



## Re-centering the Highlands: Agency and World-Making in Vietnamese Ethnic Prose

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### [ *Abstract* ]

The prose of ethnic minorities in modern Vietnamese literature not only reflects the social life, culture, and geographical space of the highlands but also serves as a source of knowledge about social life, culture, and history. Based on an analysis of the poetics of selected literary works from *Tuyển tập Văn học Dân tộc và Miền núi* (Anthology of Ethnic and Mountain Literature, 2 volumes, published in 2007), this article argues that these works build an understanding of the highlands from the very experiences of the local community in labor, collective memory, social relations, and attachment to the living environment. Instead of portraying the highlands as a peripheral area to be integrated into national discourses on development, the short stories place the local people at the center of the process of creating meaning and remembering history. From there, the highlands emerge as a space capable of self-interpreting its own life and contributing unique perspectives to contemporary Vietnamese history and culture.

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## I . Introduction

From a postcolonial critical perspective, and within colonial discourse, the highlands are primarily approached as spaces to be perceived, governed, and developed, rather than as centers for knowledge production and history-building based on the experiences of the people born there (Salemink 1991: 243-284; Salemink 2011: 27-50; Nguyễn Thị Thùy Trang 2023: 161-180; Pelley 1998: 374-391). Within this postcolonial critical framework, James C. Scott's concept of Zomia reshapes highland societies as historical actors. According to Scott's description, these societies have long negotiated, limited, and resisted the power of the lowland states; their settlement, slash-and-burn agriculture, and flexible social organization are not signs of backwardness but adaptive strategies to avoid the state (Scott 2009). In this view, mountain people are not simply "left behind" in the historical flow of a nation moving toward modernization, but have actively chosen a different path of development, not conforming to the norms established and reinforced by the dominant lowland states. Based on a poetic analysis of several works selected in *Tuyển tập Văn học Dân tộc và Miền núi* (Anthology of Ethnic and Mountain Literature, 2 volumes, published in 2007), this article argues that minority literature constitutes a crucial site for restoring the subjectivity and historical consciousness of highland people in Vietnam.

To understand this, postcolonial scholars pose a methodological question: what type of text can access the specific lived experiences of mountain communities, from how they remember the past and perceive the world to how they act in their daily lives? Administrative, statistical, or development sources often struggle to grasp these dimensions. As Scott points out, the state tends to simplify social reality into easily observable and manageable categories. "State simplifications" only record aspects that serve administrative purposes, in the form of standardized, aggregated, and documented data (Scott 1998: 9-84). Anderson shows that

censuses and colonial technologies operate as a totalitarian classification system, in which each person is placed in “one—and only one—extremely clear place” (Anderson 2006: 166). Similarly, Tania Murray Li shows that development discourses often define problems in a way that transforms complex social relationships into objects that can be intervened with technical solutions (Li 2007: 123-155). Consequently, many of the local people’s lived experiences, emotions, and worldviews are excluded from formal knowledge frameworks. Reading literature about and from potential mountain regions is a crucial way to identify the unique forms of subjectivity and capacities of mountain people with their lived experiences, historical sensitivities, and cultural imaginations that administrative, ethnographic, or development discourses cannot fully capture. Darren Byler and Shannon Dugan Iverson (2012) assert that literary writings can “reveal silences in standard discourses” and add a polyphonic, personal, creative, and emotional element to what conventional ethnography often fails to do. Marianne Hirsch (2008: 103-128) shows that memory operates as an “affective link to the past” and passes through “flashes of imagery,” “broken refrains,” sighs, nightmares, and symptoms. Ann Cvetkovich (2003: 1-15) argues that cultural texts can be “repositories of feelings and emotions,” especially when trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of storage and recording. Isabella D’Angelo (2020: 14-26) suggests that literature can be “an adequate medium” for a “relational subjectivation” in which the marginalized become the “subject of narration,” but still retain an “irretrievable otherness.” Thus, literature can create a process of “relational subjectivation,” in which the voices of marginalized groups are formed through the relationship between the narrator, the text, and the reader. Based on these arguments, it is possible to approach mountain literature, a form of minority literature or a body of marginalized literature, as having the potential to present local memories, experiences, and knowledge that are often absent from administrative records, development discourses, and mainstream history. By way of constructing the artistic worlds from the perspective of highland communities, minority literary works are capable of constructing an image of mountain people as active subjects who create meaning, maintain memory, and interpret history.

From this, literary works by and about highland minorities potentially continue the region's traditional narrative forms, contributing to the preservation of cultural values that are at risk of fading in the processes of modernization and integration (Oizumi 2014: 23-43; Mukdawijitra 2012: 207-225; Kiều Trung Sơn 2023: 66-74). Another line of inquiry focuses on questions of representation and ethnic identity, examining how ethnic minority writers depict the life of their own communities and negotiate between tradition and modernity, local identity and national discourse (Huyền 2024: 1066-1076; Nguyễn Minh Trường 2017: 108-112). Recent studies have also paid increasing attention to space, landscape, and locality, viewing the highlands not merely as a geographical setting but as a cultural space endowed with meaning through memory, social practices, and historical experience (Bùi Như Hải 2020; Trần and Bùi 2025: 91-96; Ngọc Bái 2009; Cao Duy Sơn 2024). However, most of these approaches still tend to read mountain literature primarily as a reflection of culture or an expression of identity. A survey of the short stories in *Tuyển tập Văn học Dân tộc và Miền núi* suggests another possible mode of reading. The anthology is edited by Ma Văn Kháng, Nguyễn Khắc Trường, and Nguyễn Nghiệp, and published in 2007. Specifically, this article focuses on literary works by Nguyễn Tuân (1910-1987), Xuân Thiều (1930-2019), Lò Văn Sĩ (1935-1985), Ma Văn Kháng (b. 1936), Nguyễn Khắc Trường (1946-2024), and La Quán Miên (b. 1951). Although these authors differ in generation, ethnic background, and literary trajectory, they all have a deep connection with mountain life and ethnic minority communities. For Lò Văn Sĩ and La Quán Miên, the two *Thái* ethnic minority authors, this connection comes from the indigenous cultural environments in which they were born and raised (Ngọc Chi 2023). Meanwhile, the Kinh ethnic writers, including Nguyễn Tuân, Ma Văn Kháng, Nguyễn Khắc Trường, and Xuân Thiều, have developed their relationship with the highlands through their work, field trips, and long periods of living among mountain communities (Đỗ Ngọc Yên 2013). These fictional works depict lives in the Vietnamese highlands, while raising questions about community, history, labor, culture, and social change. Through these accounts, the highlands emerge not only as a geographical area or an object of administrative management, but as

a social world shaped by the memories, values, and forms of knowledge of local inhabitants themselves.

## II . Historical Self-Determination

As demonstrated in recent research about Vietnamese literary works about the Central Highlands, the village no longer occurs as an isolated, backward, or passive space waiting for change from the outside but a community with its own social life, sustained by kinship ties, collective labor, customary laws, and communal memory. It is in these daily activities that members of the community learn to judge right from wrong, remember the past, and respond to historical changes. Therefore, history in these works does not only appear in the form of major events recorded in official documents, but is also preserved in collective memory, in lived experience, and in stories told between generations. In that sense, the village becomes a space for generating and transmitting historical knowledge from the perspective of the local community itself (Lê Dục Tú 2023; Cao Thị Thu Hoài 2018).

Nguyễn Khắc Trường's story "Gặp lại anh hùng Núp (Meeting Hero Núp Again)" (1986) is an example of this way of imagining the highlands. The person named Núp, also known as Đinh Núp, occupies a well-known place in Vietnamese revolutionary culture: he was a Bahnar figure from the Central Highlands who led villagers in resistance against French colonial rule and later became the main model for Nguyễn Ngọc's famous novel *Đất nước đứng lên* (A Rising Nation) (1955). Instead of retelling Núp's life as the biography of a revolutionary hero, Nguyễn Khắc Trường's story is built from the perspective of a narrator who returns to the Central Highlands and meets him in everyday life. Through their conversations, shared memories, and the ways villagers remember him, Núp is placed back within the social world that shaped him. What is important is that Núp's political understanding is not presented as the result of abstract theories supposedly learned from lowland knowledge. Rather, it is formed through the community's direct experience of oppression, war, and historical change. When Núp says that the

people had long recognized the nature of the invaders, this awareness comes from what they had lived through in reality, not from concepts imposed from outside. In the story, lived experience becomes the basis of political judgment. Similarly, Núp's authority is not built mainly on titles or official power. What makes the villagers trust him is his closeness to the community, the honesty of his words, and his willingness to share hardship with others. The story makes this clear when it says that "Núp only had his heart and words as truthful as counting" (Nguyễn Khắc Trường 1986: 663). He persuades not through command or heroic rhetoric, but through sincerity and shared practice. He works with the villagers, faces danger with them, and places himself within the collective rather than above it. His legitimacy is further strengthened when he pledges, "If we die, I will die first" (Nguyễn Khắc Trường 1986: 670). For this reason, power in the story is imagined first as an ethical relation recognized by the community, rather than as a position granted by a political institution.

Even the way the story represents Núp shows a move away from official historical narratives. The narrative juxtaposes the schoolbook image of Núp as "a young Bana man... with his chest full of medals" with the immediate, living presence of the man before the narrator, especially his laughter, which is described as "like water plunging down a waterfall" (Nguyễn Khắc Trường 1986: 662). This shift from symbol to person does not reduce Núp's historical significance. On the contrary, it brings history back to everyday life in which it was made and remembered. Through this mode of narration, the Central Highlands no longer appears as a margin of national history, but as a social space capable of producing its own memory, meaning, and ways of understanding the past. As Petit and Michaud (2024: 1-31) argue, history in the uplands does not exist solely in chronologies or official records; it is also preserved through rituals, oral narratives, personal memories, and local practices of remembrance. Similarly, in his study of the Central Highlands, Gábor Vargyas (2024: 248-271) shows that memories of colonialism, war, displacement, and postwar life continue to survive in personal narratives and local recollections, even when they do not easily enter official historical accounts.

“Meeting Hero Núp Again” operates in much the same way, functioning as a form of historical narration grounded in community experience. Núp’s authority derives not only from his place within the national memory of revolution but also from the experiences he shared with the villagers—labor, struggle, loss, danger, and the bonds forged among people living within the same social world. Historical significance, in this sense, does not originate in a ready-made discourse imposed from above; rather, it emerges from what the community has directly experienced, remembered, and collectively interpreted.

If “Gặp lại Anh hùng Núp” locates historical understanding within the everyday life of the village, Xuân Thiều’s “Chuyện làng Ra-pông” (Stories of Ra-Pông Village) (1964) carries this idea further by focusing on the community’s capacity to act. The story shifts from the making of historical consciousness to the enactment of collective agency, portraying the village not only as a place where history is remembered and interpreted, but also as a space where people actively shape their social world. As in “Gặp lại anh hùng Núp,” the village’s everyday social life becomes the ground from which the community’s political action takes shape. At the center of the story are the characters Pà A-luôi and Pí A-luôi, a poor Vân Kiều couple who have become reliable revolutionary bases. Their house—an ordinary domestic space—is deliberately transformed into a vernacular political node. The decision to hide secret documents inside a house pillar is justified by Pà A-luôi’s reasoning: “Even if buried in the jungle, the enemy could still sniff it out. But if it’s kept inside the house, it’s like keeping it inside your own gut. If the Americans and Diệm can’t dig out your guts, they can’t dig out the documents either” (Xuân Thiều 1964: 594). His logic does not derive from any formal military training, but from an intimate, place-based understanding of space, the body, and everyday life, in which he conceives the house as a living extension of the self, instead of merely a shelter. This understanding closely aligns with Scott’s (1998) concept of *mētis*—“knowledge of how to do specific things in the local environment” (Reamer 2024: 162-182), or put differently, situated, practical intelligence embedded in everyday arrangements — through which ordinary practices become instruments of political

and historical action rather than passive survivals of tradition. Such an understanding reminds one of Michel de Certeau's (1984) arguments about everyday life as a field of "tactics," where domestic and spatial practices reorganize imposed structures into operative terrains of meaning and intervention. In the Vietnamese context, Oscar Salemink (2018) shows that highland communities maintain their own ways of understanding social life, space, and collective belonging, shaped by long-term local experience rather than external models alone. These forms of local knowledge play an important role in organizing social relations, sustaining community life, and making sense of historical change. Read in this light, "Chuyện làng Ra-pòng" suggests that historical and social consciousness in the highlands grows out of everyday practices—labor, kinship relations, collective memory, and shared cultural traditions—through which communities interpret the world around them and act within it. It is through these seemingly ordinary activities that people not only maintain their community life but also assess the present, remember the past, and make meaningful decisions for their future.

The village thus emerges not as a passive refuge but as a community capable of organizing and sustaining itself through the everyday practices that shape social relations, shared knowledge, and collective action. This becomes particularly clear in the episode involving the American-Diệm troops. Rather than reacting with fear or confusion, the A-luôi couple responds with remarkable composure and initiative. Pá A-luôi quietly leaves under the pretext of going to the fields, using the opportunity to seek help, while Pí A-luôi carefully manages the encounter. She welcomes the soldiers into the house, tends the fire, prepares food, and explains that Pơ-riệt is simply a villager who has returned late from gathering forest fruit. At the same time, she begins telling the story of Ra-pòng village and the legendary *han* leaves that once drove invaders away in pain. The tale is more than a piece of local folklore or a moment of cultural color. By keeping the soldiers occupied and subtly reshaping the terms of the encounter, it becomes a practical means of action. Much as "Meeting Hero Núp Again" locates historical understanding in lived memory rather than official records, "Chuyện làng Ra-pòng" shows how local stories can serve as resources for



navigating moments of danger and uncertainty. In this scene, cultural memory and everyday domestic practices do not stand apart from history; they become part of the community's capacity to act within it.

The story reaches its turning point when the villagers realize that they may not be able to reach the liberation forces in time. Faced with that possibility, Ra-doi declares: "If there are no soldiers, then we ourselves will become the soldiers" (Xuân Thiều 1964: 604). Pà A-luôi immediately echoes his resolve: "If making the revolution means fighting the Americans and Diem's forces, then we will fight them now" (Xuân Thiều 1964: 605). These statements mark a profound shift in how political action is imagined. If Núp, in Nguyễn Khắc Trường's story, embodies the emergence of historical understanding from within the lived experience of the community, "Chuyện làng Ra-pông" goes a step further by presenting the village itself as the agent of history. The villagers no longer see themselves as people waiting for protection, guidance, or intervention from elsewhere. Instead, they recognize their own capacity to act. The declaration "we ourselves will become the soldiers" is significant because it dissolves familiar boundaries between civilians and combatants, between those who support a struggle and those who carry it forward. The transformation is also symbolically captured in the abandonment of the name Ca-dít, meaning "poverty," and the embrace of a new identity defined by collective action and responsibility. What matters here is not simply the willingness to resist an enemy, but the community's confidence in its ability to organize itself, make decisions, and respond to historical circumstances through its own initiative. The story therefore portrays political agency as something that emerges from within the social life of the village rather than something introduced from outside. This representation resonates with Vietnamese scholarship on Central Highlands village institutions, which has highlighted the importance of customary law, communal authority, and collective decision-making in organizing social life and coordinating common action (Ngô Đức Thịnh 2007; Phạm Thị Xuân Nga 2022). These studies show that village communities have long possessed their own mechanisms for maintaining social order, resolving disputes,

and mobilizing collective effort. Research on Ê-đê communities similarly emphasizes the central role of village institutions in sustaining social and cultural life through locally grounded forms of cooperation and authority (Đặng Hoài Giang 2021). Read in this context, the villagers' decision to take up the struggle themselves should not be understood simply as a revolutionary awakening granted from above. Rather, it reflects a form of historical agency rooted in existing social relationships, local knowledge, and community-based traditions of collective action. The narrative thus presents the highland village not as a passive recipient of history, but as a community capable of interpreting its circumstances, organizing its response, and actively shaping its own historical trajectory.

Taken together, these narrative elements—the transformation of domestic space into a space of protection, the mobilization of local knowledge, and the symbolic significance of the Ra-pông tree—gradually reshape the story's historical imagination. What emerges is not simply a series of heroic episodes but a vision of history as something produced from within the rhythms of everyday life. It is in this sense that modern highland prose can be read as articulating a form of self-determined history. Such narratives draw attention to the historical depth of upland societies and their long-standing capacities for self-organization, cultural regulation, and context-sensitive action. In “Chuyện làng Ra-pông” and “Gặp lại anh hùng Núp,” history does not simply arrive from elsewhere, nor is it received as a finished script. Rather, it takes shape through houses, forest paths, shared meals, kinship ties, and storytelling—through the ordinary spaces where judgment, initiative, and collective resolve are formed. The highlands thus come into view not as a marginal backdrop to national history but as a generative social world in which historical agency is cultivated and enacted. In this sense, Xuân Thiều's and Nguyễn Khắc Trường's narratives reimagine the uplands as a space of self-determined historical participation, where communities draw on their own cultural and intellectual resources to enter, shape, and give meaning to the shared historical horizon of the nation.

### III. Self-Labor

If modern Vietnamese highland prose portrays the uplands as a place where communities shape their own histories, it also repeatedly returns to a more fundamental sphere of life where that capacity first takes root: everyday labor. Recent studies of Vietnam's highlands help us understand that labor in ethnic minority and highland literature is not merely a sign of poverty, livelihood, or rural backwardness, but also a form of practical knowledge closely linked to the land, forests, kinship, and community life. Christian Lentz (2024: 32-51) emphasizes that to understand Vietnam's highlands, one cannot rely solely on archival texts but must pay attention to roads, villages, place names, agricultural cycles, and inter-ethnic relations of local life. Sarah Turner and Sarah Delisle (2024: 248-271) also show that the Hmong ethnic people's memories of forests, cultivated land, migration, war, livelihoods, and environmental change are passed down through stories across generations. Both studies show that agriculture, slash-and-burn farming, rice or corn cultivation, home gardens, forest product harvesting, commodity exchange, and hired labor are all connected to how highland communities organize their lives, adapt to the land, forests, seasons, and socio-economic changes. Therefore, when reading ethnic minority literature or literature from the mountainous regions of Vietnam, labor should be understood not merely as a realistic detail or rural backdrop, but as a place where characters learn to live with their community, their environment, and their history.

Scholarship on Vietnamese highland literature has increasingly shown that labor is not treated merely as economic activity or ethnographic detail, but as a narrative site where knowledge, responsibility, and communal belonging are produced. Studies of Nguyễn Ngọc's writing on the Central Highlands, for example, read agricultural work, forest relations, and collective production as spaces in which values are learned, historical memory is transmitted, and the village renews itself as a moral community (Hoàng Sĩ Nguyên and Lê Thanh Toàn 2015). Similar arguments appear in recent interdisciplinary and literary studies, which

emphasize that highland resilience is grounded less in isolated heroic moments than in everyday practices of cultivation, forest work, exchange, family care, and collective labor—practices through which people accumulate environmental knowledge, organize cooperation, and sustain social life through hardship (Vi Høi 2024; Lộc Bích Kiệm 2024). Vietnamese critics have also noted a broader shift after 1975: ethnic minority communities are increasingly represented not as static cultural remnants or exotic objects, but as dynamic societies shaped by work, production, exchange, and internal forms of social vitality (Nông Quốc Bình 2010; Cao Duy Sơn 2024; Lê Dục Tú 2023). Taken together, these studies suggest that modern Vietnamese highland prose locates communal strength in ordinary labor: through planting, harvesting, forest use, resource sharing, and village participation, highland communities build cohesion, preserve practical knowledge, and imagine their own futures.

This narrative pattern finds a particularly telling articulation in “Người bán hàng trên Cò Mạ” (The Vendor on Cò Mạ) (1964) by Lò Văn Sĩ. In this story, the highland community comes into view through the patient and demanding work of creating a viable life under difficult conditions. Rather than foregrounding dramatic acts of heroism or exceptional historical events, the narrative focuses on the everyday efforts through which people sustain themselves and their communities. The story opens with the narrator’s journey to the Cò Mạ shop on a cold winter afternoon. At first, the landscape appears bleak and inhospitable: clouds hang low over the mountain slopes, and strong winds sweep through the trees. Yet this harshness is quickly softened by the warmth and activity radiating from the small shop on Chức Hill. Significantly, the site once served as a military outpost of Bạc Cầm Quý, and traces of that past remain visible in the landscape. The story notes that machine-gun emplacements still stand nearby, while the firing holes have been sealed and converted into pens for chickens and pigs. The image carries considerable symbolic force. A former military site has been woven into the routines of daily life, and a landscape marked by conflict now supports practices of care, subsistence, and renewal. Within the story, the Cò Mạ shop functions as a local center of

exchange linking communities across a wide mountainous region. People travel from E Tòng, Long Hẹ, Pá Đông, Mường Bám and other villages, often covering long distances along forest paths, to bring cardamom, lacquer, and other forest products for trade. Through these movements, the narrative reveals a highland world sustained by local networks of labor, exchange, and mutual dependence. Economic life emerges from the capacities of the community itself and from the relationships that connect villages.

At the center of this world stands Muôn, a young Thai man whose life story embodies these broader processes. The narrator recalls that only three years earlier he had lived in poverty, yet he now appears “as solid and strong as a teak tree” (Lò Văn Sĩ 1964: 529). The comparison is revealing. Muôn’s strength grows out of years of work, persistence, and practical experience. His account of building and running the shop presents labor as a process of self-formation shaped by necessity, effort, and learning. Through this gradual accumulation of experience, he acquires the skills, confidence, and social standing that allow him to become a central figure within the local community. He explains that he himself carried his axe into the forest to choose the timber and taught himself to make pillars, shelves, and a worktable, even though he had never known carpentry before—“The good-looking pillars—I carried my axe into the forest and chose them myself... Back home I didn’t know carpentry, but once I came here, I had to do it—and somehow I managed” (Lò Văn Sĩ 1964: 529). He then recalls the physical risks of carrying goods along distant mountain roads, once nearly losing his life on the slippery slope of Pú Viêng—“the path was like grease; I slipped and nearly died” (Lò Văn Sĩ 1964: 529). Yet hardship gives way to circulation: since the new road was opened, packhorses now arrive daily, goods are plentiful, and customers continue to increase: “Packhorses now come every day... More and more customers keep coming...” (Lò Văn Sĩ 1964: 529). As the story unfolds, its focus gradually expands from the struggles of a single individual to the wider social and economic life of the highlands. At first, the narrative centers on Muôn, a young Thái man attempting to overcome poverty by building and running a small shop in a remote mountain region. Over time, however, the shop becomes

more than a personal enterprise. It develops into a meeting point linking villages, traders, and forest producers across the surrounding area. Through this shift, the story moves beyond an account of individual perseverance to explore how everyday work contributes to the making of a broader social world.

The text repeatedly returns to the physical process through which the shop is built. Readers encounter images of Muôn carrying an axe into the forest, preparing timber, carving wood, and carefully reinforcing each part of the structure he affectionately describes as his “spiritual child.” These scenes draw attention to labor itself rather than to its final outcome. What matters is not simply that a shop eventually exists, but the years of effort, patience, and accumulated skill that make its existence possible. The narrative thus presents work as a process through which a person gradually develops confidence, competence, and a sense of purpose. The significance of this labor becomes even more apparent through the location of the shop. It stands on the site of a former military outpost, where traces of war remain visible in the landscape. Yet the story’s attention is directed toward a different set of activities: raising livestock, transporting goods, maintaining exchanges between villages, and creating new opportunities for economic life. The transformation of the outpost into a thriving commercial space suggests a broader historical movement. A place once associated with conflict is gradually absorbed into the routines of everyday life and reoriented toward the work of sustaining communities. As the shop expands, Muôn’s role within the region also changes. He becomes not only a successful shopkeeper but also a figure who facilitates connections among neighboring villages. Forest products, daily necessities, information, and social relationships all pass through the space he has created. A small yet revealing episode occurs when Muôn wakes in the middle of a freezing night to open the shop for arriving customers. The scene highlights a quality that runs throughout the story: work is closely tied to responsibility toward others. His value lies not only in his ability to generate income but also in his willingness to serve and support the people around him.

Read in this light, the story suggests that the capacities that

allow communities to endure and adapt are cultivated through ordinary forms of labor. Farming, building, trading, and maintaining social ties are not treated as background details. They constitute the very activities through which people acquire practical knowledge, develop forms of cooperation, and create the conditions for collective life. Rather than locating historical significance only in wars, revolutions, or exceptional events, “Người bán hàng trên Cò Mạ” directs attention to the slower processes through which communities sustain themselves and shape their futures from within.

#### IV. Spatialized Agency

Modern Vietnamese highland prose does not treat mountains, forests, rivers, villages, or borderlands merely as geographical settings. Existing scholarship has shown that space is one of the principal ways through which ethnic-minority life, cultural values, and communal experience are represented in contemporary writing. Examining contemporary short fiction about the northern mountains, Nguyễn Minh Trường (2013: 59-66) argues that highland landscapes, local cultural practices, and regionally specific forms of expression constitute important artistic resources through which writers portray the natural environment, everyday life, and the long-standing cultural traditions of ethnic communities. In a similar vein, studies of contemporary ethnic-minority prose have emphasized that nature in these works functions less as scenery than as a *không gian sinh tồn*—a lived environment that sustains cultural identity and shapes everyday existence (Nguyễn Thùy Trang 2021). Other research further suggests that highland space is closely intertwined with memory, customary practices, and communal relations, often serving as the setting through which collective solidarity and cultural continuity are maintained across generations (Nguyễn Minh Trường 2013: 59-66). These studies indicate that space in modern Vietnamese highland prose operates as a social and cultural world rather than a passive backdrop. Mountains, forests, village paths, and communal landscapes become places where relationships are formed, traditions are transmitted, and

communities negotiate their place within broader processes of historical and social change. This perspective resonates with Henri Lefebvre's (1991) argument that "social space is a social product": space is made through social relations, everyday practices, uses, movements, and lived meanings rather than existing as an empty background to human action (Lefebvre 1991: 1). As later commentators have noted, one of Lefebvre's central insights is that space is continually made and remade through historical and social processes rather than simply given in advance (Merrifield 1993: 516-531; Stanek 2011: vii-xv; Fuchs 2019: 129-150). A perspective as such suggests that the highlands in Vietnamese prose potentially appear not as static scenery but as lived social worlds, brought into being through labor, movement, and communal life.

In Ma Văn Kháng's "Hoa gao đỏ" (The Red Silk-Cotton Flowers) (1979), space is constructed to be a product of the relationship between people and landscape. Set in the border district of Bát Xát at the beginning of spring, the novel opens at a moment of seasonal transition. After the long winter months, members of the U Ní community leave their cocoon-like earthen houses and return to the fields, while others set out in search of seasonal work. The world of the highlands begins to move again. Houses open outward, paths fill with people, and daily life extends into fields, forests, and mountain slopes. The arrival of spring is closely tied to the flowering of the red kapok trees that give the novel its title. Their appearance does more than mark a change in season. It shapes how the landscape is perceived and understood. The narrator observes that nowhere else do kapok flowers display such extraordinary colors. After enduring the harshness of winter, the trees suddenly burst into bloom, releasing a vitality that has been gathering for months (Ma Văn Kháng 1979: 232). Across abandoned hillsides and upland fields, the flowers stretch out in "a long, unbroken crimson streak" (Ma Văn Kháng 1979: 232), while each blossom appears "like a spark of fire" (Ma Văn Kháng 1979: 232). These images do more than describe a beautiful landscape. They turn the environment into a living expression of movement, renewal, and possibility. The flowering trees mirror the seasonal awakening of the community itself. As people return to the fields, travel across the region, and



resume the rhythms of everyday life, the landscape becomes intertwined with human experience. Nature therefore participates in the story's larger vision of a highland world that is constantly being inhabited, remade, and interpreted by the people who live within it.

In the story, the kapok tree carries meanings that extend far beyond its presence in the natural landscape. It becomes one of the signs through which people understand and orient themselves within the world they inhabit. For Lý A Lừ, the kapok tree is not simply a familiar feature of the mountains. It is also tied to his sense of place and belonging. When he says that "where kapok trees grow is where our country begins" (Ma Văn Kháng 1979: 234), he identifies national space not through maps, borders, or official markers, but through elements of the landscape that are woven into everyday experience. This way of imagining territory emerges from lived familiarity with the environment. Mountains, forests, paths, and trees provide points of reference through which people move across space, remember places, and understand where they belong. The boundary of the nation is therefore not presented as an abstract political line. It is encountered through the material world of the highlands and through the experiences accumulated by those who live there. As such, "Hoa gạo đỏ" suggests that space is understood from the ground up, through everyday engagement with the local environment. The kapok tree thus serves as a cultural landmark through which the relationship between place, memory, and belonging is expressed. The landscape in this sense helps people make sense of community, territory, and history.

The connection between landscape and human action becomes especially clear when Lý A Lừ helps carry a border marker back to the village. The journey is long and arduous: the group must pass through forests, cross streams, climb steep slopes, and move across remote upland terrain. As they travel, the border no longer appears as a fixed line on the ground. It takes shape through the physical act of crossing mountains, forests, and distances that demand strength and endurance. The burden also grows heavier. A soldier is killed by a tiger, and fewer people remain to carry the stone. Under these conditions, the marker exceeds its administrative function. Its weight, the distance ahead, and the difficulty of the

route become inseparable from the human effort required to bring it home. This shift reaches its clearest expression when Lý A Lù straps the stone onto his own back. What seems like an abstract symbol of national territory becomes a responsibility borne by an individual body. The border is no longer encountered only through maps or official signs; it is felt through labor, endurance, and sacrifice. Throughout the story, the narrator repeatedly speaks of “the affairs of the village and the nation” (Ma Văn Kháng 1979: 239).

The image of Lý A Lù carrying the boundary marker is meaningful because it draws on an ordinary practice of upland life. Across many communities in mainland Southeast Asia, people carry crops, firewood, forest products, and household goods on their backs in bamboo or rattan baskets while moving between village, field, and forest (Bourdier 1997: 117-130; Kunstadter 1978: 74-133). Against this background, Lý A Lù carries the marker as one carries the materials of daily survival: what usually transports food, firewood, tools, or harvest now bears an object marking the edge of the nation. The final image of “Lù bearing the stone... encircled by red kapok blossoms” gathers the story’s central elements: landscape, body, and border (Ma Văn Kháng 1979: 245). The kapok tree is more than scenery; it becomes a local sign through which territory and belonging are understood. As Lý A Lù tells his companions, “where kapok trees grow is where our country begins... further and further on... until, they say, one reaches the sea” (Ma Văn Kháng 1979: 234). National space is therefore not imagined only through maps, borders, or administrative categories, but through mountains, forests, paths, ecological familiarity, and everyday movement. Read in this light, “Hoa gạo đỏ” becomes a tribute to upland resilience: to people who can “live on stone without despising its roughness” and who, for that reason, can carry the responsibilities history places before them.

## V. Culture as an Internal Form of Agency

Modern Vietnamese highland prose, as will be indicated in this section, constructs community agency not only in labor, and social

organization, but also in the way people remember the past, interpret their surroundings, and define what matters in life. Shared values, oral traditions, and local systems of meaning form important resources through which highland communities understand themselves and respond to historical change (Phạm Duy Nghĩa 2012; Cao Thị Hảo 2019; Hoàng Sĩ Nguyên and Lê Thanh Toàn 2015). At this level, agency involves how communities understand themselves, value their own ways of life, and draw strength from inherited cultural traditions. This sensibility is perhaps most clearly expressed in the poetry of Y Phương, one of the best-known poets of the Tày ethnic minority in northern Vietnam. In his celebrated poem “Nói với con” (Speaking to My Child) (YEAR), he presents a vision of life grounded in resilience, dignity, and confidence in one’s own cultural roots. He describes people who live “on stone without despising its roughness,” who live “in the valley without despising its poverty,” and who move “like rivers and streams, up waterfalls and down rapids, without fearing hardship” (Y Phương 2010: 20). These lines draw on the mountainous environment familiar to many upland communities, but the emphasis is not on hardship itself. A similar sensibility runs through much modern Vietnamese highland prose. The highlands appear not simply as places where people make a living or struggle to survive, but as cultural worlds that generate their own values, meanings, and visions of a good life.

This aspect can be seen in La Quán Miên’s short story “Hai người trở về bản” (Two People Return to the Village) (1996), set in an ethnic minority community in the mountainous regions of northern Vietnam. The story follows the return of two villagers, Vi Nhân and Ôn La, after years spent studying and working abroad. Their homecoming provides the narrative with a way to explore how a small upland community responds to new forms of knowledge and different visions of modern life. Ôn La returns with consumer goods, fashionable possessions, and the visible markers of prosperity associated with life beyond the village, quickly attracting admiration from those around him. Vi Nhân, by contrast, comes back with little that outwardly signals success. What he brings home is less visible: education, professional training, and practical knowledge. The significance of this difference becomes clear when a medical

emergency occurs in the village. At that moment, it is not Òn La's possessions but Vi Nhôn's expertise that proves valuable. The episode shifts attention away from material display toward knowledge that can be put to use in everyday life. Vi Nhôn's importance lies not in what he owns but in what he is able to contribute. His education acquires meaning because it enables him to care for others and address problems that affect the community directly. Through the contrast between these two returning villagers, the story asks what forms of change are most valuable for a remote mountain community. Its answer lies not in the accumulation of goods or the imitation of urban lifestyles, but in the ability to bring knowledge home and use it in ways that strengthen collective life. In this sense, "Two People Return to the Village" presents learning not as a path away from the community, but as a means of deepening one's responsibility to it. Through the figure of Vi Nhôn, the story suggests that the vitality of upland communities rests not only on their openness to new ideas, but also on their capacity to adapt those ideas to local needs, values, and aspirations.

The cultural agency imagined in modern Vietnamese highland prose also appears in the way these communities reshape how outsiders understand value, beauty, and intelligence. This is where "Người lái đò sông Đà" (The Boatman of the Đà River) (1960) becomes especially revealing. Nguyễn Tuân has long been celebrated as a meticulous "artist of language," a writer with exacting standards of beauty and artistic value. For this reason, his turn toward an anonymous boatman in the upper reaches of the Đà River is not simply an aesthetic choice. It is also an act of cultural recognition. In "Người lái đò sông Đà," the highlander is not treated as ethnographic background or as a minor figure attached to a larger historical narrative. He becomes the very center of beauty and skill, the crystallization of what Nguyễn Tuân famously calls "gold refined through fire." Seen through the eyes of a demanding lowland intellectual, the boatman is raised to the status of an "artist." Nguyễn Tuân repeatedly draws on the language of battle, performance, and mastery— "generals," "formations," "virtuoso technique"—to describe work that might otherwise be dismissed as ordinary manual labor. The boatman is portrayed as someone who has spent decades

navigating the river, training his body and memory through repeated, intimate contact with water, stone, currents, and seasonal change. His knowledge is not abstract or institutional. It is embodied, practical, and ecological. For him, the river becomes a text “as vast as an epic poem,” memorized down to its punctuation. In literary terms, this is more than admiration. Nguyễn Tuân’s work asks us to recognize another kind of authority: the authority of knowledge formed through labor, memory, and long experience in the highlands.

From the perspective of cultural agency, this shift changes how both the highlands and the highland worker are seen. Nguyễn Tuân does not present the highlands as a beautiful but empty wilderness to be admired from outside; he turns the Đà River into an active force with danger, rhythm, and intelligence. The river can arrange “stone formations,” create “encirclements,” and prepare “ambushes,” so the landscape is no longer passive scenery but a living environment that demands knowledge, attention, and skill. Against it, the boatman is not a lucky survivor but a worker formed by long practice. He reads currents, anticipates the movement of water, avoids traps, and breaks through dangerous passages. His labor is therefore not only physical but intellectual and cultural, dependent on memory, discipline, judgment, and deep familiarity with the river. The ending of the episode makes this clearer: after the most violent rapids, the boatmen do not narrate the crossing as a grand heroic event, but return to ordinary actions—lighting a fire, roasting bamboo rice, and talking about fish and river seasons. The dangerous passage is absorbed into the normal rhythm of work and living. In this way, the text refuses to treat highland competence as rare spectacle; courage, skill, and calmness appear as ordinary qualities formed through repeated experience. Cultural agency lies in this ordinariness: the boatman does not need to step outside everyday life to become meaningful.

Nguyễn Tuân’s repeated claim that the most precious “gold” of the Northwest is human rather than mineral deepens this argument by shifting value away from what can be taken from the land and toward those who know how to live with it. The Northwest is not simply a place of resources waiting to be mined or used from

outside; its wealth lies in human skill, endurance, and knowledge. The boatman is therefore more than a figure in the mountain landscape. He carries an expertise shaped by memory, sharpened by danger, and tested through years of work on the river. This knowledge does not fit easily into books, manuals, formal schooling, or official systems of classification. It is learned slowly by watching the water, remembering the rocks, sensing the currents, listening to others, and repeating difficult work over many years. Nguyễn Tuân makes this quiet knowledge visible through literary form, giving language to a cultural intelligence that might otherwise remain unnoticed. His admiration is therefore not only praise for a talented boatman; it also changes the meaning of beauty. A writer known for his strict aesthetic standards finds beauty in ordinary labor, endurance, memory, and practical intelligence. Within the narrative, the boatman embodies knowledge formed through long experience with the river; at the level of literary value, he expands what can be considered beautiful and worthy of admiration.

“Người lái đò sông Đà” therefore suggests that cultural agency can appear when a major writer from outside the highlands is compelled to adjust his own standards before the depth of highland life. In that moment, the highlands are no longer just a distant region to be described, but a source of knowledge, beauty, and human possibility within Vietnamese literature.

## VI. Conclusion

Through readings of works by Nguyễn Tuân, Ma Văn Kháng, Lò Văn Sĩ, La Quán Miên, Xuân Thiều, and Nguyễn Khắc Trường, this study has argued that modern Vietnamese highland prose does more than offer sympathetic or detailed images of upland life. It repositions the highlands as a meaningful narrative world in their own right. Across these works, the highlands are not treated simply as remote landscapes, ethnographic settings, or peripheral spaces within a larger national story. They are constructed as social worlds with their own forms of organization, memory, knowledge, and value. This reorientation can be seen across several connected dimensions.

First, labor in these works is not reduced to subsistence or bodily effort. It becomes a way of knowing: the boatman's memory of the Đà River, the farmer's familiarity with land and season, and the villager's repeated work with forest, field, water, and path all show knowledge formed through practice rather than imposed from outside. Second, the village is not simply a background for action. It is where kinship, cooperation, moral judgment, and memory are organized and passed on. In this sense, highland prose treats communal life as a living social structure, not as a static ethnic setting. Third, highland space is not passive scenery but is produced through social practice; the mountain, river, forest, field, and village path in these works become meaningful through movement, labor, memory, and repeated use. Finally, culture is not presented as a decorative custom. It works as a source of orientation: through oral memory, shared values, ritual traces, inherited stories, and everyday speech, communities define what matters, remember what must be preserved, and decide how to respond to change. Taken together, these elements show that modern Vietnamese highland prose turns labor, village life, space, and culture into ways of knowing the highlands from within.

The central figures in the examined works are therefore not passive participants in histories made elsewhere. They work, choose, remember, judge, return, endure, and bear responsibility for their communities. Through these actions, they become subjects of their own lives and histories. This does not mean that the texts present the highlands as isolated from broader national, social, or historical forces. Rather, they show that highland communities engage those forces through their own practices, values, and forms of understanding. Their agency lies not only in resistance or visible action, but also in the quieter work of sustaining social life, transmitting memory, interpreting place, and transforming inherited knowledge into a basis for the future. In this sense, modern Vietnamese highland prose invites a shift in how Vietnamese literature is read. The highlands should not be approached only as margins to be incorporated into a lowland-centered literary history. They should be understood as sites where literary meaning, historical consciousness, and cultural value are actively produced.

By foregrounding labor, community, space, history, and culture as interwoven forms of highland agency, these works open a more plural understanding of Vietnamese prose: one in which the highlands are not peripheral to literary knowledge, but one of the places from which that knowledge is generated.

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