cơn mưa*]

This text describes the experiences of a young character, once again identified by the gender-neutral pronoun *nó* in the text but referred to as feminine in this analysis, who experiences bullying and abuse on account of her gender transgressive behaviours. As a child, the protagonist of this text enjoys watching schoolgirls walk past wearing *áo dài* dresses, Vietnam's national costume for women and school uniform for girls. She reflects that, "If only [she] could wear an *áo dài* even once then she would feel content" (Tuòng Vy et al., 2013, p. 74). At school, she feels that she is not being true to herself when she presents as a boy, and wishes instead to be like the other girls in her class. She characterises her gender as a "difficult sum to which there was not yet an answer" (Tuòng Vy et al., 2013, p. 74).

Her family is aware of her feminine identifications and seek to return her to normal. To that end they force her to train as a motorbike mechanic, believing that having a such a masculine profession will end her effeminate tendencies and help her to become a "really strong man" (Tuòng Vy et al., 2013, p. 74). She is entirely unsuited to this job and her resulting unhappiness prompts her to come out to her parents. They react badly to the news, calling her sick and disgusting and expelling her from the family. She feels depressed and suicidal but lacks the 'courage' to kill herself. Leaving her family behind she is forced to work as a prostitute for a time by an abusive boyfriend. Eventually her situation improves and she reflects that though she still misses her parents, she has since found a second family in the *bóng* community who accept her for who she is and treat her well.

The protagonist identifies specifically as homosexual, and this text is unusual in that it is one of very few examples wherein *pêđê* is used not only as an epithet but also for the purposes of self-identification. She explains her decision to come out to her family by expressing the need to show them that homosexuality [*đồng tính*] is not a disease, but the phrase that she uses to come out to her mother is, "I have been trying not to be myself" (Tuòng Vy et al., 2013, p. 75). When her mother asks what this means, she responds "I haven't been myself because I am a *pêđê*, mum" (Tuòng Vy et al., 2013, p. 75). The fact that she switches between using the terms homosexuality and *pêđê* indicates that the two terms are conflated. She and her parents understand that she is homosexual because she is effeminate and not interested in masculine tasks such as motorbike maintenance. She makes no mention of to whom (if anyone) she is attracted,

but the fact that she has a boyfriend after she is disowned by her family would seem to indicate that she is oriented towards males as well as having a feminine gender identity. The only sexual experiences that can be inferred from the story occur when she is forced to work as a prostitute, which presumably involves having sex with men. In this text too it is therefore gender transgression rather than same-sex desire that identify the narrator as *pêđê* and homosexual.

The narrator is similar to other *bóng lộ* characters in that she describes her attraction to women's clothing, imagining as a child how gratifying it would be to wear feminine clothes and later experiencing this gratification as an adult. As in *After the Rain*, the story's happy ending occurs when the narrator is able to present as a woman socially and finds a group of peers that are willing to accept her on these terms. Her sexual desires are unspecified, but the thrill of presenting and being recognised as a woman seems to take their place.

Also in common with the majority of the examples of *bóng lộ* considered in this chapter, the narrator has a desire to become a woman which is ultimately satisfied through social presentation rather than medical intervention. This transformation is limited to presenting herself as a woman socially and does not specifically require that she transition. Though she does not make an explicit identification as *bóng lộ*, the protagonist of this text is another character who is consistent with other examples throughout this chapter, and differs from the understanding presented in *Shadow* only insofar as she does not describe transitioning as an essential part of her identity.

d. How to Live Truly [*Làm sao để sống thật*]

This text is another story about a character identified only as *nó* which deals with issues of family, stigma and authenticity as experienced by a *bóng lộ*. This text appears in a pre-final edit edition of *Untold Stories* but was removed from the final publication. The protagonist and her identical twin are ‘really’ boys but understand themselves to be girls and want to present and be recognised as such. In her early childhood it is said that, “She had no desire that was stronger or fiercer than to become a girl” (Tuồng Vy et al., unpublished, p. 17). She and her twin refer to each other as sisters and present themselves socially as girls, dressing in feminine clothes and growing their hair and fingernails long. Even when they remove these obvious signifiers of femininity, their personalities are such that they are instantly recognisable as *pêđê*.

The protagonist’s aunt, identified only as *dì* (denoting mother’s younger sister), disapproves of her nieces, whom she regards as being her nephews and whom she accuses of “looking like a bunch of *pêđê*” (Tuồng Vy et al., unpublished, p. 17). This causes problems for the protagonist and her family. Their mother is unemployed and unable to support her family financially, depending on her sister’s assistance. The aunt lives in America but gives her sister money whenever she returns to Vietnam. She takes every opportunity to criticise the protagonist, her sister and their mother for what she views as their strange and immoral behaviour. Due to their financial dependence, they have to attempt to appease their aunt by acceding to her demands, which include cutting their hair and fingernails short, hiding their collections of shoes and clothes, and attempting to behave like boys during her visits. Their femininity remains apparent nonetheless and their aunt is never satisfied. The protagonist describes their predicament as follows:

There were two of them, how could they possibly hide everything?  
They resigned themselves to getting Korean-style unisex haircuts and cut their nails. They had to hide all their female clothes, their wigs and shoes and wear boys’ clothes starting a week before *dì* arrived. But each time *dì* found fault in their attempts to be boys. (Tuồng Vy et al., unpublished, p. 17)

When the twins turn sixteen the aunt ceases to provide for their family financially and they experience true economic hardship for the first time. Their mother sells all of their possessions and they are left living in an empty house. The sisters attempt to finish school as quickly as possible and then find a job so that they can support their mother,

but their being *pêđê* makes it difficult to find employment. The story ends with the main character reflecting on the illogical nature of prejudice and the fact that she would not be *pêđê* if she could choose to be otherwise (Tường Vy et al., unpublished, p. 18).

Though this is another story about transphobia, and touches on themes of intolerance and family explored in other stories, *How to Live Truly* is unusual in several respects. While many stories explore themes of familial disapproval, this story differs from most in that it is not a hostile parent or intolerant home environment but a distant yet important relative whose intolerance causes problems. The two sisters are raised by their mother, their father having left when they were very young. Their mother apparently accepts her children and they have an extremely positive and mutually supportive relationship. This point should be stressed, as it is almost unique in the primary sources used in this thesis and is particularly unusual in *Untold Stories*, which focuses primarily on the opposite experiences. *Bóng* tend to experience hostile reactions from their parents when they come out, *bóng lậ* more so than *bóng kín*, generally because the parents are ashamed of and disappointed in their children rather than because of any material consequences. In *How to Live Truly* the mother is supportive of both of her children being *bóng lậ* when they are young teenagers and continues to support her children when doing so alienates her sister and causes financial hardship. This fact is afforded very little attention in text, and the protagonist remarks simply that she loves and sympathises with her mother and regrets the fact that her own identity has caused such problems. It is clear that the aunt's attitudes and harsh words cause the protagonist a great deal of pain, but her assessment of her aunt's behaviour is perhaps uncharitable. It is unclear why the protagonist's mother is unable to work, and it is arguably not unreasonable for the aunt to expect that one of three members of the protagonist's nuclear family should get a job when all three were adults.

Other aspects of the sisters' lives support the idea that their experience of intolerance and transphobia was less intense than many others described in *Untold Stories*. They are unhappy at school and need to graduate as soon as possible, but this is not because of bullying but rather because their mother cannot support them and they need to start earning money as soon as possible. While other writers describe being bullied and subjected to physical and sexual violence at school with the complicity of teachers and other responsible adults, often returning home to unsympathetic families who subject them to more abuse, the narrator notes only that she has to refuse invitations to

classmates' parties for reasons of financial prudence. This of course indicates that she was invited to these parties when her being *pêđê* was immediately discernible to everyone, another fact that suggests a comparatively high degree of acceptance in the school environment. When she looks for a job she faces employment discrimination because prospective employers immediately recognised that she was *pêđê* "whether she tried to be a man or a woman" when going to interviews (Tường Vy et al., unpublished, p. 19). This is also significant, indicating that she was able to go to interviews dressed and made up as a woman. This is dissimilar to the many *bóng lộ* described in *Untold Stories* who must struggle to keep their identities secret. The protagonist of *How to Live Truly* therefore evidently enjoys a greater degree of autonomy and freedom and has a less savage experience of intolerance than most others described in other texts in the same collection. Given that the stated message of *Untold Stories* is to reveal the cruelty and pain inflicted on queer Vietnamese in a homophobic and transphobic society, this may well be the reason that it was removed while other less optimistic stories remained in the final edition for publication.

This story's representation of *bóng lộ* identity and its link with homosexuality is typical of *Untold Stories* in general. As in the other examples described above, effeminacy is equated with *pêđê*, which is the most common identity label used in this text. *Pêđê*, in turn, is equated with homosexuality. This conflation of the two terms is made explicit when the main character notes that, "While many people spend years wondering if they are homosexual, I knew from a very young age that I was *pêđê*" (Tường Vy et al., unpublished, p. 17).

The narrator emphasises their 'fierce' desires to be seen as beautiful women, a desire that leads them to collect dresses and shoes and cultivate a feminine appearance. Being forced to present as masculine in school, in job interviews and in front of their aunt causes the protagonist distress, and she and her sister are willing to compromise on their haircuts only to the extent of having unisex hairstyles. In common with depictions of *bóng lộ* individuals in other stories, neither she nor her sister describe any erotic or romantic desires of any kind. The issue of whether or not the narrator's desire to become a woman involves transitioning is unspecified in this text, and her expressed desires are limited to social presentation. In this respect, too, the identity described in *How to Live Truly* is consistent with the other *bóng lộ* characters discussed in this chapter.

e. A Child's Confidences [Tâm sự của con]

This text is another story about a trans individual who is referred to using a gender-neutral pronoun throughout, though in this case the pronoun used is child [*con*] rather than he/she [*nó*]. At the end of the story another character addresses the narrator by her name, calling her Bi. Though Bi is 'really' a boy, she is only happy when she presents herself as a girl, and grows up hiding this fact from her parents. When she is sixteen she is surprised by her family who have stayed up late to confront her as she returns home one night still wearing women's clothes. In the ensuing fight, she is assaulted and then physically ejected from her house by her family. Bleeding and bruised she makes her way to the house of her aunt, who greets her warmly and treats her with love regardless of her gender identity.

Bi herself makes no explicit identifications other than as a woman, and the only queer identity labels in the text are epithets. When her father expresses his objections to her behaviour he tells her that:

You are a pervert. I regret having had a child like you. If I'd known you were going to be like this I would have killed you [when you were a baby] and been better off for it. (Tường Vy et al., unpublished, p. 66)

In rejecting these accusations Bi wonders, "Why would my parents assume that I went with bad, weird, sick *pêđê*?" (Tường Vy et al., unpublished, p. 66) The two signifiers of her identity used in the text are therefore pervert [*thứ biến thái*] and *pêđê*. In the latter statement it is unclear whether she refutes the *pêđê* identity itself or only the negative attributes applied to it in this context.

Bi addresses her identity in the opening paragraph, stating, "I dreamed of being able to use makeup, wear girls' clothes and be doted on, but I'm still living the life of a boy" (Tường Vy et al., unpublished, p. 66). She goes on to describe her dissatisfaction with her own face, which she feels is not pretty enough, and compares herself to a caterpillar that is frustrated by its inability to transform into a butterfly. Her conceptualisation of herself as a boy with the heart of a girl is common throughout representations of *bóng* identities in the primary texts used in this thesis, while her identification as a girl forced to live as a boy is more consistent with *bóng lộ* identities discussed in this chapter. She and her friends are drawn together because:

[My friends and I] can understand each other's desires, hopes and fears, and can help each other to learn how to apply makeup and dress so that we look beautiful. (Tuờng Vy et al., unpublished, p. 66)

Continuing on this theme, she adds:

I like going out with my friends a lot, but the sad thing is that we only go out at night. Under the cover of night and the electric lights we feel more pretty, more satisfied and able to be ourselves. Only at night do we feel that we are really being ourselves. Only with my group of friends do I feel like I'm living truly with my inner self. (Tuờng Vy et al., unpublished, p. 66)

Bi's desires are therefore centred around beauty and femininity rather than overtly sexual or romantic. There is perhaps a romantic implication to the phrase that she desires to be doted upon, presumably by a masculine partner, which may indicate that she, like other feminine queer characters discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, desires a partner who will fulfil traditionally masculine duties in their relationship. Other than this single vague implication her expressed desires all concern her appearance. Satisfaction comes not from romantic or sexual relationships but from the feeling that she is beautiful.

Though Bi makes no explicit identifications, she fits with the definition of *bóng lộ* presented throughout this chapter in that she is a trans woman whose primary desires are associated with being recognised as beautiful and feminine. Judging by Bi's account of her own socialisation with her likeminded friends, she is content presenting as feminine and being seen as beautiful within the context of her social group and does not need external attention and validation. Once again therefore the otherwise accurate definition presented in *Shadow* is distinguished from the identity presented by the protagonist of this story by the fact that a desire to transition and become a woman anatomically is not mentioned as being part of this identity.

f. *Tears in the Contest* [*Nước mắt trong cuộc thi*]

*Tears in the Contest* is a short though rather complicated story about the narrator's participation in two beauty contests, dealing with issues of stigma and gender in relation to a *bóng lộ* protagonist. In the qualifying stages of the first contest she wins the award for "beauty with the best answer" (Tuờng Vy et al., unpublished, p. 61) but then falls victim to the jealous machinations of one of the organisers and is therefore not able to participate in the final. One year later she is able to participate again realises her dream by winning in the category of "traditional beauty of northern Vietnam" (Tuờng Vy et al., unpublished, p. 61). During the two rounds of the contest she is made to cry by a jealous rival and has occasion to reflect on her loneliness and the stigma faced by people like her in modern Vietnamese society.

The narrator writes extensively about the importance of beauty, expressing her feelings on the significance of the beauty contests as follows:

On that day, when I learned of the transgender modelling show I was incredibly excited. I enjoyed designing my own collection of clothes but hadn't taken part in any classes. The feeling of standing on the catwalk, looking at my friends from the Third World who were the same as me, walking around in high heels and fashionable outfits that I had designed would make me really happy. I'm not sure when this feeling started, but I no longer wanted just to be a designer, I wanted to stand up there, on the stage, in front of the bright lights and the cheering audience. (Tuờng Vy et al., unpublished, p. 61)

She goes on to describe her preparations for participation in the first contest:

My disguise was a wedding dress that a friend let me borrow. The feeling of putting on makeup for the first time in order to become a girl gave me an uncontrollable thrill. The first time standing in front of a mirror and seeing the image of a girl, my friends and I were really surprised. I felt like I had shed my skin. It was still me moving around, but the person in the mirror wasn't the everyday me. (Tuờng Vy et al., unpublished, p. 61)

Despite these desires, she refers to herself as being a boy and it is not until she sees herself in makeup and a dress that she feels she has become a woman. Her happiness at winning the contest is tempered when she remembers that, "My family still didn't know that I'm of the Third World" (Tuờng Vy et al., unpublished, p. 62). This identification

as a Third World individual is made on three separate occasions, which is remarkable given that writers in *Untold Stories* generally avoid such identifications and the text is only three pages long. A further identity label is present in the form of the term ‘transgender’ [*chuyển giới*], which is never used by the narrator for self-identification but features in the descriptions of the contests in which she participates.

It is clear therefore that the protagonist of *Tears in the Contest* is a trans woman whose enjoys presenting and female and is frustrated by societal and familial pressure to present as masculine. The narrator of this text is another example of a trans woman who does not refer to any romantic or sexual desires. Her descriptions of the experience of presenting as a woman — which is incredibly exciting, uncontrollably thrilling, causes her to cry tears of anguish and joy and causes bitter jealousy in her rivals — are evocative of romantic and sexual feelings and strongly indicate the importance that beauty and femininity hold for this character. *Tears in the Contest* focuses exclusively on these aesthetic considerations with no indication that the narrator has other romantic or sexual desires.

Her participation in the second beauty contest represents her having achieved her desire to become a woman. After her transformation, she notes that she is unable to return home to collect her portfolio until she takes off her feminine clothes and makeup and returns to presenting herself as a man. Her transformation is therefore possible, and is indeed successfully implemented, without the need for transitioning or gender affirmation surgery. This suggests that transitioning is not a fundamental part of trans identity as described in this text. The identifications as Third World, transgender used in this text therefore appear to describe *bóng lộ* identity, as defined in this chapter, even though the term itself is never used.

g. Going Hungry for a Night Won't Kill You! [*Nhìn đói một đêm không chết đâu!*]

Finally, *Going Hungry for a Night Won't Kill You*, hereafter referred to as *Going Hungry*, describes the mistreatment of a group of *bóng lộ* at the hands of the police in an unspecified Vietnamese city. The narrator, once again identified only by the gender-neutral pronoun *nó*, tells of how she and her friends are frequently victims of police harassment when they meet in public. On the night described in this story the police take the narrator and her friends to a local police station and keep them in detention overnight, during which time they are deprived of food and water. The next morning they are all officially fined and their parents are made to come to the police station to collect their children, who are still dressed in women's clothes.

By the standards of the primary sources used in this thesis, the language used by the police officers is extremely obscene. When the narrator refuses to answer questions, a police officer demands:

Do you hear what I'm asking, *pêđê* guy? Fuck you. You pretend to be girls and stand around working as whores to pick people's pockets.

(Tuồng Vy et al., unpublished, p. 87)

When another police officer takes pity on them and attempts to give them water and bread, he is chastised by his superior as follows:

Fuck you, the State pays your salary but you think you work for those demonic half-men half-women? Get back inside, you're not buying them anything. (Tuồng Vy et al., unpublished, p. 87)

A final series of insults is directed at the protagonist's mother the following morning when the detainees' parents arrive to pay their children's fines and take them home. Noticing that the protagonist's mother wears several golden rings, a police officer remarks:

Look at this lady. Instead of raising her children she lets them go and pretend to be girls and work as whores. As long as they bring home money so she can buy herself gold to wear, right!? (Tuồng Vy et al., unpublished, p. 88)

The common theme to the officer's insults are that these individuals are female impersonators, and the police repeatedly emphasise how unsuccessfully they are masquerading as female. In addition to repeatedly stating that they are pretending to be women, the officers use the masculine pejorative pronoun *thằng* in reference to the protagonist and her friends.

The narrator herself identifies as gay *lộ*. Though gay and *bóng* are often used synonymously, this construction does not occur in other texts. When explaining why they are targeted for police harassment she notes that, “In our number there were some that, even when they applied their makeup carefully, could still be recognised by everyone as boys” (Tuồng Vy et al., unpublished, p. 87). In the story’s conclusion, as she leaves the police station still dishevelled from the previous night, she laments her appearance and reflects, “Looking at her now, who could know what a pretty girl she had been the previous night, before she was arrested?” (Tuồng Vy et al., unpublished, p. 89).

The narrator and her friends are therefore conceptualised as being 'real' boys who wear disguises to make themselves look like girls. The fragility of this appearance of femininity is evident in the fact that she ceases to be a girl as a result of a night spent in detention; she is a beautiful girl only when she has freshly applied makeup, and when she is dishevelled she reverts to being a boy. There is therefore some agreement between the police officer’s accusations and the narrator’s own understanding of her identity, as both posit her outward femininity as concealing a more authentic masculine identity. This is unusual, suggesting that unlike most of the other *bóng lộ* considered in this chapter the protagonist of *Going Hungry* identifies as essentially masculine rather than as having an essentially feminine identity concealed by her masculine appearance.

The police officer’s reference to the narrator and her friends working as prostitutes implies an assumed sexual motivation to their feminine presentation. The police evidently believe that the detainees are intent on tricking 'real' men into paying them for sex. The understanding expressed here is the same as that which is evident in other representations of *bóng*, as it is assumed that because the narrator engages in feminine behaviours then she will have homoerotic sexual inclinations and her prospective partners will be men. That the narrator is attracted to men is neither confirmed nor refuted, but the police officers’ assumptions are said to be wrong at least insofar as the narrator and her friends are innocent of the charge of prostitution. Once again there is no mention of the protagonist’s romantic or sexual desires, if indeed she has any. Instead her gay *lộ* identity is expressed purely in terms of gender transgression and achieving feminine beauty, which is consistent with how *bóng lộ* are represented in examples considered throughout this chapter.

Though the protagonist of this text conceives of herself as essentially masculine, this text is one of very few examples in *Untold Stories* wherein the apparent *bóng lộng* identity is specifically associated with transitioning. The narrator herself does not mention whether or she has transitioned or desires to do so, but one of the reasons that going without water overnight presents such a problem is that some of her friends are taking hormones and need to remain hydrated. The trans characters described in this text are therefore atypical in several regards. Their conceptualisations of their own gendered identities as essentially male rather than female and even the explicit identifications that they make as gay *lộng* are not widely repeated in other texts, and the desire to transition rather than only presenting as women socially is evident in this text and very few others. The problems that these characters face are nevertheless similar to those faced by *bóng lộng* in other texts, as they encounter hostility and are ridiculed when they present as women and the specific issues raised by their abusers are exceptional for their vulgarity but otherwise representative of the accusations directed at *bóng lộng* in the examples discussed throughout this chapter.

*Untold Stories* contains many examples of individuals who see themselves both as biologically male and socially female, and the texts described above represent these characters' attempts to explain themselves to a sympathetic reader. Though these representations are not united by a single identity label, there are significant points of commonality in the behaviours and desires of the individuals concerned.

## 2.5 Chapter Conclusions

The characters described throughout this chapter are characterised by a far more unified understanding of their identities than the *bóng kín* described in the previous chapter. In terms of their gender identifications these characters are generally conceptualised as having masculine bodies but feminine essences. Given that almost all *bóng* are characterised this way and distinguished from 'real' men, the distinction proposed in certain texts that *bóng lộ* are authentically feminine while *bóng kín* are authentically masculine is impossible to apply consistently. The language of authenticity is also used in a contradictory manner between different texts. Some authors, such as the writers of *How to Live Truly* and *Going Hungry*, talk of being 'really' (i.e., anatomically) boys when they know themselves to be girls. Others (such as the writer of *A Child's Confidences* or the character of Chị from *AC Kinsey's Method*) are 'really' (i.e., spiritually) girls and are merely forced to pretend to be boys. Regardless of how these terms are applied however, these characters demonstrate similar desires and face similar problems.

All of the characters explicitly defined as *bóng lộ* desire to present themselves as women and be recognised as such, and all characters who demonstrate this desire are portrayed in a way that is generally consistent with how *bóng lộ* are defined. The extent to which these characters are able to be women socially varies drastically between different texts. Regardless of whether a character's gender transgressive behaviours are limited to using scented soaps and shopping or involve living as a woman at all times, the characters' motivations are the same.

The issue of transitioning through gender affirmation surgery is represented in an extremely small number of texts. When characters talk of having become women, in all but a few instances it is implied that this transformation is achieved by, and limited to, social behaviours and does not involve surgery or hormone therapy. In cases where characters are explicitly said to have transitioned physically, there is no separate identity distinguishing them from other *bóng lộ* who have not yet, cannot, or do not desire to transition. Based on a reading of these texts therefore, transitioning is not a common or essential part of *bóng lộ* identity, which is not usually associated with medical interventions.

Romantic and sexual desires are conspicuous by their absence. *Bóng lộ* characters almost without exception are shown to have desires that are satisfied by beautiful dresses, makeup and participation in beauty contests rather than through sex and romance. In the few examples wherein *bóng lộ* characters are shown to form relationships, these desires are always presented as being another way in which these characters are able to feel feminine. None of the texts about *bóng lộ* characters deal primarily with issues of romantic love, and this is the clearest point of distinction between these individuals and the *bóng kín* considered in the previous chapter.

The queer characters studied in this thesis as examples of *bóng kín* are generally identified based on gender transgression at least as much as homoerotic inclination. In cases of characters described as *bóng lộ*, they are defined solely by their feminine identifications and their associated gender transgressive behaviours. Nonetheless it is assumed that *bóng lộ* desire men and there are no examples of *bóng lộ* characters who desire (other) women or who explicitly reject the understanding that as *bóng lộ* they desire males rather than females. Attraction to men is therefore conceived of as a feminine quality in the primary texts used in this thesis, and the understanding that a man who desires other men will have feminine characteristics is evident throughout. Male homosexuality is presented as a feminine identity to the extent that terms such as ‘gay man’ and ‘masculine homosexual’ are at least oxymorons and arguably outright contradictions.

**Chapter 3****‘Real’ Gays and ‘Real’ Men: Gender, Authenticity and Homosexuality****3.1 Introduction**

The final chapter of this thesis considers issues of gender and authenticity raised in the previous two chapters and how these notions relate to ‘real’ homosexuals as distinct from ‘real’ men. Homosexuals, regardless of whether they are *lộ* or *kín*, are always defined in contrast to ‘real’ men, ‘normal’ men or ‘100%’ men. The term heterosexual [*dị tính*] is mentioned in only a very small number of texts (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, p. 58; Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 226) and is never regularly employed. This distinction is unproblematic in relation to examples of effeminate homosexuals and masculine heterosexuals, as these characters have social behaviours and romantic and sexual inclinations that are consistent with their gender identities. Characters who are both masculine in their social behaviours and homoerotically inclined or at least homosexually active require more complicated explanations, and rely on a distinction between ‘real’ homosexuals and ‘real’ men who are not authentic homosexuals despite their behaviours.

The following chapter considers examples of homosexuals whose sexuality is shown to be authentic and innate alongside others who are either inauthentically homosexual or are accepted as examples of ‘real’ (and therefore heterosexual) men in spite of their sexual behaviours. In each case, the criteria upon which these distinctions are based is examined. Several characters that have previously been considered as examples of *bóng kín* and *bóng lộ* identity are revisited in this chapter in order to consider issues of the authenticity and the naturalness or otherwise of these identities. As in previous chapters, these issues will be approached with reference to specific texts which offer criteria for understanding the categories discussed, followed by specific examples and comparisons of how these issues are presented across different texts.

### 3.2 A World Without Women

Once again Bùi Anh Tấn's first novel is a useful source of definitions and examples as the issue of authenticity is presented clearly and definitively in this text. The categories of 'real' homosexual and 'real' man are shown in this text to be extremely important, and the issue of authentic homosexuality as distinct from other homosexuality is shown to be clear, logical and comprehensible. This topic is broached for the first time in the story's foreword. Addressing the reader directly, the writer notes that homosexuality is shameful and unnatural, but that:

If [your being homosexual] is really true, then please live with your head held high towards the sunrise and hope for a tomorrow in which your life will be better. (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, pp. i-ii)

This distinction between genuine homosexuals who deserve tolerance and the implicit other category of individuals whose homosexuality is inauthentic sets the precedent for how these issues are presented in this and several other texts. The notion of authenticity is central to intolerant and pathological definitions of homosexuality, which tend to be associated with cases of 'inauthentic' homosexuality in people whose natural, healthy state would be heterosexuality. These individuals are understood to be affected by a psychological condition and are therefore in need of advice, therapy and in some cases punishment to cure them. Rather than being advised to accept their situation, these individuals are given the opposite advice and urged to struggle against their homosexuality and do whatever they can to return to normality. The clearest examples of a pathological understanding of homosexuality occur in *A World Without Women*. At the beginning of the novel, the protagonists of the story are ignorant of homosexuality and must educate themselves for the purposes of conducting their investigations. To this end they contact a psychiatrist named Minh Sơn who treats homosexuals and offers what in the West would be termed sexual reorientation therapy. The psychiatrist works with the families of homosexuals in order to help them to return to normality. Minh Sơn explains many aspects of homosexuality to a reporter named Quang Việt. Much of what Minh Sơn has to say is interesting, combining elements of Western psychiatry and Vietnamese history to present an account of gender deviance and homosexuality arriving in Vietnam only with the advents of Colonialism and LGBT activism. He also states that fellatio and oral sex were not practiced in Vietnam until the twenty-first century, and uses these terms in verbatim English because he believes that they cannot be translated into Vietnamese (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, pp. 248-250).

The doctor's responses to Quang Việt's questions are implausibly longwinded and full of misspelled foreign names. He initially takes issue with Quang Việt's use of the term *pêdê*, pointing out that this more correctly refers to paedophiles rather than homosexuals in the original Greek and that it is therefore an offensive term. After correcting Quang Việt the doctor goes on to refer to homosexuals as *pêdê* throughout the rest of his explanations. Minh Sơn informs Quang Việt that homosexuality is common in the West but new and unfamiliar in Vietnam, and illustrates his point with some Western gay pornography (illegal in Vietnam) which he keeps in his desk, though he agrees with Quang Việt that such materials are disgusting (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, pp. 244-246).

On the topic of whether or not homosexuality is a disease, Minh Sơn notes that the American Psychiatric Association no longer considers homosexuality to be a mental disorder as of 1973, but states that:

[The American Psychiatric Association] conducted a vote agreeing to remove homosexuality from the list of mental disorders on 15 December 1973. Which meant that homosexuals would no longer be regarded as sick people, but there was a lot of acrimonious argument about this issue and it wasn't until April 1974 that the APA ratified the decision through a second vote. I point out that they voted on this issue, let me remind you that they voted, it wasn't something that was proven through specific science, and for this reason until this very day there are psychiatrists who regard it as a form of mental illness or an illness of the psyche. (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, p. 251)

The fact that the doctor himself is not convinced is clear, though he does not suggest how a more definitive answer to this question could be reached. While homosexuality is often referred in pathological language as a disease or a sickness by intolerant characters in various texts, *A World Without Women* is unique in that the omniscient narrator of the novel frequently refers to homosexuality as a disease [*bệnh*] disability [*tật*] and symptom [*chứng*]. The doctor also mentions a link between paedophilia and homosexuality on two occasions during his interview with Quang Việt (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, pp. 244; 246), and homosexuality is linked to necrophilia and bestiality elsewhere in the text (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, p. 293).

Minh Sơn describes conditions that are likely to result in homosexuality, and outlines categories of individuals with a high and low risk of becoming homosexuals. The doctor states that homosexuality strikes randomly and can affect anyone, even famous athletes

and regardless of masculinity, social class and degree of education. This idea is immediately contradicted when he adds:

Of course, a man who is physically strong, educated, has a position in society will naturally be better able to control himself. The probability of it happening in such people is low. (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, p. 253)

Conversely, people who are at a high risk of developing homosexuality are predominantly:

Those who are active in cultural fields, arts, music, singing and dancing, or else weak, impressionable adolescents [and people] in cities with gentle jobs... In artistic fields... many famous artists with lots of fans [are homosexual]... Artists, in the process of making their art, with their romantic souls, flighty natures and sensitivity are more prone to [homosexuality] than normal people... Putting on makeup, spinning around under the bright lights and performing with artifice, fooling themselves, all of this leads them to be unable to distinguish what is performance and what is real ordinary life... (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, p. 254)

Association with homosexuals and early homosexual sexual experiences are also stated to be risk factors because most people who identify as homosexual are merely “imitating and competing with each other and therefore inadvertently become homosexual” (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, p. 254).

Homosexuals are therefore said to be effete artists and privileged city-dwellers with physically undemanding jobs. As discussed in the first two chapters of this thesis, homosexuals are commonly conceived as being men with the hearts, minds or souls of women, and these feminine essences are responsible for feminine personality traits and sensibilities. Minh Sơn’s discussion of what jobs appeal to homosexuals is an extension of this understanding, as the jobs listed are associated with emotional intelligence, artistry and creativity rather than physical fortitude, practicality and manual labour. In other words, homosexuals are attracted to jobs that suit their feminine sensibilities rather than traditionally masculine occupations.

Another interesting point that is evident in these quotes is the consistent message that homosexuals are impressionable and self-deluding, and that homosexuality arises out of a combination of the aforementioned feminine traits and having an occupation that blurs the boundaries between what is real and what is not. This fact is extremely important as

it introduces the idea of the inauthentic sexuality of individuals who believe themselves to be homosexual but are in fact 'real' men who need more masculine hobbies and occupations to help them rediscover their masculinity. Individuals who belong to this category are failing to be true to themselves when they identify as homosexual. They are not therefore deserving of the tolerance and acceptance that should be afforded to 'real' homosexuals and should instead seek to be cured.

On occasions when alarmed parents bring him their homosexual-identified children, the doctor's interventions must be timely to be successful, as "these people might become real homosexuals if it's not recognised quickly enough" (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, p. 259). In general, however, the doctor's methods are effective and "except in a few cases where the signs present from very early... after receiving my advice they will be able to go back to normal" (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, p. 256).

The specific form that these medical interventions take is that he has long conversations with them in which he encourages them to consider "both sides of the issue," helping them to rediscover their masculinity by committing to masculine tasks such as playing sport and using their willpower to struggle against their desires and encourages them to get married, to love women, and to enjoy "natural sex" with women instead of following their own unnatural impulses (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, p. 260).

The stated distinction between 'real' homosexuals and 'real' men who think that they are homosexuals is therefore interesting. As adults, members of both groups are implied to be potentially indistinguishable from each other. As a result of the lifestyle criteria outlined above, 'real' men may believe that they are gay (and therefore not men at all), behave consistently with feminine stereotypes and have same-sex romantic and sexual relationships but still lack the quality of authenticity that deserves tolerance instead of rejection. The issue of how to distinguish between these groups is therefore important, as it informs how these identifications should be interpreted, reacted to and potentially dealt with by well-meaning friends and family.

Using Minh Sơn's definition, these exceptional cases of 'real' homosexuality can be identified only by looking at his childhood for evidence of early signs. This is consistent with the experiences of *bóng lộ* characters, as described in the second chapter of this thesis, whose early gender transgressive behaviours are understood to be evidence of

their homosexual or *bóng* identity. The only valid signifier that a boy or man is a ‘real’ homosexual is that he behaves like a girl when he is a young child. If one was to apply this criterion to the texts already discussed, one would conclude that *bóng lộ* (who are usually gender transgressive from a young age) are ‘real’ homosexuals while *bóng kín*, who are far less transgressive, are primarily inauthentic gays. This distinction will be examined throughout this chapter to determine how it can be applied to various queer characters discussed in this thesis.

The most interesting aspect of the understanding presented in *A World Without Women* is not the fact that homosexuality is associated with gender transgression — a fact that is evident throughout queer Vietnamese literature — but rather the fact that cases of ‘real’ homosexuality are vanishingly rare. The definition presented in this chapter and borne out in *A World Without Women* and several other texts specifically precludes the possibility of masculine homosexual men and excludes homoerotic desires as a means of detecting homosexuality.

This understanding of homosexuality as a pathological condition associated with gender transgression in childhood and various feminine lifestyle criteria and personality traits is evident across many texts, though usually to a lesser degree than in *A World Without Women*. The various possibilities for the authenticity (or otherwise) of homosexuals presented by Minh Son are the ‘real’ homosexual who is effeminate as a child, the homosexually active ‘real’ man who may be misidentified as homosexual, and the less clearly defined outcome of the untreated or untreatable inauthentic homosexual for whom treatment becomes ineffective if the condition is allowed to go untreated. These understandings offer a model for analysing representations of these issues throughout the primary texts used in this thesis, and this chapter tests these ideas by seeking to apply these definitions and drawing comparisons between characters who fit with these criteria throughout the primary texts.

### a. Bàng

To begin by looking at examples in *A World Without Women* itself, a clear example of a pathological instance of homosexuality is a professor named Bàng. This character does not initially believe himself to be homosexual but he is an affluent, city-dwelling intellectual and a successful student. During a period of overseas study, he meets a Cuban international student named Daniel Chavara, with whom he shares a room and whom he describes as lively, strong, good fun, and immensely popular with female students (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, p. 159). One evening, while Bàng is in their shared apartment reading, Chavara returns home unusually early and asks Bàng if he wants to go out for dinner, then leads him to a small secluded cafe. Chavara asks Bàng if he has ever had sex with anyone of either gender, which confuses Bàng as he cannot imagine how two people of the same gender could possibly have sex. Chavara then directs him to look around, at which point Bàng notices that the cafe is in fact a gay group sex venue and that other men who are present are having sex with one another. He attempts to leave, but is picked up by two men, who seem to be acting on a pre-arranged signal, and dropped onto a bed. The two men then begin having sex in close proximity to him, and Bàng is horrified and disgusted but also aroused and eventually participates in the orgy, noting as he does so that his first sexual experiences were therefore with men rather than women (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, pp. 159-164). Reflecting on this moment, Bàng writes that, “Because of these naive, stupid ideas I have had to pay by being regretful for the rest of my life” (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, p. 164). Bàng is therefore clear on the point that this formative experience, combined with his lack of contact with women, is what leads to him becoming a homosexual.

He is thereafter homosexually active, his attempts at heterosexual relationships are failures while he becomes increasingly unable to resist his homoerotic inclinations. Shortly after his death, one of Bàng’s neighbours describes him as “aloof, didn’t seem to like women, seemed *pêđê*” (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, p. 115).

Bàng has two homosexual relationships, both of which end tragically. He becomes jealous of his first lover, Hải, as he resists the other man’s attempts to leave him and get married, a situation that ultimately results in the other man’s death (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, p. 273). His second relationship is illicit in that it is with one of his students and must therefore be kept secret. Bàng contracts HIV from his second boyfriend, and their relationship ends with his lover’s death from AIDS related illnesses. Shame over his

own sexuality and HIV positive status ultimately drives him to suicide by proxy, leading to a red herring storyline that links Bàng's experiences with the main plot, as he is wrongly assumed to be a victim of the serial killers targeting homosexuals (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, pp. 416-417).

Considering Bàng in relation to the criteria presented in this chapter, one can deduce that his lifestyle put him at risk of developing homosexuality. This risk was heightened by his pursuit of academia over a more physically taxing or traditionally masculine profession. He then encountered homosexuals socially and began having homosexual sex while still conceiving of this as being inconsistent with his authentic orientation and viewing his participation as being against his will. His first experience of homosexual sex is an apparent turning point in Bàng's life, leading him to experience confusion over his gender identity. His homosexual relationships with other men throughout the rest of his life mean that his homosexuality continues to go untreated even as his risk of developing the condition permanently increases. By the time that he commits suicide, he may have left the stage at which treatment would have been possible and become a homosexual even if his homosexuality was not initially authentic. The example of Bàng could be used as a cautionary tale on the dangers of living having a physically undemanding job, associating with homosexuals and sexual experimentation. Bàng's story is therefore consistent with the pathological understanding of homosexuality as an acquired condition that affects 'real' men who meet certain lifestyle criteria.

### b. Trung and Hoàng

The text's other queer protagonists, namely Trung, the masculine detective, and Hoàng, his more feminine lover, were previously considered as examples of a masculine/feminine *bóng kín* couple. They are also potentially examples of similarly confused 'real' men. Trung is far stronger example of this identification than Hoàng, and as previously mentioned is one of the clearest examples of a masculine homosexual (if he can be described as such) found in any of the texts used in this thesis.

Trung does not consider himself to be homosexual at the beginning of the book, and indeed is largely ignorant of homosexuality until he becomes involved in the story's murder investigation. He is described as masculine, handsome and desirable to women (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, p. 242). Trung is tough, decisive and works as a detective, a job which, at least in genre fiction, is physically demanding and dangerous, and at the end of the novel he conducts a daring rescue to save Hoàng from his kidnappers (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, pp. 422-428). Trung lives in Saigon but is neither affluent nor intellectual. In terms of his lifestyle criteria therefore he does not generally fit the conditions said to cause homosexuality.

Over the course of the murder investigation central to novel's plot Trung is put into various situations where he must meet and talk to homosexuals. He is initially uncomfortable in these environments, and reacts violently to an effeminate homosexual who flirts with him in a gay bar, twisting his arm and laughing when the other man cries out in pain (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, p. 181). As the investigation progresses he meets Hoàng, who is attractive and feminine. Their relationship is initially platonic, and Trung is evidently impressed by Hoàng's various admirable qualities and sympathetic to the fact that he has been rejected by his family. Trung's homoerotic inclinations follow an extended period of time during which he had contact with homosexuals in general and Hoàng in particular. He therefore fits one of the criteria defined by Minh Sơn as potentially causing 'real' men to misidentify as homosexual. This is the understanding accepted by Hoàng, who expresses his regret at having "pulled Trung into a homosexual relationship" (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, p. 436). The story's original ending sees Trung forcibly separated from Hoàng by an attractive young woman, abruptly ending the romantic relationship that had been developing throughout the novel and turning Trung back to normal at the first hint of female attention (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, pp. 438-440).

There is therefore extensive evidence to support the view that Trung is not a 'real' homosexual but belongs to the category of confused 'real' men misidentified as homosexuals. The story's conclusion is consistent with this understanding because it is revealed that Trung was, after all, curable. The fact that meeting a young woman allowed him to rediscover his masculinity is also consistent with the advice that the psychiatrist in this text proffers to homosexuals and their parents, namely that relationships with women are a means of curing homosexuality. The pathological definition of homosexuality is therefore affirmed in the case of Trung, whose experiences demonstrate both the possibility of a 'real' man misidentifying as homosexual and the fact that such individuals can be cured. He certainly does not appear to match the psychiatrist's characterisation of 'real' homosexuals as being people who exhibit signs of homosexuality from very young, as the period in at which he is at risk of becoming a homosexual does not occur until he is an adult and after he begins to encounter homosexuals. Trung is far more positively portrayed than Bàng, and does not have personality traits that lead others to identify him as *pêđê*, but nevertheless the two characters belong to the same category of inauthentic homosexuals whose inclinations are the product of circumstance rather than nature.

The counterexample, perhaps the only 'real' homosexual in this novel, is Hoàng. As has been described in a previous chapter, Hoàng an example of an effeminate homosexual. He fits the psychiatrist's definition of a 'real' homosexual, presenting signs very early. Unlike Trung and Bàng, Hoàng recognises himself as homosexual without having had any obvious formative experiences or encountering other homosexuals. Hoàng's decision to come out to his family is not widely copied, even in later texts that profess a more tolerant message, and is especially remarkable for being a decision that Hoàng makes before he has become sexually and romantically active and while he is still financially dependent on his family. The catastrophic results of his decision, which include his father's death, could be taken as a cautionary tale for Vietnamese considering coming out, but Hoàng's actions nevertheless suggest a large degree of confidence and clarity about his own identity.

The idea that Hoàng might be a 'real' homosexual who has no control over his sexual orientation never occurs to any of the story's characters other than perhaps Hoàng himself. When he is hospitalised by his older brother, everyone agrees that the blame for this event should be assigned to Hoàng himself. Even though the definition

presented by the psychiatrist in *A World Without Women* seemingly accounts for Hoàng's being a 'real' homosexual and therefore entitled to tolerance and acceptance, other characters are united in the opinion that Hoàng should stop being gay, apologise to his remaining family members that he has not inadvertently killed and go back to being a normal, heterosexual person. Other characters' perceptions of Hoàng's sexuality contradict the ideas expressed by the psychiatrist — and Bùi Anh Tấn himself in the story's introduction — about the nature of homosexuality and the existence of 'real' homosexuals who cannot change their sexual orientation. This contradiction could be explained as simply being a realistic portrayal of homophobic sentiments in Vietnamese society, showing that the other characters are ill-informed, in denial, or are more willing to accept homosexuality as an intellectual concept than to react with acceptance to individual homosexuals. This explanation cannot however account for the story's original conclusion. In the original version of the book Hoàng - like Trung - ultimately meets a pretty woman. Hoàng evidently experiences an epiphany, finding that he is suddenly bored by Trung, resolves to exercise more self-restraint in future and agrees to return to normal and reconcile with his family (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, pp. 434-436). Hoàng is therefore ultimately shown to have simply needed female attention to correct the misperception on his part that he was gay, and the pathological understanding of homosexuality as a curable condition is therefore evident once again. There are therefore no 'real' homosexual characters in *A World Without Women* whose authentic, natural sexualities are not challenged and arguably rejected. It should be noted however that later editions of *A World Without Women* were published with an alternative ending which sees Hoàng making a phone call to Trung in a state of some emotional distress, quoting a romantic poem and asking him what the future holds for them. With this second ending, there is less evidence to suggest that Hoàng is not an authentic homosexual.

c. Hải

The difficulty that homosexuals face in being accepted as such in spite of their own actions and identifications contrasts sharply with the ease with which characters such as Trung are accepted as being 'real' men in spite of their behaviours. This distinction is clearer in comparison to other characters who are homosexually active but are also 'real' men who are neither homosexual nor confused, examples of which are found in several of the primary texts used in this thesis. In the context of *A World Without Women*, this character type is personified by Bàng's aforementioned heterosexual boyfriend, whose name is Hải. The two men live together for a period and are romantically and sexually involved. Hải agrees to move in with Bàng after the first time they have sex, is willing to be monogamous to Bàng during their early relationship and is later extremely tolerant of Bàng's jealousy.

Bisexuality is discussed in this novel, but the idea that Hải may be bisexual is never considered in spite of the fact that he evidently pursues relationships with both men and women. Similarly, there are several examples, of whom Hoàng is the most prominent, of characters who face extreme intolerance within their families as a result of their homosexual identifications. The possibility that Hải, or indeed anyone, might be homoerotically inclined yet prioritise filial and familial responsibilities over having a (public or exclusive) same-sex partner and therefore pretend to be heterosexual is not considered in *A World Without Women*. Instead this text is concerned with precisely the opposite situation: characters who pretend to be homosexual for reasons that are never clear and therefore jeopardise their family lives and ignore their filial responsibilities. The fact that Hải ultimately becomes a husband and father is taken as the final and definitive answer the question of his identity, and renders his homosexually active past irrelevant (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2000, pp. 266-273). This too is typical of several other texts.

According to the logic presented in *A World Without Women* therefore, the burden of proof is on homosexuals to demonstrate that they are really gay, and doing so in a way that is beyond doubt is extremely difficult. The idea that there is always hope that a gay might become normal delegitimises gay identity and cast doubts on whether anyone should, or properly can, be identified as homosexual. A man like Hải who is homosexually active for an extended period is still viewed as being clearly heterosexual if he identifies himself as a 'real' man, while characters such as Hoàng can spend years trying to convince their families that they are gay without ever having this identification

accepted. Hoàng also shows that the families of such men should not stop pressuring them to conform because all it takes for them to return to heterosexual normality is to meet an attractive woman at the right moment.

*A World Without Women* therefore demonstrates an understanding of male homosexuality as being associated with gender transgressive behaviour and a lack of masculine personality traits. According to this text homosexuality can be either innate and therefore authentic or else socialised and partially voluntary, with the latter instances being the result of various lifestyle criteria, feminine personality traits and interactions with homosexuals. In practice, all of the characters who identify as homosexual are shown to belong to the latter category.

A reading of novel this does not ultimately present any clear examples of characters who can properly be identified as 'real' homosexuals and suggests that all homosexuality is inauthentic and curable. A qualified exception to this reading exists in the form of the trio of Vietnamese-American serial killers responsible for the murders central to the story's plot. These men are foreign, evil paedophiles, and in addition to conducting a series of sadistic murders one is arrested while having sex with a twelve-year-old boy. Further analysis of these characters is impossible, however, as they are almost completely absent in the text except when they are finally brought to justice and nothing is revealed about their personalities, backgrounds or formative experiences. Clearly however they do confirm the psychiatrist Minh Son's most negative opinions on homosexuals and indicate that perhaps 'real' homosexuals do not yet exist in Vietnam, though this may be changing as homosexuality is brought to the country by deviant foreigners.

Other texts tend to present a less rigid framework for deciding who can and cannot be considered homosexual, and to be generally more open to accepting individuals' rights to self-determination. Nevertheless, the characterisation of homosexuals as feminine and pathological and the notion of masculinity equated with heterosexuality and antithetical to homosexuality is in some respects typical and is evident in several other texts, as shall be shown in this chapter.

### 3.3 AC Kinsey's Method

The text which represents homosexuality in the most similar manner to *A World Without Women* is *AC Kinsey's Method*. Publication of these two works is separated by eight years and there is a significant change in how queer issues are presented and discussed, especially by the story's omniscient narrator. The most obvious of these changes is that homosexuality is no longer referred to as a disease and the narrator no longer refers to individual homosexuals as *pêđê*. The fact that overtly pathological language is no longer used to describe homosexuals affects how issues of authenticity are presented, making the distinction between real, sympathetic gays and inauthentic, misguided gays less clear. Nonetheless in most respects *AC Kinsey's Method* refines rather than revises the ideas presented in *A World Without Women*, and several characters are worthy of analysis in this chapter.

a. Trung

The young architect Trung is seemingly a 'real' gay, and has previously been considered as an example of a feminine *bóng kín*. Trung is an effeminate homosexual, being girlishly attractive, possessing various feminine personality traits and entering into relationships with more masculine men. When questioned about his gender identity, Trung states:

I confirmed that I was gay a long time ago and I don't need to explain why, I also don't need to figure out why. Why would I need to be confused or find the reason when I was born that way? (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, p. 204)

His defence of his homosexuality therefore follows the same logic presented in *A World Without Women*, namely that because it is an innate quality rather than a learned behaviour his sexuality is legitimate and not shameful. As an affluent, educated city dweller with a physically undemanding job, Trung fits several of the lifestyle criteria that put him at risk of developing homosexuality. He also works as a prostitute when he is a teenager, a time during which he was surrounded by homosexuals (both customers and sex workers) and therefore has extensive experience of homosexual sex and social contact with homosexuals (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, pp. 44-59). As the experiences of characters such as Hoàng in *A World Without Women* demonstrate, the fact that Trung considers himself to be homosexual does not necessarily mean that his identity is authentic and Trung could still be an example of an inauthentic gay who could be treated and return to normal in spite of his own assertions to the contrary.

Perhaps the most significant distinction between Trung and Hoàng, the most positively portrayed queer characters in *AC Kinsey's Method* and *A World Without Women*, respectively, is that Trung's homosexuality is never challenged. These are no equivalents in *AC Kinsey's Method* to the pretty women who lead Hoàng and Trung off to become normal men, thereby saving them from their same-sex romance. Instead Trung is loyal to his boyfriend throughout the text, even when doing so puts him in situations where he faces sexual violence and, later, being sent to prison. There are some minor negative reactions to Trung's sexual orientation, most notably when his employer, Cường, expresses his surprise that such an intelligent young man could be homosexual (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, p. 201). In general however everyone (including Cường) has a highly positive opinion of Trung that does not seem significantly affected by knowledge of his homosexuality. There is therefore a significant shift between how these issues are portrayed in *A World Without Women* and *AC Kinsey's Method*. Even if

Trung could be taken as an example of someone who is homosexual because of various lifestyle criteria and formative experiences, this is not used to pathologise and delegitimise his identity in the way that the same factors are used in relation to *A World Without Women*'s queer characters.

### b. Rich Phạm

Another of the story's significant homosexual characters, Rich Phạm was previously considered as an example of a *bóng kín* who pursues relationships with 'real' men preferentially to other *bóng*. Rich is masculine but is revealed to have some feminine characteristics. He is extremely affluent and highly educated, having a well-paid, physically undemanding job working for a business initiative of the UN and having obtained a PhD from Harvard (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, p. 132). Rich's privilege is very clear, affirmed in virtually every scene in which he features through signifiers such as expensive restaurants, exclusive clubs and luxurious apartments. Rich drinks cocktails, plays tennis at five star resorts and has a foreign personal assistant who accompanies him on his business trips (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, pp. 128-132). He is also revealed to have had homosexual experiences in his early life, having been the romantic partner of a much older man named Bằng when he was a teenager. His adult homosexuality could therefore be explained by his formative experiences as an adolescent and the various lifestyle criteria which place him at risk of becoming a homosexual in later life.

As an adult, Rich is one of the strongest examples of a masculine homosexual found in any of the primary texts studied in this thesis. He is athletic, attractive to women, charismatic and confident. Cường, the novel's protagonist, spends a great deal of time with Rich without suspecting that he is homosexual, in spite of frequent flirtatious behaviours on Rich's part. Rich's masculine traits therefore inure him to suspicions of being homoerotically inclined. There are however several aspects of Rich's character that suggest that his masculinity is a facade that hides a more feminine essence. As a young man, Rich left Vietnam and was thought by Bằng to be dead. Bằng commissioned a portrait of his young lover, and the teenage Rich depicted in this portrait is described as follows:

[He was] not exactly dove-eyed but his eyes were round and shining with long, raven black eyelashes... His round cheeks were always blushing, his lips were as red as lipstick and he had beautiful pale skin. (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, p. 78)

The description of Rich as an adolescent highlights various feminine and androgynous aspects of his appearance, and he has features that make him appear to be wearing makeup. Bằng always refers to Rich as his 'angel,' a name with clear feminine connotations. His implied childhood effeminacy is consistent with the single criterion presented in *A World Without Women* as defining 'real' homosexuality, namely that he presents signs of gender transgression from very early. The adolescent Rich is far more

similar to other *bóng* characters discussed in this thesis than to the masculine, adult Rich. The two are dissimilar to the extent that Cường looks at the portrait of Bằng's 'angel' without recognising the adult Rich.

When Rich begins to act upon his attraction to Cường, after the two have been drinking, he suddenly becomes more feminine. The narration, which is from Cường perspective, describes Rich's "soft, warm, pink lips" as he kisses Cường's hand, and Rich's eyes begin to tear up as he talks of his loneliness, a fact that is described by the narrator as follows: "Rich Phạm gently rested his head on Cường's shoulders, inhaling the masculine smells coming from him, his voice suddenly completely weak and effeminate" (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, p. 134).

His transformation in this scene is remarkable, as he is suddenly characterised by the opposite of his character traits throughout the rest of the novel. From being tough and masculine, Rich suddenly becomes weak and feminine. During this scene, Rich is attempting to seduce Cường, who is a masculine heterosexual, and Rich may therefore be trying to position himself in a feminine role in relation to Cường to facilitate a relationship or at least an encounter based around the binary division of gender roles, as discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. It is also possible that Rich's inhibitions were simply lowered by alcohol, and that he is behaving in a way that comes more naturally to him, shedding the masculine persona that he is forced to use for his business and social dealings. Regardless of how it is interpreted, this scene hints that Rich's outward masculinity conceals a more feminine essence. His younger days as Bằng's 'angel,' may therefore be a more authentic representation of his gender identity. When he meets Bằng as an adult, and is addressed once again as 'angel,' Rich becomes distressed, pretends not to recognise Bằng and immediately leaves his presence (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, pp. 390-392). Rich's reaction in this scene could be indicative of the lengths to which he has gone in order to distance himself from his earlier, more feminine and therefore easily recognisable queer identity.

Rich could therefore be interpreted either as a 'real' homosexual who has gone to great lengths to appear heterosexual or as a 'real' man whose early experiences and lifestyle criteria have led to his developing homosexuality. Either interpretation would be consistent with the understandings set out in *A World Without Women*, and in either case his homosexuality is revealed through his gender transgressive behaviours in the

scene described above. If he can be considered an example of a particularly masculine gay man, he nevertheless shows that such individuals have an inner femininity that reveals itself on occasion and which, it is implied, takes conscious effort to conceal.

### c. Bằng

Bằng, the aforementioned lover of Rich Phạm, is himself an interesting example of a homosexual character who may or may not be an authentic homosexual. Bằng is an effeminate man, identified as homosexual and as gay. He meets Rich when he is working as a teacher and Rich is one of his pupils (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, pp. 75-82). It is unclear whether Rich and Bằng have a sexual relationship, but certainly from Bằng's point of view Rich represents his one true love. Rich's supposed death informs the remainder of Bằng's relationships, which are sexual but unromantic, his heart having been permanently broken by the presumed death of his young lover.

Bằng abandons this job and leaves Vietnam to study as a beautician. Upon returning to Vietnam he establishes a successful business, making and selling beauty products and wedding dresses. The narrator notes that Bằng is "known to everyone in the city's artistic circles" (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, p. 66). As a successful, talented, educated, wealthy city dweller who works in feminine beauty, Bằng obviously fits with most of the lifestyle criteria associated with homosexuals.

The issue of the authenticity of Bằng's homosexuality is raised when Cường remarks that:

Cường was shocked because he didn't understand why his friend had to take it so far. Thinking of the past he realised that maybe this was the authentic path that Bằng had to take, but... he still felt shocked and surprised. (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, p. 76)

The suggestion that Bằng had "taken it too far" reflects the concern expressed in *A World Without Women*, portraying homosexuality as a choice or a habit-forming behaviour, implying that Bằng might have been able to be a normal man if he had exercised more restraint or willpower during his youth. The reference to Bằng's past relates to the fact that during their school years together Bằng was already being bullied for being *bóng lợ*. The fact that Bằng was showing signs of effeminacy (and therefore homosexuality) from a very early age is taken as evidence that this was his "authentic path." The notion of legitimate queer identity based on the criterion of early presentation is therefore applied to the case of Bằng.

On the other hand, like most of Bùi Anh Tấn's homosexual characters, Bằng's sexuality can be traced to a formative childhood experience. Bằng's case is particularly extreme.

Before Bằng was born, his ailing father was desperate to have a daughter. To assuage the old man, Bằng's mother pretended that Bằng was a girl throughout his infancy. This involved dressing him in dresses and presenting him as a girl until he was old enough to go to school and further deception became impossible. Bằng is clear that this is the cause of his queer adult identity, and he wonders whether or not he should blame his mother for "turning him into a homosexual" (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, pp. 70-71). Clearly the fact that being dressed as a girl as a child is thought to cause homosexuality as an adult is an explanation that equates homosexual orientation with gender transgression. According to the logic of Bằng's story, becoming feminine (by adopting feminine behaviour) causes one to feel feminine desires including erotic desire for men.

The anecdote about his childhood, taken as the unambiguous cause of his homosexuality, shows that his sexuality is the result of clear social factors. In spite of the fact that Bằng is explicitly identified as a 'real' homosexual and satisfies the criterion of having shown signs of gender transgression from very early, the fact that Bằng's formative experiences predate even his primary school education means that he is arguably another inauthentic, pathological homosexual.

#### d. Khảo

The character of Khảo is a final example from *AC Kinsey's Method* of a homosexually active 'real' man. Khảo is not a strong example of any kind of queer identity, but he could be considered an example of an inauthentic, pathological homosexual. He makes no identifications as gay or homosexual and has only very limited homosexual encounters.

Khảo's story is interesting because his relationship with the *bóng lờ* "man from Than Kinh," discussed in the second chapter of this thesis and referred to in this analysis as Chị. As discussed in the previous chapter, Chị's desires are associated with beauty and femininity rather than with love and sex. Though their relationship is not overtly sexual or romantic, it is nonetheless flirtatious and has sexual undertones. Khảo sleeps in Chị's bed, is bathed and kissed by her and is allowed to discover her masturbating (Bùi Anh Tấn, 2008, pp. 179-188). Their relationship is based around him, as a child, facilitating her desires to be seen as a beautiful and feminine woman while keeping this a secret from everyone else, and so the adolescent Khảo is in a sense tasked with fulfilling Chị's primary desires (as a *bóng lờ*) and made responsible for protecting her privacy as he does so. During this period Khảo expresses his love for Chị and his desire to marry her, though she laughs off this suggestion. As Chị offered him solace from his unhappy home environment and gave him the love and protection that his family was unable to offer, his relationship with her was extremely important in his young life.

As an adult, Khảo finds it difficult to have relationships with women and instead develops a romantic obsession with his rape victim, Trung. Several aspects of Khảo's story are therefore consistent with the pathological definition of homosexuality presented in *A World Without Women*. His early relationship with Chị, his subsequent homoerotic inclinations and his struggle to define his own sexuality suggest that childhood contact with homosexuals may lead to homosexuality in adults. The link between homosexuality, rape and paedophilia is also present in Khảo's story, and this too is consistent with the more negative messages in *A World Without Women*.

The 'real' homosexual for whom treatment is impossible, acknowledged to exist and to be morally sound in *A World Without Women*, is arguably present in this text in the cases of Trung and Rich Phạm. If these individuals can be considered examples of 'real' homosexuals, they are consistent with the understanding presented in *A World Without*

*Women* as they are men with feminine characteristics. The pathological understanding of homosexuality as a condition that affects men under certain circumstances is affirmed unambiguously in the case of Bằng, whose homosexuality is a result of gender transgressive experiences while he was a child. This understanding could also explain the adult homosexuality of Trung and Rich Phạm as both characters have formative experiences with other homosexuals and lifestyle criteria that are consistent with the conditions said to cause homosexuality. Khảo, who is a masculine ‘real’ man, has violently expressed homoerotic inclinations that are arguably explained as a result of his extensive childhood contact with a *bóng lộ*. The understanding of homosexuality presented in *A World Without Women* is therefore affirmed in *AC Kinsey’s Method*.

### 3.4 Shadow

The identity of Dững, *Shadow*'s protagonist, has already been discussed in detail, and for the purposes of this chapter it need only be noted again that Dững understands that his homosexuality is authentic and congenital. The lifestyle criteria that are associated with homosexuals are largely absent in *Shadow*. Dững and his *bóng* friends are city dwellers but are neither very affluent nor highly educated. They do not therefore fit with the understanding of homosexuality considered in this chapter as the product of an overly privileged and physically undemanding lifestyle. The fact that Dững and his peers are 'real' homosexuals is conveyed by their conceptualisation of their genders as being a combination of a woman's heart (or mind or spirit) in a man's body. Certainly in the case of Dững himself, his identification as homosexual predates his becoming sexually and romantically active and is evident in his effeminate behaviours as a child. There are no examples of inauthentic homosexuals as such in *Shadow*, as homosexuality is shown to be a result of this transgender combination of male bodies and female essences rather than a result of social factors.

The partners of the various *bóng* in *Shadow* are all said to be normal men who desire women, and as previously discussed their relationships with their *bóng* partners are all to some degree transactional. These men are interesting examples of 'normal' heterosexually oriented but homosexually active men. Given that these relationships are described in great detail, they are particularly useful as examples for investigating the various criteria upon which these gendered identities are based.

Several of Dững's lovers have physically demanding or traditionally masculine jobs. One is a soldier (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 126), another a martial arts expert (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 129), and several are from farming families. Dững detects no hint of effeminacy in their personalities, and they fulfil few if any of the lifestyle criteria proposed in *A World Without Women*, being uneducated, poor, and coming from rural provinces rather than large cities. Most are heterosexual before and after their encounters with Dững, and ultimately leave him in order to marry and start their own families with women. Though they have sex with Dững, they are ostensibly not attracted to him and there is constant tension in his relationships caused by his lovers seeking opportunities to be unfaithful to him with women. According to the definitions discussed in this chapter therefore, Dững's lovers are 'real' men who do not fit with the lifestyle criteria said to produce homosexuality and are not

homosexuality oriented. Dũng reaches the same conclusion regarding his lovers' gender identities based on the logic presented in the first chapter of this thesis, and regards their authentic masculinity as inseparable from the fact that they desire women.

There are however several aspects of the experiences recounted that seem to challenge this understanding. The strongest example of this is Nhân, whom Dũng regards as his greatest love. Their relationship is described in detail and presented as means to explaining Dũng's relationships with his boyfriends in general. Nhân is introduced as a young man from a farming family in Nam Dinh (approximately 80 kilometres from Hanoi) who has recently moved to the capital to look for a job. It is Nhân rather than Dũng who takes an active role in establishing their relationship. Initially intending to spend the day with his friends, Nhân changes his plans immediately after meeting Dũng in order to allow them to spend the following day together. He also makes the first sexual advances, professes his love, and asks Dũng to promise never to leave him. Taken at face value Nhân's actions would seem to strongly indicate that he is attracted to Dũng and wants to be in a relationship with him. Dũng dismisses this interpretation and views Nhân's professed affections as being more pragmatic, believing of Nhân — as he does of all his partners — that he is 'real' man who exclusively desires women and is only attracted to Dũng for his money. This explanation would mean that Nhân is being manipulative and deceptive which is contrary to how he is always described as being honest and conscientious (Hoàng Nguyên and Đoàn Trang, 2008, pp. 60-70).

If Dũng's understanding was accurate then one would expect that Nhân would only have sex with other men reluctantly and when there was the prospect of financial gain. This explanation does not fit Nhân's behaviour at any point in the novel. Before even arriving in Hanoi, while still on the train from Nam Dinh, Nhân met and had sex with a stranger during a chance encounter. During their relationship Nhân and Dũng are sexually active, which Dũng regards as part of their transactional arrangement, but even after they separate and Nhân is married he continues to visit Dũng in Hanoi to have sex with him and asks for nothing in return (Hoàng Nguyên and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 99).

Nhân is financially dependent on Dũng during their relationship. Not wishing to take advantage of Dũng, Nhân insists on getting a job. Dũng opposes the idea because he is afraid that having a job will afford Nhân opportunities to meet women, and later spies on Nhân when he is at work. As discussed in the chapter on *bóng kín*, Dũng regards

offering financial incentives as his only means of attracting and keeping his boyfriends. He therefore attempts to ply Nhân with gifts, as he does with all of his other lovers. Nhân is reluctant to accept these and outright refuses Dũng's more extravagant presents. He does however accept Dũng's money to pay for his father's healthcare (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 76). It is apparent therefore that Nhân attempts to accept as little as Dũng's money as possible, while Dũng attempts to make Nhân financially dependent as a means of ensuring their continued relationship. This is not Dũng's interpretation of events, however, and towards the end of their relationship Dũng calls Nhân a call boy and accuses his parents of being willing to prostitute their son to a *pêđê* (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 93).

Shortly after they meet, Nhân moves into Dũng's house in Hanoi and they live together for several months. Over the course of their relationship Dũng becomes extremely jealous and physically abusive. At one point Dũng throws a knife at Nhân's head (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 75). When he becomes jealous of Nhân's friendship with a female coworker, Dũng and his friends begin harassing her with constant phone calls and fabricate complaints to her employers in an attempt to have her fired (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 70). When Nhân begins to withdraw from their relationship Dũng responds by becoming more violent, threatening suicide, and blackmailing Nhân with the threat of exposing their relationship to his family (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 71). When his threats fail to have the desired effect, he follows through on them, leading to the aforementioned denunciation of Nhân's parents.

Their relationship finally ends after Dũng takes revenge on Nhân for lying about his whereabouts one weekend. Dũng is aware that by this point Nhân's family might recognise his voice and be suspicious of any news coming from Dũng himself, and so enlists his friend Trung to call Nhân's parents and tell them that their son is in critical condition and likely to die as the result of a traffic accident. Trung tells them that they should come to Hanoi to collect Nhân's body but ends the call without specifying at which hospital Nhân is being treated. With no way of reaching Nhân and before the advent of mobile phones, Nhân's family travel to Hanoi and spend the day visiting different hospitals looking for their son. The joke, as Dũng views it, ends with Nhân's mother collapsing in the foyer of a hospital, complaining of chest pains and screaming about her grief, a reaction fact that Dũng finds unaccountably hilarious (Hoàng Nguyễn

and Đoàn Trang, 2008, pp. 86-90). After this ordeal Nhân refuses to meet Dũng, but is tricked into a meeting through a mutual friend. Dũng then invites Nhân to return to Hanoi and live with him once again, and when Nhân refuses Dũng becomes angry, gets extremely drunk and resorts to violence and blackmail. Forced to placate Dũng, who is threatening to shame him by fighting in the streets of his hometown, Nhân agrees to spend the night in a hotel. He initially refuses to sleep in the same room as Dũng, but acquiesces when Dũng attempts to smash the door of Nhân's room and the hotel owner threatens to bill them for any damages incurred. Ultimately therefore Dũng is able to force Nhân to spend another night with him through a combination of deception, threats of violence and blackmail (Hoàng Nguyên and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 97).

After their relationship has ended, Nhân remains with his family in Nam Dinh and gets married (Hoàng Nguyên and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 105), though he continues to visit Dũng, especially on holidays when he is aware that Dũng will be lonely, and continues to have sex with him. In Dũng's opinion, the fact that Nhân finally settles down with a woman to have a traditional family is the ultimate confirmation of Nhân's heterosexuality. The other evidence that Dũng offers to support this conclusion is an overheard conversation towards the end of their time together during which a drunken Nhân tells his friends that he is only living with Dũng because he was poor and that it was very difficult to live with a *pêđê* because it was "like being in prison" (Hoàng Nguyên and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 102). This is perhaps clearer evidence of Nhân's true feelings about his situation, though it was only one sentence, spoken while drunk and trapped in an abusive relationship. The comparison to being in prison is also apt, given that Dũng has a habit of locking his boyfriends at home when he goes to work.

Dũng's understanding supports his conclusion that their relationship was always doomed, that its end was inevitable and not a result of his own actions. One of the same issues that problematizes the understanding of masculinity presented in *A World Without Women* is also evident in *Shadow*, namely that it does not account for the social factors that might lead someone who is homosexual to identify as heterosexual. Given that by the time of the book's publication Dũng has worked as an activist and as an advisor to individuals and families encountering difficulties related to homosexuality, Dũng must surely understand that young Vietnamese are pressured by their families to get married. In the case of Nhân this pressure would be especially strong for several reasons. As his parents' eldest son it would be his responsibility to carry on his family

name. By the time of his marriage he is once again living with his parents in his hometown and is therefore less independent than he was during the period in which he lived in Hanoi (and was in a cohabiting homosexual relationship). Nhân would also have faced the added factor of having effectively been driven home from Hanoi in shame, and his parents were humiliated by Dũng's attempts to blackmail and humiliate him and his family. The understanding of homosexuality presented in *A World Without Women* encourages parents to react to discovery of their child's homosexual relationship by forcing him to get married as soon as possible. Characters that are ultimately able to resist these pressures generally do so without ever explicitly coming out and by establishing their own financial independence. Even Dũng, who is an activist and claims to be the only out homosexual in Hanoi waited until after his mother's death to come out (Hoàng Nguyễn and Đoàn Trang, 2008, p. 276). Largely because of Dũng's actions, Nhân was deprived of the conditions that may have allowed him to identify as homosexual if he had desired to do so. As the firstborn son, living at home with his family who had been directly and humiliatingly confronted with their son's homosexual relationship, Nhân was not in a strong position to defy their wishes by refusing to get married. The fact that Nhân gets married under these circumstances therefore proves very little.

Another possible interpretation of Nhân's story would be that he was homosexual or bisexual and that he genuinely reciprocated Dũng's feelings but eventually decided that he did not want to be his boyfriend. Following this interpretation, leaving his hometown might have been motivated in part by a desire to escape familial pressure to get married and live with more autonomy. Nhân's own perspective is not known and the reader must take Dũng's word for Nhân's actions and how they are interpreted, but the fact that he has his first homosexual encounter on the train from his hometown, before even arriving in the city, and then enters into a homosexual cohabiting relationship within a few days of his arrival suggests that freedom to indulge his homoerotic inclinations may have been part of his motivation for leaving. His early professions of love and his desire to be with Dũng may therefore have been sincere, which would be consistent with Dũng's estimation of Nhân as an honest and trustworthy person. Regardless of how Nhân initially felt towards Dũng, it is unsurprising that after months of physical and emotional abuse — during which time Dũng apparently never entertained the possibility that Nhân loved or was even capable of loving him — Nhân felt the need to escape from their relationship. Having been driven back to his family in shame and then faced

further humiliation as Dũng began to target his parents and neighbours, he may have felt that he had no choice but accede to his parents' wishes and get married, but even then he continues to satisfy his homoerotic desires by continuing a furtive relationship with Dũng for years after their separation. This explanation accounts for the material facts at least as well as the explanation that is accepted by the main narrative of *Shadow*.

When Dũng writes that, "Obviously Nhân is a totally normal man and not bisexual" the logic of this statement is not apparent: this seems far from obvious (Hoàng Nguyên and Doan Trang, 2008, p. 99). Though he uses the terms elsewhere in the text, Dũng never describes Nhân or any of partners as bisexual, in spite of the fact that they are all bisexually active. The fact that this distinction exists is less interesting than the fact that it is said to be obvious. Taking Nhân as an example, one can infer that it is not having or acting upon homoerotic desires that defines a person as homosexual, gay, *bóng* or the various other synonymous terms used in *Shadow* but rather the gender transgressive behaviours and transgender identifications associated with having a woman's heart in a man's body.

Analysis of Nhân from the perspective of the criteria set out in *A World Without Women* is complicated by the fact that the only perspective offered on Nhân is that of his ex-boyfriend. As noted above there are many reasons to consider Dũng's version of events to be biased and unreliable. One never learns whether Nhân, like many other such characters, had a formative encounter with a homosexual or early experiences of gender transgressive behaviours that may be posited as explanations for his subsequent homosexual relationship. It is however possible to consider Nhân in relation to the lifestyle criteria presented as risk factors that may lead to someone being homosexual. Nhân has no higher education, is from a rural area, and is poor. He works as a mechanic in later life and grew up in a farming community, both of which are physically intensive and stereotypically masculine occupations. In short, Nhân does not display any of the lifestyle criteria or personality traits associated with homosexuality. The representations of homosexuality found in *Shadow* are consistent with the definitions presented in *A World Without Women* as there is indeed a divide between 'real' homosexuals and people who only behave homosexually.

'Real' men are therefore defined in opposition to homosexuals not by their sexual behaviours, as the partners of the various *bóng* in *Shadow* have homosexual

relationships and extended periods of being exclusively homosexually active, but rather by the fact that they do not have effeminate traits. The understanding of 'real' men presented in this text demonstrates that these characters can be homosexually active but remain “obviously” ‘real’ men and not gay or bisexual so long as they are masculine. In spite of the profound differences in authorial perspective and sentiment therefore, the understanding of homosexuality presented in *Shadow* is similar to that presented in Bùi Anh Tấn’s novels, equating homosexuality with gender transgression and masculinity with heterosexuality. In particular, the character of the homosexually active 'real' man whose masculinity is incompatible with homosexual identity is present in both texts. The substantive difference between *Shadow* and the other texts described above is that the queer characters in *Shadow* are ‘real’ homosexuals while Bùi Anh Tấn’s characters are arguably only homosexuals because of external factors. ‘Real’ homosexuality is therefore demonstrated to be more common in *Shadow* than in Bùi Anh Tấn’s writing, but otherwise the conceptualisation of 'real' homosexuality and 'real' men are not significantly different.

### 3.5 I'm Sorry, I Love Him!

The relationship that serves as the focus for the lengthy two-part novel *I'm Sorry* provides an example of a 'real' homosexual in the form of Hà and a homosexually active 'real' man who might also be considered a masculine homosexual in the form of Hiền.

Hà fits with the stereotypical image of an effeminate homosexual, and as previously discussed is an example of an effeminate *bóng kín*. He is conceptualised as having the body of a man but the heart of a woman, in common with other *bóng* characters considered in this thesis. He is therefore understood to be a 'real' homosexual whose sexuality is innate and congenital, though the issue of authenticity is never explicitly raised in the text. For the purposes of this chapter it is relevant to note that Hà does not fit the lifestyle criteria outlined in *A World Without Women*, being relatively poor, uneducated and living in a small village rather than a large city. He does however satisfy the sole criterion that characterises 'real' homosexuals according to the definition considered in this chapter because he shows signs of gender transgressive behaviour while he is still very young. This is revealed through the fact that he is seen as effeminate and called *bóng* by other children when he is still a child (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007b, p. 36).

Hiền and Hà's backgrounds are similar, as they grow up in the same village. Hiền is less wealthy than Hà, has no higher education and comes from a rural background. In terms of his lifestyle criteria, the only risk factor that applies to Hiền is that he has had extensive childhood contact with a homosexual, namely Hà. The differences between Hiền and Hà are very pronounced. Even at 14 years old Hiền is physically strong, showing off his biceps which is "large as a cucumber" (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007b, p. 36). He is tough enough to fight off Hà's bullies and promises to protect Hà throughout his entire life (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007b, p. 58).

Hiền's sexuality is addressed directly on several occasions. As mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, Hà forces Hiền to get married as he regards this as a way of ensuring Hiền's future happiness (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007b, p. 102). Hiền refuses to accept that he and Hà are different, and refers to Hà as his wife, but Hà remains adamant and his decision is ultimately shown to be correct (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007b, p. 100). This fact is particularly interesting as it validates the idea, expressed in *A World*

*Without Women*, that one's explicit self-identifications can and should be ignored when the individual in question is a 'real' man and his being homosexual is inauthentic.

The issue of Hà and Hiền's genders is discussed in a later passage wherein it is suggested that Hiền's feelings for Hà arise from a deep friendship and a sense that is his responsibility to protect his physically weaker friend (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007b, p. 115). Hiền is explicitly said to be not in fact a homosexual but rather just a greedy man and a "heterosexual mixed with a few grams of homosexual" [*người có xu hướng tính dục khác phái pha một chút gam đồng tính*] (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007b, p. 100). This latter description suggests that Hiền is interested in Hà because of a hedonistic desire to have sex with people of both genders rather than because he is able to form romantic attachments to both men and women.

As with the homosexually active 'real' men in *Shadow*, this explanation does not appear to be able to account for Hiền's behaviour. In particular, the fact that his relationship with Hà is romantic as well as sexual cannot easily be explained in this way. As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, Hiền plays a far more active role than Hà in initiating their relationship and making sexual advances. Hà, on the other hand, attempts to end their relationship on several occasions, threatens to break up with Hiền as a means of forcing him to get married, and moves away from the town where Hiền lives with his wife, meaning that Hiền must thereafter travel a considerable distance in order to meet his lover. It is consistently Hiền who makes more efforts to continue their relationship and cannot stand to be separated from Hà. From the earliest stages of their relationship onwards Hà is more reserved and demonstrates a willingness to end their relationship when he feels that doing so is in Hiền's best interests.

All of this contrasts with Hiền's relationship with Oanh, his wife. Hiền initially refuses to marry Oanh in spite of his mother's insistence, and intends to tell his mother that he cannot marry a woman because he is in love with Hà. Ultimately Hiền agrees to wed only because of Hà's threats. At first, Hiền is cold and distant with Oanh, having no feelings for her other than resentment. He is also initially unable to have sex with her because he cannot sustain an erection — a problem that he never experiences with Hà (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007b, p. 88). It is not until later, when Hà has left the village and Hiền is determined to fulfil his roles as a husband and a father, that he is able to have sex with Oanh, and even then it is implied that this requires great effort and

concentration on his part. At this point he is overwhelmed by the significance of the act of having sex with a woman, and with a feeling of connection to her and with the miracles of life and reproduction (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007b, p. 99). The implications of this scene are that heterosexual sex has a profundity with which homosexual sex cannot compare. This is perhaps the most significant scene in the two novels for the purposes of discerning Hiên's identity, as he seemingly experiences an epiphany that validates Hà's decisions to forcibly direct Hiên towards a life as a husband and as a father. It should also be noted, however, that even in this scene it is not arousal as such that Hiên feels for Oanh but rather excitement at the prospect of becoming a father and doing his duty as a husband that fills his mind and eventually arouses his ardour.

When Oanh discovers Hiên's relationship with Hà, she deduces that Hiên has been in love with this other man since before the start of her marriage and offers to step aside so that the two men can be together (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007b, p. 105). By this time Hiên is also in love with his wife and already has a son, and he refuses her offer. The understanding of homosexuality demonstrated by Oanh therefore allows for the possibility of homosexual love and same-sex relationships as an alternative to heterosexual marriage. Of the three main characters therefore, only the homosexual, Hà, never considers this as an option.

Hiên is therefore evidently spontaneously attracted to men (or at least to Hà) and prioritises his relationship with Hà over all other concerns. He comes to desire women (or at least Oanh) only after a great deal of effort and a result of other people's manipulations and contrivances. The explanation that Hiên is a 'real' man who is led astray by his queer friend does not fit with the events of the story, and it would be far truer to say that Hiên consistently tries and fails to persuade Hà to be his boyfriend rather than the reverse. Similarly, the narrator's statement that Hiên's attraction to Hà is based on deep friendship and shared experiences clearly does not account for Hiên's sexual attraction and active, persistent pursuit of Hà, and would appear instead to be a more accurate description of how Hiên came to fall in love with his wife and prioritise his role in their family.

It is difficult to account for Hiên's behaviours if he is to be taken as an example of a heterosexual man. Indeed, considering the fact that Hiên's homosexual inclinations become apparent while he is still an adolescent, he could be considered an example of a

homosexual who showed signs from very early and whose homosexuality is therefore natural, authentic and should be accepted according to the criteria laid out in *A World Without Women*. Given that this explanation is obviously not accepted by the narrative of the text, Hiên is presumably an example of a ‘real’ man who was in danger of becoming homosexual, and his later epiphany and enjoyment of his married life with Oanh represents his being saved from this fate by Hà’s timely intervention.

An alternative reading of the events described in *I’m Sorry* could be that Hiên and Hà are both homosexual, and that their relationship consists of one masculine and one feminine homosexual partner, according to the model presented in a chapter one. The fact that Hiên ultimately comes to accept Hà’s decision and feel contentment within the context of his marriage to Oanh in no way contradicts this explanation, particularly as his satisfaction in his family life is rooted in his ability to fulfil his filial obligations and to be a father — something that Hà could not offer him. This interpretation would account far better for Hiên’s initial attraction to Hà and his reticence and unhappiness in his relationship with Oanh.

The understanding of homosexuality presented in this text is therefore consistent with that defined in *A World Without Women* and demonstrated in *Shadow*. There is a clear distinction between ‘real’ homosexuals and ‘real’ men. Once again, the distinction between the former and latter categories is not evident in their romantic and sexual behaviours, as in this case it is the ‘real’ man who demonstrates homoerotic inclinations and the ‘real’ homosexual who denies having these feelings. Ultimately the fact that Hiên is said to be a ‘real’ man is less remarkable than the fact that this is said to be obvious. If Hiên — who is homosexually active throughout his entire adult life, whose most enduring relationship is with another man and who was willing to eschew marriage in favour of his homosexual lover — can be said to be obviously heterosexual then the author must feel that there are strong compelling reasons to make this assessment. These seem to be the fact that Hiên is happily (albeit unfaithfully) married and is entirely masculine in his personality, able to smoke, drink and trek through the jungle with other masculine men without being seen as out of place. ‘Real’ homosexuality as presented in *I’m Sorry* is therefore an innate category which cannot be deduced by someone’s sexual history and which is antithetical to masculinity. In *I’m Sorry*, as in *A World Without Women*, a character’s self-identifications can be disregarded if the individual in question is too normatively masculine to be homosexual.

When considered together, *A World Without Women*, *AC Kinsey's Method* and *Shadow* all present a largely consistent understanding of what constitutes a homosexual as opposed to a homosexually active 'real' man. In each of these texts, characters exist whose sexual behaviour indicates that they are homoerotically inclined but who are otherwise gender normative. In every case, their gender normativity takes precedence over their erotic inclinations in determining identities as 'real' men.

### 3.6 Parallel [*Song song*]

*Parallel* by Vũ Đình Giang (2011) is a novel that describes the relationships of three homosexual characters, identified by what are presumably the nicknames of Kan, G.g and H. All three have romantic and sexual relationships with one another and with other men. At the beginning of the novel G.g and H. are a cohabiting couple, and over the course of the narrative Kan is introduced as H.'s coworker and later becomes their lover. The text is divided into short chapters, many of which are only one or two paragraphs long, and the narratorial perspective switches between the various protagonists. The protagonists' lives are initially fairly normal and the characters go to work, deal with depression and have issues in their relationships with one another and with their coworkers. Over the course of the novel their behaviours become increasingly outlandish and violent, and the story deals with themes of violence, sex and mental illness. This novel is remarkably graphic by the standards of the primary texts considered in this thesis, a fact that is hinted at on the front cover of the novel, which shows an androgynous figure wearing bondage gear.

The three protagonists are homosexually active but make few identifications. Identity labels such as homosexual, *pêdê*, *bóng* and gay are almost totally absent in *Parallel*. MSM is used more often but still very infrequently, though it features prominently in two extremely brief passages at the beginning of the book. The first reads only “**MSM**” while the second, on the same page, reads as follows:

MSM, MSM, MSM...

Constantly, madly, he unevenly tattooed these three letters all over me. My pale body gushed blood. The blood flowed, covering my whole body. I was totally covered in colour. I turned into a shivering object that shed its skin. (Vũ Đình Giang, 2011, pp. 26-27)

The content of this text is similar to *I'm Sorry* in that both texts are novels that focus on a complicated same-sex relationship involving three people and describe various dramas associated with it. Unlike *I'm Sorry*, which describes a homosexual relationship in great detail, or the two autobiographical novels *Shadow* and *Not Out of Place*, which deal extensively with the experiences of being homosexual as lived by their narrators, in *Parallel* the fact that the protagonists are homosexual is presented as unsurprising and almost unworthy of mention. There are no lengthy explanations of homosexuality of the sort found in Bùi Anh Tấn's writing. Unlike Hà and Hiền in *I'm Sorry*, the characters in

*Parallel* do not seem to care about social and familial pressures to conform to normative heterosexuality, and there are no pleas for acceptance, understanding or sympathy. On occasions on which they encounter homophobia they disregard it as illogical and inconsequential. This is shown most clearly in one scene in which Kan describes his relationship with H. to a female colleague, whom he notes “is more than smart enough to... guess what my sexual orientation is” but in will not care because “sexual preference doesn’t affect one’s moral character” (Vũ Đình Giang, 2011, pp. 30-31). Kan’s queer identity is therefore referred to as a preference and an orientation rather than as a gender position in this scene, and he is of the liberal opinion that anyone who is sufficiently intelligent will understand that homosexuality is not immoral. This attitude is typical of the protagonists’ stances of unapologetic confidence.

As is common in the sources used in this thesis, the understanding of homosexual identity as a sexual orientation distinct from gender is evident in some passages but is contradicted elsewhere in the text. Later in the story, when his belief that his friend does not care about his being queer is vindicated, he notes that, “[My friend] wasn’t the sort of person who believed in stigma or prejudice based on gender” (Vũ Đình Giang, 2011, p. 235). Homoerotic desire, MSM identity, gender and sexual orientation are all therefore conflated.

All three of the story’s principal queer characters are generally portrayed as masculine and gender normative. They are each implied to be attractive (to men and women) and to be strong and muscular. There is no suggestion that any of the three men are effeminate or that they have feminine personality traits such as the hearts, minds or spirits of women. The understanding expressed by the characters themselves, evident in passages such as the one quoted above wherein Kan talks of his ‘sexual preference’ and how it does not determine his personality, is that they are normal men other than in their romantic and sexual behaviours. Kan, G.g and H. are among the strongest and least qualified examples of masculine homosexuals in any of the texts used in this thesis, exhibiting few if any of the gender transgressive traits generally associated with homosexuality as defined in this chapter.

On the other hand, the protagonists are all young, artistic, educated and financially independent if not necessarily wealthy, and live in a large city separated from their families. G.g is an artist who makes conceptual art projects at home, though it is unclear

whether this is in a professional or a purely recreational capacity. H. and Kan are graphic designers who work in the same company. Kan has a further factor which might be conceived as a cause of his homosexuality in that he had childhood sexual contact with a homosexual. His father would beat him, tying him upside down from the ceiling and using him to “practice boxing” (Vũ Đình Giang 2001, p. 276). Kan’s first experience of sexual contact came when he was rescued by a kindly, older male neighbour who tended to his wounds but then embraced and kissed him (Vũ Đình Giang 2001, pp. 276-285). This early sexual contact with a homosexual may have been a formative experience leading to Kan’s future homosexuality, as is suggested to be a possibility in other texts. The combination of extreme violence and sexual contact is evidently influential in shaping Kan’s future sexual behaviours, and as an adult Kan can only attain gratification through extreme, bloody sadomasochistic sex (Vũ Đình Giang, 2011, p. 247). Though the issues are never discussed in these terms, the protagonists have lifestyles that consistent with the conditions said to cause homosexuality, and Kan has formative experiences that are consistent with this understanding.

The issue of homosexuality as a pathological condition requires particular attention in *Parallel*, as this text’s representations of these issues are unique. When explicit reactions to homosexuality are mentioned these are positive or indifferent, as described above, and homosexuality is thereby presented not as an aberration but rather as something personal, unimportant and disconnected from morality. H. and G.g are cohabiting partners throughout the text, and while they are not monogamous their having sex with other men does not appear to be regarded as cheating and is evidently part of their arrangement. Their promiscuity could be interpreted as part of a negative or shocking portrayal of homosexual lifestyles, and may therefore be conceived as part of a negative portrayal of these characters, but it is unimportant to the characters themselves and the discovery of outside relationships does not elicit anger.

Their open relationship is however far from the most controversial aspect of their behaviours. It becomes clear at the outset of the story that G.g is extremely mentally ill. In the beginning of the book he falls into a deep depression after watching a foreign film (Vũ Đình Giang, 2011, p. 30). Chapters told from G.g’s point of view reveal his obsession with torture and death, as he fantasises first about breaking H’s teeth (Vũ Đình Giang, 2011, p. 17), and later about pushing him off a roof or poisoning him (Vũ Đình Giang, 2011, p. 37). G.g suffers from paranoid delusions, first of being hunted by

wolves and later of his garden being full of poisonous snakes (Vũ Đình Giang, 2011, pp. 58-61). Overcoming these delusions involves acting out torture fantasies on inanimate objects, and H. notes that, “[G.g and I] made torture into a fun game” (Vũ Đình Giang, 2011, p. 79). His psychotic behaviours escalate as his delusions become more severe and he later adopts a dog which he plans to boil alive but eventually starves and finally drowns in his bathtub. Towards the end of the story he meets and begins to fantasise about murdering two of his neighbours, a young boy and an old man (Vũ Đình Giang, 2011, pp. 132-138). By the time that they act upon these desires, enjoying and filming the violence then burying their bodies in their garden, it has ceased to be clear how much of the story is supposedly based in reality and how much is the product of G.g’s unhealthy imagination (Vũ Đình Giang, 2011, pp. 224-226). Ultimately it is suggested that G.g and H. are multiple personalities of a single individual, and noted that the name G.g might be an abbreviation denoting male homosexuality (presumably, ‘gay-gay’) (Vũ Đình Giang, 2011, p. 318). G.g and H. are therefore apparently sadistic murderers. Kan, the most positively portrayed of the protagonists, is conflicted about his need for violent masochistic sex, and feels simultaneously aroused and nauseated by leather belts which he associates with sexualised violence. Though the BDSM in which Kan engages is consensual, it goes far beyond safe limits, involving actual injury, is a source of shame connected with childhood trauma and is part of a broader mental health issue for Kan.

Given these facts it is difficult to make assertions as to how queer issues are portrayed in this text. If one focuses exclusively on the explicit statements on the nature of homosexuality then *Parallel* presents strong example of normative, masculine homosexuality that is devoid of a moral component, that which intelligent people will accept without requiring explanation or apology, and that does not determine the behaviours of the people in question other than their romantic and sexual lives. G.g and H. are a seemingly contented couple who have a stable, trusting, open, cohabiting relationship that is mutually gratifying and is not touched with jealousy or insecurity. An examination of the personalities and behaviours of the queer characters in this text suggests a highly pathological conceptualisation of homosexuality. In the cases of the story’s protagonists, homosexuality is associated with severe mental illness, sadism, murder, paedophilia and necrophilia. The cohabiting homosexual couple who appear normal in their social behaviours are revealed to be quite insane and intent on murdering their neighbours’ children for sexual gratification.

Kan's colleague's remark to the effect that sexuality is not an indicator of moral character comes to seem ironic given the behaviours of the story's protagonists. There is no explicit link made between the characters being homosexual and these other behaviours in which they engage, many of which are obviously immoral and indeed highly criminal, but these factors are too significant to simply disregard and inevitably colour the reader's opinions of other passages in which queer issues are presented.

*Parallel* therefore presents contradictory messages on the nature of homosexuality. The few explicit statements in this novel that pertain to homosexual identity claim that it is a sexual orientation and that sexuality is not an indicator of morality or broader personality traits. In this respect, *Parallel* positions itself alongside texts such as *Shadow* and *Untold Stories* which present a positive and tolerant message on homosexuality. This message is accepted by the protagonists and by other minor characters in the novel. The queer characters in this novel are remarkably masculine, and their masculinity is far less qualified than the homosexual protagonists of any other texts discussed in this thesis. This is neither positive nor negative, but is consistent with the idea that homosexuality is largely irrelevant as an indicator of one's broader personality. Closer examination however reveals that many of the same lifestyle criteria posited as applying to 'real' men at risk of homosexuality can be inferred in the lives of the story's queer protagonists. These factors are never invoked to explain the sexuality of the characters in question, and the pathological definition of homosexuality would not be evident in this novel if it were not for the obvious mental illness and criminality of the protagonists. The extent of the mental health issues revealed to be associated with homosexuality is unmatched even in *A World Without Women*, which of all the primary texts studied in this thesis is generally the least accepting of homosexuality. The fact that the three protagonists have such severe issues, and that these issues evidently determine at least some of their sexual behaviours, calls into question the issue of whether they are congenitally homosexual and deserving of acceptance or can be better understood as cautionary tales. It is in any case evident that the protagonists are dangers to themselves and others and are in urgent need of medical intervention.

*Parallel* is therefore more open to interpretation than other texts used in this thesis, as its protagonists are unusually examples of both normative masculinity and of pathological conceptualisations of homosexuality simultaneously.

### 3.7 Untold Stories

The various texts in *Untold Stories* present a largely consistent understanding of homosexuality. Several examples that are relevant to this chapter have already been presented in this thesis. In *How to Live Truly*, discussed in the chapter on *bóng lộ*, the protagonist's parents force her to become a mechanic in order to cure her homosexuality, obviously demonstrating a similar pathological understanding of homosexuality to that considered in this chapter. In other texts, characters react by attempting to force their children to find girlfriends and to get married. In either of these situations the characters in question accept the premise that homosexuality can be overcome, and a willingness to believe that their family members ones are not 'real' homosexuals but are really boys that need guidance and correction. These reactions are therefore consistent with the advice given by the psychiatrist in *A World Without Women*, though the consequences are never as he predicts.

Texts in *Untold Stories* are generally very interesting for the purposes of this thesis but are extremely brief. Rather than revisiting characters discussed in previous chapters, this chapter considers two new examples that directly critique the pathological understanding of homosexuality studied in this chapter.

a. Proving [*Chứng tỏ*]

*Proving* offers a particularly interesting representation of masculinity and its link with male homosexuality. At the beginning of the story the protagonist, Hải, is a victim of bullying at the hands of his classmates. They insult him “whenever they have a chance” and address him by the feminine pronoun “*chị*” (Tường Vy et al., 2013, p. 33). Hải may be an example of a *bóng lộ*, but he does not make any explicit identifications as such. The masculine pronoun is used in this analysis on the basis that it is generally used by *bóng kín* and the fact that he objects to having the feminine pronoun applied to him. His classmates’ bullying takes a form common to several texts in *Untold Stories*, namely that they forcibly remove his clothes in school, with the added detail that in this case they throw his garments out of an upstairs window, forcing him to hide under a table in the classroom until they are returned to him.

These experiences convince him that he must integrate, and to achieve this his behaviour changes dramatically. His motivation for making this transformation is described succinctly as follows:

The feeling of being isolated from the other boys made him afraid and the experience of being bullied made him promise to himself that he would show them he was not a girl, he was no less than any of the other boys. (Tường Vy et al., 2013, p. 33)

He therefore takes steps to make himself appear more masculine to his classmates. He cuts his hair and nails and stops wearing flared trousers out of concern that they are too effeminate, noting bitterly as he does so that other boys wore similar trousers without criticism. He pretends to be attracted to girls, buying pornography and flirting with his female classmates. He also begins to take part in masculine activities such as drinking alcohol, gambling, playing rough games and generally misbehaving. His transformation is a complete success until he takes the blame for a dangerous prank involving fireworks and is expelled from school as a result. By this time the boys in his class regard him as a hero, having apparently forgotten about his previous feminine characteristics. The story concludes:

No one knew that he was tired of every day proving “that he was a MAN”. No one knew that he really only liked gentle things... and that he was in love with the prefect. (Tường Vy et al., 2013, pp. 32-35)

Hải’s classmates recognise his effeminate behaviour for a sign of homosexuality. In his case, like that of many *bóng* in general and *bóng lộ* in particular, his girlish behaviour is

correctly interpreted as evidence that he is homosexual. Hải therefore fits with the conceptualisation of homosexuals as being effeminate and with the sole criterion that defines 'real' homosexuality in that he presents signs of gender transgression from a young age.

Recognising that his homosexuality is evident in his effeminate behaviours, Hải consciously adopts masculine behaviours to create the impression of masculinity and therefore heterosexuality. This is not easy, and by the end of the story he is tired of maintaining the pretence, but it is accomplished through relatively simple steps. By feigning an interest in things that he does not enjoy, making small changes to his appearance and donning some more masculine trousers Hải not only achieves but surpasses the apparent of masculinity of his male classmates. This self-awareness allows him to separate his innate, feminine personality traits from the social behaviours through which his gender is revealed. He makes the decision to become masculine quite cynically, but is so successful that ultimately it is his adopted masculine persona rather than his inherently feminine traits that cause him problems.

Though Hải becomes an example of a masculine homosexual, the natural effeminacy of homosexuals is nevertheless affirmed in this text because his girlish behaviours are evidence of his natural self whereas his masculinity is only a masquerade. The course of action that Hải follows through his own volition is that which the psychiatrist in *A World Without Women* suggests as a medical intervention to return a homosexual to normality, but Hải's intention is only to create the illusion of masculinity because he recognises intuitively that no actual change is possible. In spite of his new masculine persona, the link between feminine behaviour is affirmed by Hải himself in the story's conclusion, wherein he notes that he is still attracted to boys, or at least to his prefect. His homosexuality is presented as something that would surprise his classmates, who now think of him as masculine, and is clearly understood to be incongruous with his apparent masculinity. The character of Hải therefore challenges the understanding that homosexuality can be cured, but otherwise supports the characterisation of homosexuals discussed in this chapter.

b. The Sky Outside is Full of Clouds [Ở ngoài trời có những đám mây]

*The Sky Outside is Full of Clouds* tells the story of a teenager named Lâm whose being homosexual is discovered by his family, prompting them to have him committed to a psychiatric hospital. He has nightmarish experiences in the ward, where he is drugged against his will and confined in close quarters with people who have severe mental health problems, making them inconvenient and sometimes frightening roommates. During his time on the ward, visits from his mother cause him a painful mixture of guilt for not fulfilling his duties as a son and resentment of his mistreatment at the hands of his family. Ultimately Lâm offers an insincere apology, promising to be normal in future, and is discharged and allowed to return home. The story concludes by noting that he suffers from nightmares and other adverse psychological effects as a result of his traumatic time in hospital, that his relationship with his family is permanently damaged by this experience and that the treatment was ineffective because he is still the same as before he went to hospital.

The specific identity label used in this text is the pejorative *pêđê*, which is not specifically applied to Lâm but is used to describe the lifestyle that his parents want him to disavow. Lâm is not said to be a *pêđê*, but his parents want him to stop living as though he is a *pêđê* and associating with *pêđê*. It is further stated that Lâm is not normal and not like other boys, though the precise nature of this difference is unspecified.

Lâm expresses no discomfort with having to behave as a boy in general, and unlike most texts considered in this thesis his homosexuality is revealed purely through his romantic attraction to other boys. His father tells Lâm that he is “a male boy and so [Lâm] cannot love another boy” and his mother also encourages him to “forget about that bad guy” (Tuồng Vy et al., 2013, p. 70). It is not stated how Lâm’s sexuality was discovered, but it is suggested in these sentences that it involved a romantic attachment to another boy. This idea is supported by the story’s conclusion where he notes that he “still secretly loves boys” (Tuồng Vy et al., 2013, p. 73). There is no indication that Lâm is gender transgressive, and Lâm is therefore a relatively rare example of a character that is identified as homosexual on account of his homoerotic inclinations rather than his gender transgressive behaviours.

According to the understanding considered in this chapter therefore, Lâm does not fit with the criteria that define a ‘real’ homosexual, as the only evidence of his sexuality is

his attraction to other boys. Lâm's family refuses to accept that he is really homosexual, and his mother expresses her disbelief by noting that, "When I gave birth to you, you were a boy with a penis" (Tuồng Vy et al., 2013, p. 70). Her understanding of *pêđê* is therefore apparently as a transsexual or intersex category, and anatomical maleness is equated with (male) heterosexuality. This understanding is even less accepting of homosexuality than understanding presented in *A World Without Women*, as even in cases where a child presented signs of gender transgression from very early, he would not be a 'real' homosexual without ambiguous or female genitalia. Lâm's behaviour and his implied relationship with another boy is therefore understood to be an instance of inauthentic homosexuality which can and should be overcome. His mother believes that he is imitating "*lũ pêđê*," literally 'gangs' or 'that gang of *pêđê*' (Tuồng Vy et al., 2013, p. 70). This vague collective noun is consistent with the mother's stated belief that her son is not a *pêđê* but is merely allowing himself to be influenced by his unsavoury acquaintances. Clearly therefore she believes that the inauthentic homosexuality exhibited by her son is a learned behaviour, contracted through exposure to homosexuals. She goes on to list further contributing factors to her son's misidentification, apologising for having created the conditions that she believes have led to his believing himself to be *pêđê*. This includes the fact that his parents spoiled him because they loved him too much and that he had "studied too much and lived away from home too often" (Tuồng Vy et al., 2013, p. 71). The reference to spoiling Lâm equates *bóng* identity to an overly comfortable lifestyle, while the mention of studying and spending time away from home indicate that intellectualism as opposed to athleticism and lack of proper parental guidance are understood to be causes. All of these ideas are consistent with the lifestyle criteria associated with homosexuality discussed throughout this chapter.

Finally, the fact that Lâm's parents react by having him committed to a psychiatric ward obviously reflects a pathological understanding of homosexuality as a treatable condition. His mother attempts to help him to reevaluate his orientation by encouraging him to think of his future, in which he will be married and fulfil his filial duties by having children. Lâm is allowed to leave hospital when he promises not to love boys in the future and to be normal, signalling that treatment is successful and complete. The possibility that Lâm's apparent homosexuality is genuine is therefore never entertained by the adults in his life. His parents' response to their son's apparent homosexuality is therefore also consistent with the advice proffered in that *A World Without Women*,

though in fairness to Bùi Anh Tấn, the author of *A World Without Women*, it should be noted that he does not advocate that homosexuals should be forcibly medicated and institutionalised.

*The Sky Outside is Full of Clouds* therefore deals with the issues of 'real' homosexuals and the 'real' men who should be compelled to receive corrective treatment when they identify as homosexual. Lâm's mother experiences these issues from the same perspective as the psychiatrist Minh Sơn's patients' families, and she acts in accordance with his advice, exercising tough love, forcing her child to receive what she regards as being help, compelling him to have treatment that is focused on the outcome of returning him to normality. *The sky Outside is Full of Clouds* presents a different perspective on this narrative by showing these issues exclusively from the point of view of the young man in question. From Lâm's perspective his family's behaviour appears to be a form of torture, the effects of which continue to be felt after the ordeal itself has ended. This is made all the more painful by the fact that he accepts personal responsibility for his parents' actions and believes that they are motivated by a genuine desire to help him. His mother visits him in hospital and cries upon seeing him suffering, and Lâm never doubts that her concern and her love is genuine, but her actions are clearly misguided. Lâm makes no explicit identifications, but mentions that he loves other boys before and after his time in the hospital, and that he was "born that way" (Trương Vy et al., 2013, p. 70). His mother's belief in the distinction between 'real' *pêđê* and her son is therefore shown to be unfounded, as Lâm is a 'real' homosexual and cannot be cured in spite of his being anatomically male and socially masculine.

The notion of homosexuality as divisible into 'real' and inauthentic categories is therefore evident in this text, as this belief informs the reactions of Lâm's family. As in *Proving*, however, the pathological definition is in this case presented only to be challenged, and his family's misunderstanding of homosexuality lead only to harm and trauma. A cure is shown to be impossible and is in any case not necessarily desirable from the perspectives of the homosexuals themselves, as both protagonists described in this chapter desire to be accepted or left alone.

As discussed in chapter two, the majority of the texts in *Untold Stories* deal with the experiences of *bóng lộ* individuals. These are characterised, like *bóng lộ* in all of the primary sources used in this thesis, by gender transgression primarily if not exclusively,

and homoerotic inclination is not presented as being an important part of these queer identities. Considering these characters based on the criteria proposed for determining 'real,' inauthentic or pathological homosexuality discussed in this chapter, *bóng lộ* in *Untold Stories* are 'real' homosexuals, demonstrating signs from very early and having extremely gender transgressive behaviours. *The Sky Outside is Full of Clouds* is one of a small number of counter examples that present sexuality as distinct from gendered behaviour.

The lifestyle criteria that are associated with homosexuality are almost entirely absent in *Untold Stories*, as few of these characters are shown to be affluent or to have remarkably privileged lifestyles. Formative experiences such as early sexual contact with other men are also entirely absent as factors determining adult sexuality. Authenticity is not part of this discourse and there are no instances of characters whose homosexuality is inauthentic. Pathological definitions of homosexuality are directly critiqued, and in particular the idea that homosexuality is an acquired and curable condition is shown to be a harmful misconception that leads to violent and abusive behaviours on the part of well-meaning but ill-informed family members. Considered together therefore, the texts of *Untold Stories* agree with the characterisation of homosexuals discussed in this chapter in terms of personality traits and effeminacy but disagree with the notion that it is pathological, curable or transmissible.

### 3.8 Lesbian and Gay Love Stories [*Chuyện tình của lesbian và gay*]

The final text to be considered in this thesis is the short story compilation *Lesbian and Gay Love Stories*, written by Nguyễn Thơ Sinh (2007a), who is also the author of *I'm Sorry*. The texts in this compilation, as its title suggests, describe romantic relationships involving homosexual characters.

This generalisation is qualified, however, as there are also several texts that do not involve queer characters at all but only describe experiences of 'real' men and women wrongly assumed to be queer. In *The Artistic Crowd* [*Giới nghệ sĩ*], for example, the protagonist's mother assumes that he and his other male friends are homosexual when in fact they are not (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007a, pp. 113-118). Another text entitled *Brain Structure* [*Cấu trúc bộ não*] recounts a conversation that the heterosexual narrator had with his wife after she mentioned reading a research paper stating that male homosexuals' brains are structured similarly to women's (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007a, pp. 189-195). Neither of these texts could reasonably be described as gay love stories, in spite of the collection's title.

This book is divided into three sections. The first and second, which describe lesbian and gay stories, respectively, are approximately equal in length, though only the second section is discussed in this thesis. The third, entitled "Sexual Orientations," is far shorter and presents Vietnamese language summaries of Kinsey Institute research (all based on American data), explanations of terms such as LGBT, and a brief history of LGBT rights activism in the West (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007a, pp. 201-231).

Nguyễn Thơ Sinh is introduced in the collection's introduction as a psychiatrist and the stories in the compilation are ostensibly based on the experiences of patients whom he has treated. Each text is introduced through a brief paragraph that outlines the circumstances under which the author met the patient, and conveys some information about the patient's lifestyle and occupation together with the author's interpretation of the lessons that one can learn from their experiences. From these introductions one can glean that the compilation is intended to promote tolerance and equality for homosexuals and to make its heterosexual readers question their prejudices. These introductions explicitly introduce queer characters as being homosexuals without qualification and without presenting what criteria or formative experiences that led to this identification. The protagonists of these texts are all therefore accepted as 'real'

homosexuals, and of course the fact that they are included in a compilation entitled *Lesbian and Gay Love Stories* indirectly identifies them as gays or lesbians.

The majority of these texts focus on the experiences of examples of men who are secretly homoerotically inclined but whose behaviours are otherwise gender-normative and who 'pass' for normal men. As such, this collection is particularly useful as a source for examples of masculine homosexuals.

a. *Small Dogs Like to Play* [*Những con chó nhỏ thích đùa*]

The first of the gay stories in this collection, *Small Dogs Like to Play*, hereafter referred to as *Small Dogs*, recounts of the experiences of a man identified first as NS and later as Năm. The text describes his relationships with three of his colleagues, whose names are Văn, Thụ and Tư. The four meet as apprentice goldsmiths and one day witness two male dogs attempting to mount each other. Văn jokes that they have learned this behaviour by copying Thụ and Tư, who have a sexual relationship. The other men try to pass this off as a joke, but Văn is unwilling to drop the issue and insists that he knows that the other men are having sex because Tư had admitted it to him directly. Thụ is humiliated and abandons his apprenticeship shortly thereafter, leading NS to reflect on Văn's cruelty and Tư's carelessness and indiscretion. Years later NS and Tư are colleagues and Tư reveals that Văn was also homosexual and it was jealousy of Thụ that led him to reveal their secret. This final disclosure prompts NS to reconsider his opinion of Văn and note that jealousy can drive people to behave immorally.

In the preface, the author writes that this story shows that, "Homosexuals sometimes exhibit shocking behaviours, and jealousy is always something that they struggle to avoid" and "in NS's opinion everyone, regardless of their orientation, needs to maintain a minimum level of care and respect for those around them" (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007a, p. 164). The term 'homosexual' is used by Tư to describe himself and the other queer characters in the story. The explicit identifications made in this text are therefore as 'homosexuals' and their sexuality is described as an 'orientation' rather than as a gender position.

The homosexual characters in this text are gender normative to the extent their sexuality is not discernible before the information is disclosed. None of them are wealthy or enjoy a privileged lifestyle, and at the beginning of the story they are all living as poor apprentices and sleeping in their employer's shed. The stereotype of homosexuals as pampered intellectuals does not obviously apply in this text, and the factors which are said to contribute to making 'real' men behave like homosexuals are seemingly lacking in the cases of these characters.

*Small Dogs* does however present indications that these characters are effeminate. When Văn initially reveals Thụ and Tư's secret he explains that he knows because Tư had told him directly, but adds, "Anyway, your personality isn't masculine at all" (Nguyễn Thơ

Sinh, 2007a, p. 165). He therefore makes an explicit link between homosexuality and gender transgression. The negative aspects of these characters' personalities are also presented as feminine traits. When NS feels angry at Văn — whom he does not yet know is homosexual — he reflects that Văn is “a man who has a mouth of a woman” (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007a, p. 165). As the story concludes, NS is angry with Tư, who has just disclosed Văn's sexuality. Tư therefore exhibits the same trait of propensity to gossip, which NS views as feminine.

The characters in this text are therefore said to be examples of authentic homosexuality and are shown to be generally masculine and to satisfy none of the lifestyle criteria associated with pathological homosexuality as described in this chapter. They therefore appear to be counter-examples to the majority of other representations previously discussed. A closer examination of the characters however reveals that they are in some ways effeminate, and more importantly that this effeminacy is used to (accurately) predict their homosexuality. These characters are presented as masculine homosexuals, but are in fact shown to be like other *bóng kín* whose outward masculinity hides their effeminacy. Just as *bóng kín* are conceptualised elsewhere as men with the hearts and minds of women, the propensity for gossip exhibited by the characters in this text is conceptualised as their being men with the mouths of women. The characters in this text are relatively strong example of masculine homosexuality, but even so there is an evident understanding that homosexuality is antithetical to 'real' masculinity.

b. A Gentle Suggestion [*Lời đề nghị êm ái*]

One of the more interesting *Lesbian and Gay Love Stories*, this text is an account of a heterosexual man named U and his experiences of working for a homosexual employer, identified only as *sếp* [boss]. The protagonist U works in a factory and is good at his job. He is therefore unsurprised to be offered a promotion, but when his boss makes a romantic advance U reacts with anger and disgust and immediately decides to quit his job, even though doing so will mean taking a less well-paid job elsewhere.

When the boss expresses his love for U, he reacts with surprise and experiences “a panicking sensation” (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007a, p. 140). U states that:

It turned out that all this time *sếp* was praising me not because of my accomplishments but because he was perverted, selfish, deceitful and not kind in the slightest. My face turned thunderous. He had been taking care of me just because he liked me? Totally sick. (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007a, pp. 140-141)

U rushes out of the factory, suddenly overcome with a desire to embrace his wife.

Arriving home, he immediately announces that he has quit his job, even though doing so will mean finding a less well paid job elsewhere.

The boss is identified in the introduction, by the writer, as homosexual in his sexual orientation, though he himself makes no identifications. As is common throughout *Lesbian and Gay Love Stories* therefore, his homosexuality is explicitly stated to be authentic without qualification or explanation. The boss is an interesting example of homosexual identity in that he works as a foreman in a factory, which is a traditionally masculine and practical job. U’s panic and astonishment at discovering his boss’ sexuality suggests that he has been successful in keeping his sexual orientation hidden from his employees. There is no indication that the foreman is rich or highly educated and he does not therefore obviously fit the lifestyle criteria that are said to cause homosexuality. U notes with admiration that his boss is not afraid to get his hands dirty doing the same physical labour as the other workers.

There are however minor hints that the boss is less masculine than his employees. He is said to be not very good with his hands, suggesting that despite his enthusiasm and positive attitude he is not well suited to his job. More significantly, his effeminacy reveals itself when he makes his advance on U. From being a masculine man with a masculine job he suddenly becomes camp, his voice becoming soft and his manner

effeminate. At this point in the text U no longer views him with admiration but is instead disgusted and alarmed. The boss therefore undergoes a similar transformation to that of Rich Phạm in *AC Kinsey's Method*, becoming effeminate the moment that his sexuality is revealed and while in the act of trying to seduce a heterosexual man. There is therefore some evidence that here too, in spite of his outward masculinity and his blue-collar job, the boss is also *bóng kín* and has an inner femininity that he struggles to conceal. *A Gentle Suggestion* is therefore another strong but also qualified example of masculine male homosexuality, and the boss in this text is an example of a relatively masculine homosexual who is both authentically homosexual and largely normatively masculine.

c. My Eldest Brother's Story [*Chuyện anh cả tôi*]

This text tells the story of a young man named Quyền, who is explicitly identified in the introduction as “a homosexual” and as homosexual in his “sexual orientation” (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007a, p. 161). As in other texts from *Lesbian and Gay Love Stories*, therefore, his being homosexual is stated simply and without qualifications in the impersonal narrative sections of the book and is described as a sexual orientation rather than a gender position.

Quyền encounters pressure to get married, which is a common problem faced by queer characters in the primary sources used in this thesis. Unusually in this case the most pressing advocate for Quyền's marriage is not anyone in his immediate family but rather one of his teachers, a domineering older man who physically marches Quyền to his bride-to-be and will not allow him to refuse or prevaricate. The wedding is ultimately cancelled when Quyền is outed by his younger sister, the story's narrator. This text is remarkable for a particularly intense example of homophobia on the part of the teacher who, upon learning that his student is homosexual, falls to the ground clutching his chest but “very luckily made it to [hospital] in time” (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007a, p. 163). The fact that the teacher's life was saved only through extreme good fortune shows that this reaction is accepted as being genuine by the narrator. The extremity of this reaction is matched only once in the primary texts used in this thesis, in *A World Without Women* wherein shock over Hoàng's coming out is understood to be the cause of his father's death.

After Quyền has been identified publicly as homosexual others begin to refer to him as “Quyền *pêđê*” (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007a, p. 163). Homosexual in is therefore conflated with *pêđê*, not by the writer or Quyền himself but by his peers and neighbours. Having outed her brother, nearly killed his teacher and ensured that Quyền will remain unmarried but with a new (and presumably unwelcome) nickname, the narrator concludes that:

It is always easier to tell the truth. The people you love will be hurt. But then they will gradually come to understand. Don't hide the truth. Especially if it's a truth that's important to your life. (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007a, p. 161)

Given the consequences of telling the truth in this instance, this sentiment is not necessarily borne out in the story as a whole. In particular, there is no indication of whether or not Quyền agrees with her assessment that his situation has been improved

by her honesty, or how the situation might have been interpreted morally if the narrator's honesty had resulted in the teacher's death.

Quyền is another character in *Lesbian and Gay Love Stories* who is normative enough to have escaped detection into adulthood and who only begins to encounter homophobia when his sexuality is disclosed. The fact that he has managed to pass as heterosexual until the events in the story suggests that he is outwardly masculine. He is therefore another example of a largely masculine but authentically homosexual individual in this collection.

d. Who is the Bravest? [*Ai là người dũng cảm nhất?*]

This text deals with the story of a paediatrician named Dũng who is identified as homosexual in his “sexual orientation” and as “a homosexual” in the story’s introduction (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007a, p. 165). At the outset of the story he has successfully hidden his sexuality from his family. On his 30th birthday party he decides to come out, and he is subsequently rejected by and becomes estranged from his family. His announcement causes his family to fall into “a panic” (Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007a, p. 165). Their horrified objections are indicative of their understandings homosexuality and are interesting enough to quote at length. The clamour of objections following his announcement reads as follows:

Are you mad or what? Don’t you know you have to take responsibility for what you say, you can’t just live selfishly for your own sake. Don’t you see your nephews and nieces sitting here, what makes you think you can talk like that? Dũng. I beg you. Living like that has no future! Who is going to take care of you when you are older?

Dũng. Don’t go too far. Listen to me. You have to calm down.

Dũng. I am so disappointed in you.

Dũng. Why are you talking such nonsense...?

If you continue to walk down this road of sin, I consider myself to have no brother.

Wake up Dũng. Before it’s too late.

Remember to get a test to see if you have AIDS.

Dũng. If you care for the souls of your parents, look after your own soul yourself and those of everyone in the family. Come back before it is too late.

(Nguyễn Thơ Sinh, 2007a, pp. 165-166)

As a paediatrician, Dũng has a job that requires a high degree of education and is physically undemanding. To this extent his character is consistent with the homosexual stereotypes discussed in this chapter. In common with the other characters in *Lesbian and Gay Love Stories*, however, his homosexuality is accepted at least by the narrator as being authentic and is not therefore attributable to his lifestyle. His family’s reaction indicates that they understand homosexuality to be an acquired and pathological condition. A common theme in their remarks is that Dũng is choosing to be homosexual, and furthermore that he is making this choice as a result of a delusion or ill-conceived notion and should return to his senses. His being homosexual is further

characterised as selfish, sinful and shameful, and it is evidently understood that it might soon be too late for him to return to normality.

Dũng is shouted down when he attempts to speak for himself, and is ridiculed, shamed and called an idiot for self-identifying as a homosexual. His family members speak with apparent confidence that they understand Dũng's sexuality better than he does. There is a shared understanding of several important concepts: people lie about being homosexual, pretending to themselves that they are gay for selfish and immoral reasons; these people can stop being homosexual if they want to; and that there comes a point when it is too late to stop and one becomes homosexual in truth. Their shared understanding of homosexuality is therefore entirely consistent with the pathological definition considered in this chapter, though in this text this understanding is raised only to be directly critiqued.

All of these ideas are consistent with the understanding of homosexuality presented in *A World Without Women*. The message in this text is however precisely the opposite. As in the examples from *Untold Stories* discussed previously in this chapter, the notion of pathological, curable homosexuality is presented here only to show it to be harmful. The reader knows, because he or she is informed directly by the narrator, that Dũng is a homosexual, and his family members are therefore only demonstrating their ignorance when they urge him to reconsider. It is his family, rather than Dũng himself, who are failing to accept the truth of the situation. The fact that Dũng fits some of the lifestyle criteria said to cause homosexuality is therefore largely irrelevant, as his being homosexual is a separate fact given independently of his profession and educational background. It is also evident from his family's reactions that Dũng was passing successfully as heterosexual until he decided to make his announcement. This text is therefore another example of a text in *Lesbian and Gay Love Stories* of a relatively normative, masculine homosexual whose sexuality is authentic and not reducible to lifestyle criteria and formative experiences. To this extent, it challenges the understandings presented in this chapter.

e. Conclusions in *Lesbian and Gay Love Stories*

The texts described above are examples from *Lesbian and Gay Love Stories* are generally consistent in several respects and are unusual when considered alongside the other primary sources used in this thesis. The protagonists in this collection are unambiguously defined as homosexual in the introductions to each text. Whether or not this constitutes 'authentic' homosexuality by the criteria discussed in this chapter is difficult to say, though there are no examples of characters whose homosexuality is temporary and no suggestion that homosexuals can, should, or even desire to be cured.

The characters described in the texts above do not generally fit the lifestyle criteria said to characterise homosexuals and are more gender-normative than queer characters in the other primary texts used in this thesis. Though each of the characters described above are qualified examples of homosexual masculinity, they are all able to pass for heterosexual until they come out or are otherwise outed. In the cases described above, feminine traits such as the foreman's emotionality and the goldsmiths' gossiping are noticed and applied retrospectively after their homosexuality becomes known. The masculinity of the characters discussed is therefore separate from and not necessarily at odds with their homosexual inclinations. The terminology used throughout this collection is consistent with this distinction, referring to homosexuality primarily as a sexual orientation and only occasionally as a gender position. Gender and sexuality are therefore unusually conceived as largely separate categories throughout this collection.

This understanding differs markedly from that presented in *A World Without Women* and evident throughout most of the primary sources used in this thesis. The understandings evident in *Lesbian and Gay Love Stories* are notably similar to liberal Western understandings of these same issues. This pattern is also consistent outside of the stories that deal with the experiences of gay men, though these fall outside of the scope of this thesis. The first section of the collection, which deals with characters identified as lesbians, describes similarly normative characters who face similar challenges and dilemmas associated with coming out. This collection therefore presents a relatively consistent notion of sexual orientation as a separate category from gender, and of homosexuals as gender normative and distinct from 'real' men (or in the case of the lesbian stories, women) only in their sexual orientations. In these respects, *Lesbian and Gay Love Stories* is remarkable when considered alongside the other primary sources used in this thesis.

### 3.9 Chapter Conclusions

Authentic homosexuals are defined according to either a pathological or non-pathological understanding depending on the text, its expressed message and the perspective of its author. Texts that present a pathological understanding of homosexuality hold that it is a psychological condition which affects impressionable young people and is caused broadly by middle-class, physically undemanding lifestyles and a lack of parental guidance. Childhood sexual encounters and experiences of gender transgression are repeatedly shown to be associated with adult homosexuality, which in turn is linked to fetishistic sex, paedophilia and rape. The understanding that homosexuality is curable and can potentially be overcome through application of willpower and medical treatment is a feature of these understandings, and represents the largest point of contention between tolerant and intolerant representations of homosexuality because it determines how people evaluate the morally correct reaction to learning that someone is homosexual.

*A World Without Women* is the only text to unambiguously accept that homosexuality is a mental illness, but this belief is evident to varying degrees in other texts that depict adult homosexuals as the products of these causal factors. When homosexuality is accepted as pathological condition, a relatively clear distinction can be drawn between 'real' homosexuals who are congenital and incurable as distinct from pathological cases of homosexuality that are a result of these factors and not therefore a reflection of the characters' true identities.

Texts that promote a message of acceptance refute the idea that homosexuality is pathological and accept individuals' rights to self-identify, usually without providing detailed explanations of how the characters first came to make their identifications. In several of these texts pathological understandings are however still evident in the form of beliefs held by misguided family members and malicious peers, who refuse to accept or tolerate the homosexuality of the various protagonists. Stories with similar contents are therefore told in *Untold Stories* and in *A World Without Women*, as characters make decisions based on a pathological understanding of homosexuality, but the results are entirely opposite from one another.

The distinction between authentic and inauthentic homosexuality is harder to define in the absence of a pathological condition, but nevertheless a distinction is often conceived

as existing between 'real' homosexuals who are acting in accordance with their essential natures and homosexually active 'real' men, who are not. In either case and in spite of these conceptual differences, the characteristics that define 'real' homosexuals (regardless of how this authenticity is conceived), the opposing characteristics that define 'real' men and interpretations of characters who pose a challenge to these binary classifications are largely the same throughout the texts studied in this thesis.

The definition of homosexual individuals presented first in *A World Without Women* is shown to be largely accurate in predicting how these ideas are understood throughout queer Vietnamese literature. The homosexual characters discussed in this thesis are generally shown to be affluent, urban, middle class people who work in creative or artistic jobs. The protagonists of the various texts discussed in this thesis predominantly live in Hanoi and Saigon and include doctors, architects, beauticians, educated professionals and people who work in artistic fields. There are a very small number of counterexamples who work as farmers or as a factory foremen, and even these are generally qualified as the characters in question are shown to be effeminate but masquerading as masculine to varying degrees of success.

Homosexuals are said to have feminine personality traits and corresponding interests. This is shown to be universally true across the primary texts studied in this thesis. *Bóng lộng* individuals are obviously feminine, and achieving feminine beauty and thereby being recognised as women constitutes their primary desire. *Bóng kín* characters are however also conceived of having feminine hearts, minds or essences in spite of their masculine outward appearances, and have feminine characteristics that reveal themselves concurrently with the characters' homosexuality.

The specific criterion defined in *A World Without Women* for determining the curability of homosexuality is whether or not the individual displayed childhood signs of gender transgression. There are no examples of characters who are assessed on this criterion and then accepted as legitimately homosexual on account of these early signs of homosexuality from very young. Nevertheless, perhaps the most commonly described experience in the primary texts used in this thesis is that of being gender transgressive at a young age and facing ridicule, rejection and stigma as a result. Regardless of whether a text is sympathetic or unsympathetic, adolescent gender transgressive behaviours are consistently shown to be the way that characters are recognised as homosexual.

Texts that present a pathological understanding of homosexuality view these feminine characteristics as a cause of the condition, and encourage effeminate young men to be more masculine in order to ward off the risk of developing homosexuality as a permanent condition. Non-pathological understandings nevertheless hold that homosexuals have a transgender identity, and view these feminine traits as expressions of their feminine hearts, minds or souls. In either case, writers accept that characters who are 'real' homosexuals share the same effeminate characteristics, middle-class backgrounds and artistic, physically undemanding jobs.

Several characters are shown to be homosexually active in spite of not satisfying any of these criteria. Examples of these include Dũng's lovers in *Shadow*, the detective Trung from *A World Without Women*, the gangster Hoàng Long in *AC Kinsey's Method* and Hiền, one of the two protagonists of *I'm Sorry*. All of these men are homosexually active but work in traditionally masculine jobs and are generally (though not necessarily entirely) masculine. They are also homosexually active, forming romantic and sexual relationships with other men, in most cases without any obvious recompense to suggest that these relationships are commoditised. Regardless of whether or not the texts in question regard homosexuality as pathological, the interpretation of these men is the same: they are said not only to be 'real' men but to be obviously 'real' men and not therefore homosexual. True counterexamples, in the form of men who are both unambiguously homosexual and unambiguously 'real' men exist in only a very small selection of texts. The reasoning underpinning the classification of characters as 'real' men is not always clear, and is further complicated by the fact that in several instances characters are said to be 'real' heterosexual men in spite of not only their sexual and romantic behaviours but also their own identifications to the contrary.

## Chapter 4

### Conclusions

This thesis has catalogued a body of texts and presented understandings of a range of identities that have existed in Vietnamese literature published since 2000, but had yet to be documented in academic research. It has comprehensively reviewed how queer issues and identities associated with male-bodied people are portrayed in the context of modern Vietnam, and is an early work on specifically Vietnamese attitudes towards gender and sexuality framed within a regional context.

The distinctions between the identities that comprise the topics of the three chapters of this thesis were not pre-determined at the outset of this research, but emerged as the logical approaches to these issues on account of the fact that these are the popular terms used in the primary sources themselves. No adequate translation exists of the concepts of *lộ* and *kín*, and while the phrases ‘real’ man and ‘real’ homosexual were easy to translate it was always apparent when working on these texts that the meanings of these phrases were unintuitive in English and required in-depth analysis and explanation. Viewed together, these concepts represent a framework for understanding how gender, sexuality and normativity are presented and explained in Vietnam through literature.

The clearest finding to emerge from this research is that there is a great deal of variation evident throughout the primary texts in the ways in which these issues are presented. This is true not only when comparing works by different authors but also when comparing different texts written by the same authors. Evidence of this can be found in the problems implicit in categorising the identities even into broad and cursory labels such as *kín* and *lộ* which are themselves problematic and ambiguous. As has been shown in this thesis, even when taking a broad view of these terms there is a great deal of overlap and outright contradiction in how they are applied and understood.

This is an indication that these issues are new and emergent. This fact is significant firstly because it means that the research offered in this thesis is in a sense a snapshot of a significant time for queer issues in Vietnam. Anyone interested in this particular period of Vietnamese history, which was a time in which queer issues became more mainstream and started to acquire recognisable labels, can look at this research to see

what developments took place and some of the challenges and contradictions that were implicit in the formation of what may since have become more solid and widely recognised categories.

Secondly, this is important as it points to the need for further research that can build on the findings developed in this thesis. In other words, it is likely that the *bóng lộ* and *bóng kín* identities are the antecedents of the LGBT identities now more popularly used by Vietnamese activists. This is of course outside of the scope of this research, but future researchers could draw comparisons between the emergent identities in the early 2000s and the more coherent identities that may have come to exist since then through the rise of LGBT activism and other phenomena.

The constructionist theories of representation and gender raised in the introduction to this thesis are useful ways of deciphering the understandings of gender and sexuality presented in the primary texts. With very few exceptions one can apply the notion of gender performativity in an unambiguous way to show how notions of normality, gender and transgression are constructed through outward signifiers. These outward signifiers take some surprising forms. Though the identities discussed in this thesis differ drastically in terms of their behaviours, genders and sexual orientations, each is rooted in an understanding of homosexuality as gender transgression first and foremost. This fundamental finding was evident throughout primary texts used in this thesis, applying equally as a determinative factor that unites understandings of such disparate categories as masculine 'real' men and feminine, *bóng lộ* trans women.

The most salient point to emerge from this thesis is that in the case of Vietnam, homosexuality, in the sense of having and acting upon homoerotic desires, is in fact often the least important factor in determining that someone is queer. Far less obvious signifiers such as wearing jewellery, using expensive soaps, enjoying receiving presents or being interested in traditional opera are all taken, across a range of texts, as being proof that someone is *bóng lộ*, *bóng kín*, homosexual or MSM. Conversely, enjoying sex with other men, even to the extent of forming cohabiting relationships with other men that may last months or years and are both romantic and sexual is generally dismissed as irrelevant if the person in question is a 'real' man who does a masculine job and has masculine sensibilities. Gender-normative, homosexually active men are almost universally considered to be 'real' men, sometimes in spite of their own

objections to the contrary. Because of the terminology used, and specifically because of how many terms are used synonymously, this leads to counter-intuitive situations where someone who is erotically attracted to other men is considered ‘obviously’ normal (i.e., heterosexual) whereas a man who cries when he watches romantic Korean soap opera but has no sexual desires for other men is ‘obviously’ homosexual. One can conclude therefore that in the context of Vietnam and in the period of time discussed in this thesis sexuality is indeed understood to be performative, an impression created by specific outward manifestations of what are perceived to be inward truths, and that these manifestations are associated with feminine behaviours in male-bodied individuals rather than sexual inclinations. This finding is not ultimately challenged by the fact that some of the identities discussed in this thesis have a clear and defined sexual component, as is the case with several instances of *bóng kìn* in general and of those who seek out top and bottom or husband and wife relationships in particular. There are no examples of *bóng lộ* who desire women, which would be inconsistent with their conceptualisations of themselves as women. Similarly, there are no examples of feminine *bóng kìn* who specifically desire other feminine *bóng kìn*, and where same-sex partnerships exist wherein both partners are homosexual there is almost always a clear and binary division of gender roles. This is implicit far more often than it is explicit, but it is nevertheless ubiquitous in the sources studied in this thesis. These sexual behaviour therefore function as logically coherent aspects of broader gender identifications. These are markedly different from the criteria applied to determine sexuality in the West. Once again, it will remain to be seen how these ideas are challenged in further research. If the rise of LGBT activism in recent years popularises terms such as transgender and bisexual, these may be adopted as more appropriate terms for certain individuals than those used in this thesis.

The notion of representation as a constitutive force, which is to say that books such as these create the understandings that they appear merely to represent, is a more abstract concept and is difficult to prove, but there is evidence of this in the fact that later texts often draw on earlier texts when they are explaining homosexuality. As the most famous example it is not surprising that *A World Without Women*, despite its largely intolerant message, is the most commonly referred to text. The clearest evidence of this process occurring is the fact that the term Third World, which presumably derives from the imagery of this novel’s title, has been thoroughly adopted as a synonym for queer or third gender in most of the books published afterwards.

The analyses studied in these texts and the conclusions above demonstrate similar findings to those documented elsewhere in South East Asia and China. There is no doubt that the imagined West is an important point of cultural reference for defining queer issues in Vietnam. One need hardly look beyond the titles and introductions of the texts in question to find evidence of this; Vietnamese borrow liberally from Western terminology when defining and explaining homosexuality. References to Western homosexuals, both as a collective and individual celebrity figures, are extremely common, and the notion that homosexuality is something that has existed for decades in the West but has only recently arrived in Vietnam is ubiquitous. In some less tolerant texts, this idea is used to justify hostility towards homosexuality as something incompatible with Vietnamese culture. Even in tolerant texts, however, Western data is used to justify homosexuality and no reference is made to the homoerotic traditions discussed by Vinh and Proschan in the context of Vietnam nor of Hinsch, Chou and others in the context of Vietnam's closest cultural relative China.

Nevertheless, homosexuality as depicted in the primary texts bears far more resemblance to past research on China, Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia than to modern Western attitudes. As mentioned in the introduction, there is a caveat that must be acknowledged in that this research focusses on published works of literature rather than sociological data. The most significant points of contention between how queer identities are understood in Vietnam as opposed to these other Asian contexts relate to sexual behaviour, and specifically the importance attached to active and passive sexual positions. The evidence presented in this thesis suggests that these are less important in the context of Vietnam, and indeed most texts make no mention of this distinction whatsoever. This finding is qualified by the fact that Vietnamese literature tends not to be sexually explicit, and writers specifically intending to present a sympathetic message might be disinclined to discuss gay sex in any detail for fear of eliciting a hostile or disgusted response from their readers. Even so, there are suggestions and euphemisms in several texts that support the notion that masculinity is associated with taking the penetrating role and femininity is associated with being penetrated.

The notion of sexuality as an expression of gender is typical of findings of queer theory research in these other contexts and is certainly the norm in Vietnam. Though sexual roles are generally unspecified, there is a clear divide in the same-sex relationships

described that cast one partner in the more masculine role (always identified using the masculine pronoun *anh*) and the other more feminine partner (always identified by the feminine or neutral pronoun *em*) playing the part of his wife or girlfriend. From this one can conclude that the notion of gender as a spectrum rather than as a binary plays a strong implicit role in the formation of queer identities in Vietnam. Even in the context of same-sex relationships, opposites are understood to attract. Vietnam does not have clear signifier such as *gay king* and *gay queen* (as discussed by Jackson) or *tom* and *dee* (as discussed by Sinnott, 2004) but nevertheless queer identities and relationships are obviously based around similar understandings.

From a global queering perspective, therefore, one can conclude that the evidence presented in this thesis is consistent with findings in other non-Western contexts. Based on readings of these texts, Vietnamese have incorporated aspects of Western ideas into their own cultural formations for interpreting sexuality, and attach significance to the notion of the West as the cultural point of origin from which these queer identities have emerged. As elsewhere, however, a closer examination reveals that in spite of recognisable lexical signifiers and specific subjectivities, the forms that homosexuality takes and the ways in which it is interpreted as a concept are distinctly Vietnamese. Even when characters conceive of their homosexuality as being fundamentally Western, the concepts that they describe are something quite different. Boellstorff's concept of dubbing culture therefore seems to apply accurately the Vietnamese context. One can definitively conclude that in spite of the fact that a great deal of Vietnamese vocabulary describing queer issues is borrowed from European languages, Vietnamese conceptualisations of sexuality demonstrate at least as much similarity to local and regional traditions as to Western ideas.

Some limitations to the findings of this research should be taken into account. The characters and relationships discussed in this thesis represent only a small selection of those present in the texts themselves, and yet other texts were examined in preparation for this research but not ultimately included in this thesis at all. In the larger novels, such as *A World Without Women*, the most significant characters and relationships were discussed, while in the short story compilations only a representative sample of the more interesting examples were presented.

The selection was further reduced by the decision, taken early in the research process, to focus exclusively on the identities of male queers. This decision was made in for the sake of brevity and because of tentative findings that the issues present in texts dealing with female queers were sufficiently different from those discussed in this thesis to make considering examples of both alongside one another difficult. Texts such as *Variant [Dị Bản]* by the blogger Keng (2010) deal with the experience of female queers, as does the first section of *Lesbian and Gay Love Stories*, and there is certainly a sufficient body of texts available that queer female issues could be the topic of research similar to that conducted in this thesis.

Finally, the fact that the texts involved are all broadly works of fiction as well as being dependent upon publication and intended for a reading audience is of obvious significance. The findings of this thesis therefore relate to a perception of these issues that has been influential in forming literary representations of homosexual identities but may be quite different from lived experiences. In particular the exclusive focus on romantic relationships over sexual experiences in many texts and especially in relation to characters that are positively portrayed is likely a reflection of literary standards as this is an element of these identities that is notably lacking when compared to otherwise similar research on queer studies in different contexts in the same region. The texts discussed in this thesis are all examples of literature from a period of time that during which great and rapid changes occurred, and the subject matter of the texts is relevant to cultural ideas on queer issues during this period of Vietnamese history. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, however, queer issues have undergone an unprecedented rise to prominence over the last few years since the active research of this thesis was completed.

Some future avenues for research that are apparent from this thesis are therefore social identities rather than literary identities, issues affecting female-bodied queers rather than males, and research on sources made available since the rise of popular LGBT activism in around 2012. Given that queer identities are always conceived as expressions of gender, and that many of the characters discussed in this thesis conceive of themselves as being women, there may be significant intersectionality between women's issues and those affecting *bóng lợ*, and this could be a topic to explore in future research. The extent to which the literary queer identities discussed in this text differ from social identities and the extent to which these identities have been shaped and challenged by

changes in the last few years will only become clear with further research in this field. Ultimately therefore this thesis is one contribution which must be part of a broader field of Vietnamese queer studies in order to allow scholarship of issues of gender and sexuality in Vietnam to add to the discourses these issues globally and regionally.

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