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**Research on Tay Ethnic Minority Literature in  
Vietnam Under Cultural View**

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# Research on Tay Ethnic Minority Literature in Vietnam Under Cultural View

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## Abstract

The Tay people are an ethnic minority of Vietnam. Tay literature has many unique facets with relevance to cultural identity. It plays an important part in the diversity and richness of Vietnamese literature.

In this study, Tay literature in Vietnam is analyzed through a cultural perspective, by placing Tay literature in its development from its birth to the present, together with the formation of the ethnic group, and historical and cultural conditions, focusing on the typical customs of the Tay people in Vietnam.

The researcher examines Tay literature through poems of *Nôm Tày*, through the works of some prominent authors, such as Vi Hong, Cao Duy Son, in the Cao Bang province of Vietnam. Cao Bang is home to many Tay ethnic people and many typical Tay authors. The research also locates individual contributions of those authors and their works in terms of artistic language use and cultural symbolic features of the Tay people. In terms of art language, the article isolates the unique use of *Nôm Tay* characters to compose stories which affect the traditional Tay *luon*, *sli*, and so forth, and hence the use of language that influences poetry and proverbs of Tay people in the story of Vi Hong, Cao Duy Son. Assuming a symbolic framework, the article examines the symbols of birds and flowers in *Nôm Tay* poetry and the composition of Vi Hong, Cao Duy Son, so to point out the uniqueness of the Tay identity.

The above research issue is necessary to help us better appreciate the cultural values preserved in Tay literature, thereby, affirming the unique cultural identity of the Tay people and planning to preserve and develop these unique cultural features from which emerges the risk of falling into oblivion in modern social life in Vietnam. In addition, this is also a research direction that can be extended to Thai, Mong, Dao, etc, ethnic minorities in Vietnam.

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*Keywords:* Tay People, Vietnam, Literature, Poems

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## Introduction to the study of Tay literature from a cultural perspective

During the community formation, Tay ethnic minority in Vietnam was formed very early in the cultural environment of Bach Viet and Choang ethnic in China. Tay people are considered as one of the first inhabitant groups of Dong Son culture. They are people of power and courage, and they have their own cultural identity. Tay's literature has developed and exhibited its own cultural identity, and has contributed to the diversity of Vietnamese cultural paintings. Studying Tay literature from a cultural perspective, we will consider how historical, religious, geographic, anthropological factors etc. affect the concept and habits of the Tay ethnic minority.

### Locality and history of Tay ethnic minority in Vietnam

The Tay ethnic minority live mainly in some northern mountainous provinces of Vietnam, such as Lang Son, Bac Kan and Cao Bang. In Cao Bang, apart from the Kinh, we can refer to typical ethnic groups such as Tay, Nung, Dao, Hoa, San Chay, Hmong, etc., of which Tay accounts for 41%, Nung: 31.1% , Dao: 10.1%, H'mong: 10.1%, San Chay: 1.4%, and so on. However, the Tay ethnic minority is more numerous than others among ethnic minorities in Cao Bang, so there are many festivals characterized by Tay culture, such as the Long Tong festival in the lunar first month, the Thanh Minh festival in the lunar third month, and the festival of Nang Hai in the middle of the lunar eighth month. Many traditional folk songs of the Tay ethnic group have been handed down and developed such as then, sli, luon, sluong dancing and chau dancing with typical musical instruments such as dan tinh, dan nhi, xoc dong luc lac. Tay literature has developed well in Cao Bang. According to Tay folklore, in the 3rd century BC, Cao Bang was the territory of Nam Cuong, associated with the formation of the ancient Tay tribes of Western Europe, and its capital was in Hoa An. In the story of Cau chua cheng vua (Nine lords - One king) - a legend of Tay, after defeating the opponents, Thuc Phan established Au Lac, named his throne An Duong Vuong and moved the capital to Co Loa. In the eleventh century, this land became the center of the autonomous nation of Dai Nam with the leaders Nung Ton Phuc and Nung Tri Cao. By the end of the sixteenth century, the Mac dynasty fled to the mountainous region, establishing a monarchy against the Le dynasty for nearly 100 years in Cao Bang. The king of the Mac dynasty built Cao Bang into a political, military, cultural and economic center for a period of time. Schools were opened, writing in Nom Tay was encouraged, markets were built, and agricultural production was promoted to improve peoples' lives.

### Tay literature in Cao Bang

Tay folk literature - Nom Tay poetry

Cao Bang is a special land of history and culture; it is also referred to as "literary land" because of the early and rich emergence and development of writing literature. The Nom Tay (a type of Tay language created by the Tay people) is said to have existed "since the fifth century, with the design of Le The Khanh, a Tay intellectual"<sup>1</sup>. Together with Nom Tay, Nom Tay poetry

<sup>1</sup> Trieu An: Nom Tay and poetry stories, Ha Noi: Literature Publishing House, 2003, 30.

was formed and flourished in this rich cultural tradition. These are folk compositions of the Tay expressing the soul of the Tay community. A characteristic of Nom Tay poetry is to express the cultural identity of the Tay ethnic group. Nhan Lang, Bjooc La, Chieu Duc, Nho Huong, Nam Kim - Thi Dan are works that express Tay cultural identity through the concept of the world, the way of building characters and customs, and habits of human life.

\* The concept of the world of Tay

In the Tay people's view, human beings have flesh and soul ('khoan'). 'Khoan' can leave the body to travel around the world. The world is conceived of having three realms: Heaven, earth, and hell (muong troi, the dong, and muong am). These three realms are considered as versions of each other. Heaven has a King, fairies, Buddha, Mother Flowers and gods who are in charge of different fields. There are also king, generals, demons, and prison with a penalty. The three realms are connected to each other. The heaven manages, arranges and controls everything in the world. Having difficulties, people living on earth go to the realm of heaven to find a solution; Hell is the place where sinners are punished. The soul of man (khoan) can escape the body to go to heaven or hell. The Nom Tay always express the world as these three realms.

Nhan Lang (in the story of Nhan Lang) represents a poor man who must beg for a living. He goes to heaven to know the reason of his suffering. As he has no money, he has to work for Quy Coc for three years. However, he misses his mother so much that he asks for early leave. On the way home, he is curious to know his mistakes, so he goes back to the master's house in the middle of the night. Consequently, he overhears the secret he was about to ask a question regarding, so he avoids the pain of his life. In Luong Nhan, Thi Xuan dreams of being wrecked by the big river in the sky, awakening on earth, and of becoming sick and dying. The Buddha in heaven considers Luong Nhan a good gentleman, so he turns into an old man sitting under the pine to save Luong Nhan. The Buddha is the man who helps Han Chan, the daughter of the poor in the temple, pass the exam. Nho Huong (Nho Huong poetry) changes his life and becomes the King. Luu Huong (the story of Luu Huong) not only goes up to heaven but also down to the hell to get married. Dinh Chi (the story of Dinh Chi), due to his father's greed, taking bronze statues for sale, is punished instead of his father. Ngoc Long is arrested first. Thanks to the miracle, Dinh Chi can visit his wife in the ocean and finds a way to save himself. Obviously, the concept of three world realms is deeply embedded in the poetry of Nom Tay, expressing the indigenous cultural beliefs of Tay community. They believe in the world of the three realms, which influences their way of life. Living with love and fondness will ensure a life in the heaven whereas whoever lives deceitfully will have misfortune and be exiled to hell.

\* The method of making characters

In terms of characters, Nom Tay poetry has its own manifestations. Characters in poetry are fairy characters, but they have the personalities and characteristics of mountainous people: Poor, industrious and hard working. In normal life, they are gentle, hard working and warm-hearted. When their country is invaded, they become warriors to fight against the enemy.

Thi Trinh in the story of Ly The Khanh is a faithful woman who wholeheartedly serves her mother-in-law. When her husband is away from home to fight in the war, Thi Trinh has taken care of all the household chores, nurturing her mother-in-law and raising her children. While she is away from her husband and her mother-in-law is sick, Thi Trinh vows and is willing to die for her mother. Her vow is heard by a Buddha in heaven, so he decides to save her old

mother-in-law. When she is taunted and exiled to the forest, she still cares for and raises her two children. The image of Thi Trinh represents Tay women who are always loyal and wholeheartedly contribute to the family. Luong Nhan, a poor orphan, loves his wife so much that when his wife dies, he decides to carry her home, as Tay's custom is that when one dies, he must be buried in his home. It takes him three years to carry his wife home, and during that period, he has to beg for a living. When the owner of the river Tang snatches his wife away, and pays him two bags of silver and gold, he does not accept but demands: "I only marry my wife". This proves that he is a faithful and honest man. In general, straightforwardness, the nature of mountainous people, was embedded in the poetry of Nom Tay. It is the poor and the honest who are the ones to overcome the difficulties to become skilled and successful. When the country is in jeopardy, they become the heroes of the nation, saving the king. Nhan Lang, Chieu Duc, Ly The Khanh, Nho Huong, Luu Tuong are such characters.

\* The habits and customs of the Tay

In the poems, the picture of the stilt is quite clear. Luong Nhan (in the poem of Luong Nhan)<sup>2</sup> carries his wife and begs for food, "standing under the stairs" when he comes to a widow's house in Phai village and begged for food. The house is described as as small as a tent, at the edge of the village, but it does have stairs. This is the characteristic of Tay people's house, which is high and connected to the land by a ladder. When Luong Nhan is away, a dealer asks the old woman who lives next door to Han Chan - Luong Nhan's wife, to convey his love to her, this old woman just stands below the stairs talking to the landlord: Hearing that, the old lady goes to meet Han Chan below the stairs of the front door (Luong Nhan). When Nam Kim says goodbye to Thi Dan before leaving, the image of stairs also appears: Waking up, realizing that she is on her own, Nam Kim steps down the ladder with a broken heart (Nam Kim - Thi Dan). In daily activities, the Tay often carries a bun of rice when shopping or hunting. Nam Kim - Thi Dan<sup>3</sup> also reminiscent of this lifestyle through the action of Thi Dan "making a bun of rice for him before going to the market" and Nam Kim: Looking at the bun of rice, he remembers his wife's hands. He feels sad and does not want to have lunch (Nam Kim - Thi Dan).

Hospitality, willingness to share, and helping those who are in trouble is one of the traditional beauties of the Tay. We often encounter mutual affection between people in the works of poetry in Nom. In Luu Tuong<sup>4</sup>, when the King of So escapes and becomes lost in the forest, he has to ask for help: The king stands at the foot of the stairs, crossing his hands, begging for help. The host says sincerely, whoever has to leave his house is miserable. Despite being poor, no one can refuse a beggar. Please come in and sit down. The host asks his wife and children, "The meal is available, isn't it? If not, then prepare another one" (Luu Tuong). The words and gestures of the landlord to the King of So (a beggar at that time) show the affection and deeds of people living in the forest who are always willing to help people in need. These are also the heart and gestures commonly seen in the interactions between people and people in the Tay ethnic currently.

We also encounter the same scene in Luong Nhan. When Luong Nhan comes to Phai village, begging a widow for food, she is ready to bring him, a meal even though "she is poorer than anyone else": The woman tells him to wash his feet and go up the stairs, and then asks her daughter to bring him a meal (Luong Nhan). The rituals are described in accordance with the

<sup>2</sup> Luong Bien (Collecting and translating): Luong Nhan, Thai Nguyen University Publishing House, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Vu Anh Tuan, Nam Kim - Thi Dan, printed in "Tay Tales and their origins, developmental process and genre", Hanoi: Hanoi National University Press, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Nong Phuc Tuoc, Be Si Uong (Collecting), *Luu Tuong*, Ethnic Culture Publishing House, Hanoi, 2013.

custom of Tay people. Luong Nhan comes to the widow's house and asks for food. He is not only invited to eat, but also offered a job and a wife - Han Chan, the daughter of the landlady. That he works there for three years demonstrates the custom of the bridegroom staying at his wife's house and working there. During this time, Luong Nhan works diligently: Working for three years, he doesn't wonder about his marriage. He spends day and night on the farm, harvesting, plowing and planting (Luong Nhan). Three years later, his wedding is organized and its stages follow the customs of the Tay. Inviting, setting tables and conducting ceremonies expresses the custom of the Tay. The funeral in this story is described as a real one. When the mother of Han Chan is sick, Luong Nhan and Han Chan bring a master home to worship and pray for her mother's health. When the mother dies, the young couple sell all the fields and buffaloes to hold a funeral according to Tay tradition: Han Chan thinks thoroughly, and regretfully agrees to sell the garden and field. They invite a master to hold the worshipping ceremony. They slaughter their cattle for the worshipping ceremony. The son-in-law kneels for mourning. They build a funeral house and a hearse, prepare the worshipping feast, and wish that the mother rest in peace (Luong Nhan). Thus, customs and activities in weddings and funerals express the lifestyle of the Tay.

### **Tay's modern literature Tay - Short stories by Cao Duy Son**

Cao Duy Son, whose works show the cultural identity of Tay by depicting traditional customs and symbols, is a modern writer of the Tay ethnic group,

#### a. Traditional customs of funerals and holidays

Short stories by Cao Duy Son do not recreate authentic or close-ups of the funeral, wedding or feast of the Tay. Instead, he knows how to choose the outstanding details to retain the soul of the customs associated with the lifestyle of the Tay. The funerals are evoked from the sound of *thanh la* (a traditional musical instrument of the Tay), the New Year's Day starts with a custom called *khai vai xuan*, spiritual lifestyle is reproduced through the sweet sound of *nhi*. All of those details help readers recognize that the source of Tay culture is like a smoldering underground water which influences Cao Duy Son's works.

In the short story 'A resounding soul'<sup>5</sup>, the writer describes the morality of the Tay's funeral through the hollow sound of the bar - an indispensable tool in the Tay's funeral to farewell a soul to the other side of the world. "Co ong ... co ong ... co ong... the soul led by the sound moves to the new place. Living and dead people say the last words by the bar (*thanh la*). The sound of *thanh la* is the word of the living to the dead, as it "connects the living with the dead with the sound co ong ... co ong ... co ong" and directs the souls to their eternity. Especially, in the funeral of Mrs. Ban, whom the old man Khue loves but he does not dare to confess because of his cowardice - the sound of the bar *thanh la* expresses the mood of the old man. It is "whimper", "bitterly" and "endless torment". It is a tribulation to the dead, for his tragic love and his own boring life. When he is young, Khue loves Ban; however, he is frightened by Lu and Ki, so he does not dare to express his love for her. As a result, he has a whole life of regret. What Cao Duy Son wants to convey to readers is not simply the practice of knocking the bar *thanh la* in Tay's funeral but the sentiment of the living for the dead and the empathy of the living about the

<sup>5</sup> Cao Duy Son: *The human-shaped clouds*, Hanoi: Ethnic Culture Publishing House, 2002

third realm - the world of the dead. This is what creates human values for a custom.

When describing the customs of New Year, Cao Duy Son also pays attention to important details that highlight the spiritual values of the Tay. In the story of Suc Hy<sup>6</sup>, the writer describes the tradition of welcoming spring of the Tay. Tay people believe that there must be someone to visit their house on the first day of the year. That one must “wear old faded clothes and look like a beggar. He carries a bag filled with red paper and a pen-and-ink bottle is hung on his chest.” At New Year’s Eve, he will go to each house “standing at the door, versing poems as soft as the stream singing”: “Bươn chiêng pi mầu khai vại xuân a... ngân sèn khẩu tu nả à, mò mả khẩu tu lẳng σ...cần ké lục đếch khẩu pi mầu à a... phù sần au khen sửa lòng dà... khẩu, nặm, ngân sèn tim rườn la... cung hỷ phát sòi”. This custom not only expresses the desire for good things but also reminds people of tough times. Also, it gives the poor hope for better days. This reinforces the lifestyles of gratitude, compassion and optimism of the Tay.

Cao Duy Son always emphasizes the spiritual value of customs rather than its material values. The sound of *nhi* in his short story 'The white marble' expresses this value. The sound coming from Do's *nhi* is regarded as a museum where people can learn the characteristics of Tay's culture. Every time Do plays his *nhi*, he “touches the heart of Co Sau's people. It can be the beginning of play “Pham Tai-Ngoc Hoa” in Da Hai melody, which is as earnest as the way underground water coming from Phja Bjooc runs. It can be the bitter and suffering love story of “Nam Kim-Thi Dan in then melody”. These are folklores in Nom Tay (Pham Tai - Ngoc Hoa, Nam Kim - Thi Dan) and lyrical folk songs which make up the identity of the Tay (da hai, luon, then). This shows that the Tay's folk culture is embedded in the sound of *nhi*, which can be compared with the desire of Tay's people to preserve their traditional culture. Through the sound of *nhi*, we not only know the diversity of Tay's folk culture but also recognize its integrated characteristic. “But the most exciting melody is the bustle of Moc Tau Hi, illustrated by the wooden puppet show that is unique in Vietnam. At that time, the audience was fascinated with the sound of the sword in the hands of the orphan cutting off seven heads of demons to save all people. In addition, the story Cau chua cheng vua tells us about the war between nine lords to become the King on the land of Muc Ma ... “. These are not originated from the Tay culture but have been integrated by Tay culture from Vietnamese and Chinese culture. It shows the spirit of martial arts with the strong willpower of mountainous people in the struggle for survival and development.

## b. Typical icons

### \* The flower symbol

In the traditional view of the Tay, Mother Flower (Mẻ Bjoóc) is always illustrated as a benevolent mother who creates the beauty for the human realm and protects human beings. In the Tay festival, in the Hoa procession ritual it is believed that human beings are born and brought up by Mother Flower - Me Hoa. They claim that flowers are human. Men are the children of Mother Flower - Me Hoa. Every human being is a flower which “Mother Flower gives, Mother Flower organizes to reincarnate into the earth. Therefore, the flower is a way of expressing love and a substance to cleanse the soul. They bathe their soul in the incense of flowers so that the delicacy and noble quality of flowers constantly motivates them to have a clean and noble life. The flower is the faith and the bravery of man: This four-colored flower

<sup>6</sup> Cao Duy Son: The human-shaped clouds, Hanoi: Ethnic Culture Publishing House, 2002

does not wither; This flower falling to the ground remains fresh; this flower cannot be burnt with fire, it will not drift in the stream (Tay folk song). Flowers symbolize the joy of life and well-being; a symbol for beauty and love. The Tay have a comparison stipulating "as beautiful as flowers, as bright as flowers, as young as flowers, as white as flowers". In short, the flower has become the basis of emotion, the foundation of moral conception, even the basis and criterion of love. Consequently, "the flower is regarded as the basis of the Tay's soul, the criterion of Tay's love, and the foundation of morality"<sup>7</sup>.

In the stories of Cao Duy Son (The old house by the stream)<sup>8</sup>, the flower symbol no longer conveys the original meaning, as it mainly expresses the meaning of humanity. The flower is not only a sacred and beautiful symbol for people to aspire and reach but also a place to return when they are full of tolerance. At the end of life, a simple but insightful thought comes to one's mind: "This sound goes up high in to heaven, then is whispered back in the sister's voice, parents' voice and Moc Vuong's voice. It is a slow-blooming, long-lasting flower, preferring to live in the cold land". Therefore, when the soul is perplexed, the flower becomes a place to return after the storms of life. The image of the Moc Vuong flower is compared with fatherhood and brotherhood. The flower also symbolizes nobility and it can purify the soul. Lo's love (Human-shaped clouds) is only for one person but her life was misled and her body was "covered with sweat of many men". When she meets Ky again, she is immersed in water sprinkled with fragrances of flowers to cleanse all the "dirt" she has: "She drops into the pot of boiling water in the kitchen a handful of dried yellow chrysanthemums, then a bunch of peach blossoms which are as red as bubbling blood. At the end, her hands let go of white pommels, which look like doves plunging into the water bubbles. All three colors of yellow, white, red quickly blossom on the surface, giving off a smell of charm". Bathing in the fragrance of nature has purified her body. It "becomes pure white" and "as clean as the water of Bo Slao" as her soul and the love she has for Ky. Accepting the love of Lo, Ky also feels ecstatic, passionate and "feel like floating on a flower stream". Flowers have manifested as a sublimation of love.

Apparently, through this image, the writer has shown that the power of the flower is magical. It symbolizes the purity and is able to purify all the blemishes of life so that people can return to their innocent status one more time. The fragrance is also the memory of love in the soul of man. In his description of the human, Cao Duy Son often uses the flower symbol as a cultural imprint to identify the female main characters. Most of the beautiful girls in his short stories are depicted in comparison with flowers: Em is as beautiful as flowers ... every time she smiles, the sky is brighter, and hence spring flowers are happy to give her beauty; Lan Di is like a brilliant gold Papaver Nudicaule; her face is as beautiful as a peach flower in the sun; Dinh's cheeks suddenly get redder like a peach flower; the girl has eyes as beautiful as fire birds' eyes, a neck as white as a banana tree, lips as red as the petals of the bombax flower ... Through this comparison, compared with the image of flowers, the beauty and spirit of the character appear lively. Readers not only imagine the freshness of characters' appearances but also realize the hidden personalities. For example, the character Lan Di (Hoan the guy) is compared to a brilliant gold Papaver Nudicaule that implicitly introduces this girl's sharpness. That the beauty of Dinh (Flowers flying to the end of the sky), Em (Love Market) is compared to peach flowers shows that their souls are pure and that they have the beauty of young girls. Cao Duy Son was

<sup>7</sup> Vi Hong, Sli luon - folk songs of Tay Nung, Hanoi: Ethnic Culture Publishing House, 1979.

<sup>8</sup> Cao Duy Son, The old house by the stream, (A collection of short stories), Hanoi: Ethnic Culture Publishing House, 2008.

very delicate when describing the girls using the flower symbol in a unique way. It is the beauty of flowers in the midst of the forest which is innocent (a peach flower in the sun, a peach flower sleeping in late autumn). This represents a unique way of sensing flowers, helping to portray the character as authentic, soulful and personalized.

\* The bird symbol

In addition to the flower symbol, the image of the bird, though not appearing much, also carries a distinct message of Tay culture in Cao Duy Son short stories. The bird symbol in Tay culture expresses the dream of freedom when being imprisoned by the reality. Therefore, birds are also symbolic of sadness, especially the fate of the miserable. Birds symbolize sadness and loneliness. For example, sad birds have feet to move, sad people have no shoulder to cry on (Tay's folk song). In Cao Duy Son short stories, the image of the bird depicts the sadness of the character. In the short story 'The white marble,' when Do returns home from prison, the first thing he sees is a hawk. "Oh, angels of freedom, never bothered me. Thank you for waiting patiently. You stimulate me to struggle for free sky and dispel the intention of committing suicide." It symbolizes the desire to have freedom and to travel to new horizons of Do. He also wishes "it would be as big as a flying ship which could take him to the sky seeing the ground". This scene shows that his dream of freedom has come true; he is released after months in prison for burning his house and beating his rival. On the other hand, it shows the sadness and the loneliness of this character when his wife and children do not wait for him to return.

In Tay folklore, the image of the bird also expresses the sadness of the infidelity and betrayal. In the short story 'Swallow season,' the character of Thung wishes to become a bird to fly and find his love, "even if I had to cross thousands of forests over the mountains, I would fly to find Dem whenever I heard her voice". Living in loneliness and regret, Thung understands his cruelty to his wife. Dem once mistakenly betrays her husband, causing his heart to bleed painfully. The more he loves her, the more hateful he becomes. The action of walking away of Dem and her son wakes Thung up to live a life of sorrow. Cao Duy Son uses the image of a flock of swallows flying South to avoid the cold as a symbol of joy and warmth, which is opposite to the sadness and loneliness of Thung, who is "a bird without her flock". The image of the swallow flying away reminds him of his wife's infidelity and also shows the sadness and loneliness he has because he is not generous enough to forgive his wife. The loneliness of the character shows the meaning of life which is not from hatred but from sharing and sympathy.

As he is a Tay writer, Cao Duy Son's works are full of Tay culture's marks. Although there are not many works about funeral customs, holidays or Tay cultural symbols, the writer knows how to choose the details that highlight the identity of the Tay. Readers not only see the image of Tay culture but also the soul and symbol of Tay culture.

## Conclusion

Literature is a vital part of culture and expresses cultural identity. Tay literature, from folk poetry (Nom Tay poetry stories) to modern works (Cao Duy Son's short stories), expresses the cultural identity of the Tay ethnic group. Through literature, the view about the world, customs, lifestyle, soul and behavior of the Tay community are expressed as a message of compassion, tolerance, love, sharing, sympathy, the love of beauty and living in peace with nature. The above research issue is necessary to help us better appreciate the cultural values preserved in

Tay literature, thereby, affirming the unique cultural identity of the Tay people and preserving and developing these unique cultural features for which there is a risk of falling into oblivion in modern social life in Vietnam. In addition, this research direction can be extended to Thai, Mong, Dao and so forth ethnic minorities in Vietnam.

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