

EXISTENTIALISM IN VIETNAM: LITERARY REFLECTIONS AND EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

EXISTENCIALISMO NO VIETNÃ: REFLEXÕES LITERÁRIAS E IMPLICAÇÕES EDUCACIONAIS

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Abstract: This study examines the manifestation of existentialism in Vietnam, focusing on its influence on literature, morality, lifestyle, and implications for contemporary value education. Existentialism, a profound philosophical movement, has significantly impacted global intellectual and cultural landscapes, including Vietnam. Vietnamese literary works often depict life as empty, monotonous, and fraught with loneliness and identity loss, reflecting existentialist themes. Emphasizing human existence, freedom, and responsibility, existentialism has shaped moral and lifestyle choices in Vietnam. Using qualitative methodologies such as document analysis, comparative methods, literature synthesis, and logical and historical analysis, this research explores existentialist themes in Vietnamese literature and their impacts on morality and lifestyle. The findings highlight existentialism's significant influence on Vietnamese literature, morality, and lifestyle, portraying themes of emptiness, identity loss, and

existential anxiety. While existentialism fosters individual responsibility and authentic existence, it sometimes leads to a disregard for social and moral standards. The study suggests integrating traditional values with existentialist ideals in contemporary value education to address the human condition and emphasize spiritual development in the age of science and technology.

Keywords: Cultural influence. Existentialism. Human condition. Moral philosophy. Value education. Vietnam.

Resumo: Este estudo examina a manifestação do existencialismo no Vietnã, com foco em sua influência na literatura, moralidade, estilo de vida e implicações para a educação contemporânea de valores. O existencialismo, um profundo movimento filosófico, impactou significativamente paisagens intelectuais e culturais globais, incluindo o Vietnã. As obras literárias vietnamitas frequentemente retratam a vida como vazia, monótona e repleta de solidão e perda de identidade, refletindo temas existencialistas. Enfatizando a existência humana, liberdade e responsabilidade, o existencialismo moldou escolhas morais e de estilo de vida no Vietnã. Usando metodologias qualitativas como análise de documentos, métodos comparativos, síntese de literatura e análise lógica e histórica, esta pesquisa explora temas existencialistas na literatura vietnamita e seus impactos na

moralidade e estilo de vida. As descobertas destacam a influência significativa do existencialismo na literatura, moralidade e estilo de vida vietnamitas, retratando temas de vazio, perda de identidade e ansiedade existencial. Embora o existencialismo promova a responsabilidade individual e a existência autêntica, às vezes leva ao desrespeito aos padrões sociais e morais. O estudo sugere a integração de valores tradicionais com ideais existencialistas na educação contemporânea de valores para abordar a condição humana e enfatizar o desenvolvimento espiritual na era da ciência e da tecnologia.

Palavras-chave: Influência cultural. Existencialismo. Condição humana. Filosofia moral. Educação de valores. Vietnã.

1. Introduction

Existentialism, a major philosophical movement of modern Western thought, emerged prominently in the 1950s and 1960s. This philosophy often conveys its ideas through artistic expressions, particularly in novels, short stories, and plays. Existentialism has established itself as a spiritual foundation for various societies, including those in Germany, France, the United States, and Vietnam.

In the context of Vietnam, existentialism has influenced literature, morality, and lifestyle, reflecting themes of human existence, freedom, and responsibility. These influences are evident in the works of many Vietnamese authors who explore the meaning of life, the struggle between good and evil, and the importance of individual choice. Existentialist ideas have also been incorporated into Vietnamese education and culture, particularly during the mid-20th century.

Numerous scholars have examined existentialism and its implications. Tran (2005) described it as the philosophy of human meaning, while Le (1974) emphasized human freedom and the confrontation with life's challenges. Authors like Bui and Nguyen (2006b) highlighted the idea that existence is unique to humans, with individuals creating their own nature. Other scholars have explored the ethical dimensions of existentialism, such as personal responsibility and the liberation of the human spirit from oppression.

Despite these studies, there has been limited research on the specific impact and presence of existentialism in Vietnam. Most existing works critique existentialism without recognizing its positive effects or analyzing its ethical implications for Vietnamese society. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the presence of existentialism in Vietnamese literature, morality, and lifestyle. The objectives are to analyze the manifestation of existentialist themes in Vietnamese literary works, assess the influence of existentialist

philosophy on Vietnamese morality and lifestyle, and draw orientations for current value education in Vietnam by integrating traditional national values with new existentialist ideals.

2. Literature Review

Existentialism, a prominent philosophical movement of the mid-20th century, has been extensively analyzed by scholars. This philosophy emphasizes themes of human existence, freedom, and personal responsibility, often articulated through literature and the arts. This review critically examines key contributions to existentialist thought and its influence on Vietnamese literature, morality, and lifestyle, highlighting both established knowledge and gaps in research.

Tran (2005) characterizes existential philosophy as a focus on the meaning of human life, which aligns with the movement's central concerns about human existence. Le (1974) underscores the importance of individual freedom and the moral struggles between good and evil, emphasizing humanity's capacity to confront life's inherent challenges. Similarly, Bui and Nguyen (2006b) argue that human existence is unique and self-created, rejecting the notion of a predetermined essence.

Further expanding on existentialist ideas, Do; Thanh e Nguyen (2006) assert that existence is fundamentally linked to freedom of choice, portraying it as an act of creation that transcends current limitations. This view is consistent with the broader existentialist perspective that human beings continuously strive to surpass their present state. Bui (2010) contributes to this discourse by exploring Simone de Beauvoir's feminist existentialism, which advocates for women's liberation through the affirmation of individual freedom.

The influence of existentialism in Vietnam is substantial. Nguyen, T. D. (2006a) documents the integration of existentialist philosophy into Vietnamese educational curricula and its widespread acceptance in socio-cultural organizations since 1955. This significant adoption underscores the impact of existentialist thought on Vietnam's intellectual and cultural landscape.

Foreign scholars have also provided valuable insights into existentialist ethics. Zolotukhina-Abolina (2006) explores existentialist conceptions of moral phenomena such as duty, conscience, and human dignity, emphasizing the ethical depth of existentialism. Warnock (1967) addresses the relationship between consciousness and freedom, asserting that self-awareness inherently involves freedom, a fundamental existentialist principle.

In the Vietnamese context, Luong (2009) offers a nuanced perspective on Vietnamese existentialism, arguing that while it shares themes with European existentialism, it is deeply rooted in Vietnamese cultural and historical contexts. Luong contends that Vietnamese existentialism, influenced by Buddhism, emphasizes a relational self and a harmonious relationship between self and others. This perspective challenges the dominant view within Vietnam that existentialism is a morally bankrupt imitation of European philosophy. Luong's work highlights the unique contributions of Vietnamese existentialism to philosophical thought and its relevance to contemporary social and political movements in Vietnam.

In contrast, Gadkar-Wilcox (2014) examines the appeal of existentialism to Vietnamese intellectuals during the 1960s, particularly in the context of war-torn Vietnam. Gadkar-Wilcox suggests that Vietnamese existentialists sought to find equivalency with Western nations and saw existentialism as a means to refuse both capitalist and communist ideologies. This study provides insights into the motivations behind the adoption of existentialist ideas in Vietnam and their implications for intellectual and cultural discourse during a tumultuous period.

Fontana (2020) delves into the existentialist themes of death and absurdity in Sartre's works, which have also resonated with Vietnamese authors. Fontana argues that Sartre's exploration of death as a limit for nihilism and the absurdity of life reflects broader existential concerns that are mirrored in Vietnamese literature. This examination underscores the universality of existentialist themes and their relevance across different cultural contexts.

Pham (2022), Nguyen; Nguyen e Nguyen (2023), and Nguyen e Nguyen (2024) provide insights into the educational philosophy of Ho Chi Minh, emphasizing the holistic nature of his approach to education. Pham (2022) argues that Ho Chi Minh's educational philosophy is significant for building and developing the country's academic cause. Nguyen; Nguyen e Nguyen (2023) highlight the importance of educating the young generation to build a strong country, drawing on Ho Chi Minh's views on comprehensive human development. These studies suggest that integrating existentialist ideals with Ho Chi Minh's educational philosophy could offer a balanced approach to value education in Vietnam.

Nguyen; Pham e Lai (2023), Nguyen; Phung e Le (2021) and Nguyen (2022b) explore the influence of Confucian philosophy on Vietnamese education and morality. Nguyen; Pham e Lai (2023) discuss the ethical and epistemological dimensions of the Four Noble Truths in Buddhism, highlighting their relevance to contemporary education. Nguyen; Phung

e Le (2021) emphasize the role of Confucian ideals in shaping moral and ethical standards in Vietnam. Nguyen (2022b) explores Chinese philosophical views on human issues and their historical significance for educational innovation in Vietnam, illustrating the influence of Confucian thought on Vietnamese existentialism, particularly in promoting moral education and humanistic values. These works suggest that integrating existentialist themes with traditional Vietnamese philosophies could enhance the effectiveness of moral education in contemporary Vietnam.

Pham; Nguyen; Nguyen; Do *et al.* (2023) examine the interplay between communitarianism and Confucian philosophy, offering insights into how these traditions conceptualize selfhood and community. Pham et al. argue that both traditions emphasize authenticity, community, and transcendence, which could inform contemporary educational practices. This study underscores the potential for a dialogical approach that incorporates existentialist and traditional Vietnamese philosophical ideals in value education. Nguyen (2023) clarifies Confucius' views on political virtue and their significance for contemporary governance in Vietnam, highlighting the influence of Confucian thought on Vietnamese existentialism, particularly in promoting ethical leadership.

Nguyen (2022a) and Nguyen; Pham e Nguyen (2022) analyze the impact of international integration on human resource development and education in Vietnam. Nguyen (2022a) argues that international integration has significant implications for educational policies and practices, highlighting the need for a balanced approach that addresses both traditional and modern values. Nguyen; Pham e Nguyen (2022) emphasize the importance of integrating Buddhist philosophies into contemporary education, suggesting that this could enhance the spiritual development of students in an age of science and technology. Nguyen e Nguyen (2021) investigate the impact of international economic integration on students' perceptions and revolutionary ideals, emphasizing the need for moral and lifestyle education, which aligns with existentialist themes of personal responsibility and the pursuit of authentic existence.

Phung; Nguyen e Le (2024) investigate the effects of rural urbanization on the peasantry in Vietnam, highlighting the complex transformations within rural social and economic structures. Phung et al. argue that these changes necessitate nuanced policy interventions to support the evolving role of the peasantry. This study underscores the importance of addressing the socio-economic context in educational practices and policies,

suggesting that existentialist themes could provide valuable insights into the human condition in the face of rapid social change.

Despite these significant contributions, there are notable gaps in the current knowledge regarding the specific impact of existentialism on Vietnamese morality and lifestyle. While Luong (2009) and Gadkar-Wilcox (2014) provide valuable insights into the historical and cultural contexts of existentialism in Vietnam, there is limited research on the ethical implications of existentialist philosophy for contemporary Vietnamese society. Most existing studies critique existentialism without recognizing its positive effects or analyzing its potential to address issues related to the human condition.

To fill this gap, future research should examine the ethical dimensions of existentialism in greater detail, exploring how existentialist themes can be integrated with traditional Vietnamese values to inform contemporary value education. This approach could provide a more comprehensive understanding of existentialism's role in shaping Vietnamese culture and education, addressing the broader human condition while emphasizing individual responsibility and authentic existence.

In short, the current literature highlights the significant impact of existentialism on Vietnamese literature, morality, and lifestyle. However, there is a need for more research on the ethical implications of existentialist philosophy and its potential to inform contemporary value education in Vietnam. By integrating traditional values with new existentialist ideals, future studies could offer valuable insights into the development of educational practices that address the complex realities of modern Vietnamese society.

3. The Concept of Existence and Existentialism

Existentialism, as explored by various philosophers, delves deeply into the meaning of human life. Tran (2005) succinctly defines existential philosophy as a philosophy centered on the meaning of human life, often referred to as the philosophy of human beings. At its core, existentialism emphasizes existence as the fundamental way of life, highlighting an individual's unique life attitude as a finite being. Unlike essence, which implies something fixed and predetermined, existence is fluid and associated with viability (Nguyen; Do, 2009).

For Karl Jaspers, existence emerges when an individual becomes aware of their subjectivity, actively shaping their personality. Jaspers posits that one's true self is not a static entity but a forward-looking creation: "I am just a self-created by myself, but I just created

the honest self that I am... That honest self is not behind me but in front of me. Not what I am now but what I am becoming, which is what I care about and am anxious to become” (Tran, 2005, p. 208). He views existence as a spiritual activity, where an enlightened subject becomes deeply aware of their subjectivity, recognizing their rights and duties. This personal ability allows individuals to form attitudes toward life’s incidents, situations, and the reactions of others.

Martin Heidegger expands on this by identifying sin, conscience, consistency, and death as the ontological phenomena of existence. He describes existence as an aspiration and a call to become one’s true self, with conscience serving as a guide through various life situations. Conscience, in Heidegger’s view, is realized through constancy, bringing existence into specific contexts and actions.

Jean-Paul Sartre presents a more radical view, asserting that existence initially manifests as nothingness, with human beings originating from this void. Sartre introduces the concept of nausea as a fundamental aspect of existence, representing man’s contemplation of the absurdity of life (Sartre, 1994). For Sartre, existence is inherently a creative act, unbound by pre-existing patterns. He argues that existence is not merely about being or living but about actively shaping one’s life from what “is” to what one “will be.” This continuous process of becoming signifies that existence must always aim for something unique and distinct, unconditioned by any external reason or law.

In summary, existentialism is a philosophical movement that focuses on the lived experiences of individuals, emphasizing the protection and maintenance of human values such as existence, freedom, responsibility, and the meaning of life. Existentialists argue that the true meaning of life is realized when individuals understand that they do not live merely to exist but to express their noble and unique destinies. They reject the notion of living according to predetermined stereotypes, advocating instead for self-creation and the affirmation of one’s existence and individuality.

By viewing humans as original beings, existentialists insist on the necessity of overcoming societal and cultural constraints to create and affirm one’s unique value in life. They are deeply concerned with how individuals must exist to live authentically as persons, constantly striving to live meaningful and distinct lives.

4. The Presence of Existentialism in Vietnamese Literature

The presence of existentialism in Vietnamese literature is vividly reflected in novels that capture the essence of life imbued with existential colors. These works depict life as empty, comfortless, boring, and repetitive, with characters often enveloped in loneliness and loss, gradually losing their unique identities. Themes central to existentialist philosophy, such as the human condition, freedom, loneliness, absurdity, nausea, anxiety, and the inevitability of death, are prevalent in Vietnamese literary works.

Firstly, the perception of a tragic, empty, and comfortless life is a recurring theme in Vietnamese novels. Existentialist philosophers like Jaspers, Heidegger, and Sartre focused on the human condition, each providing a different perspective. Jaspers placed individuals in limited situations, Sartre viewed human life as inherently nauseating and absurd, while Heidegger described humans as beings thrown into a strange world without refuge. According to Heidegger, “the place where people live is both a place of exile and a place of the homeland” (Heidegger, 2004). This sense of displacement and alienation is vividly portrayed in Sartre’s “Nausea,” where the character Roquentin is obsessed with the stereotyped, boring, and meaningless nature of life, feeling as if he belongs to a different species. This sentiment of existential nausea is reflected in Vietnamese literature, such as in Pham’s “Marie Sến,” (1996) which describes the suffocating and monotonous life of Vietnamese civil servants during the early years of renovation. Pham illustrates how conformity and lack of uniqueness permeate Vietnamese society, where people and even gods in temples are standardized and devoid of individuality.

In Pham’s “Thiên Sứ” (Angels) (1988), the bland and poor spiritual life of characters is depicted through their trivial daily concerns, highlighting the intellectual stagnation and spiritual poverty of individuals. Characters like Hung, who despite his proper training and education, leads a life devoid of meaningful engagement, encapsulates the existential struggle of maintaining a semblance of identity and purpose in an inherently meaningless world. Nguyen Binh Phuong’s novel “Ngồi” (Sitting) (2006) further exposes the banal and fragmented nature of life, filled with contradictions and existential angst. The depiction of sectarian conflict within the government, familial discord, and societal evils such as gambling and prostitution, underscores the pervasive sense of stress, confusion, and disorientation in contemporary Vietnamese life (Nguyen, 2017).

Secondly, the portrayal of individuals losing their unique identities and becoming akin to soulless machines is another significant aspect of existentialism in Vietnamese literature. Existentialist thought upholds the idea of humans as original beings with intrinsic freedom. Heidegger criticized the arbitrary substitution of one personality for another, which leads to a loss of identity and uniqueness. Sartre's concept of living like a creature, merely surviving without true engagement with life, reflects the trivial and absurd existence that existentialists seek to transcend. In Sartre's play "The Flies," characters struggle with authenticity and the weight of their actions, illustrating the existentialist belief in the importance of personal responsibility and freedom (Tran, 2008).

Vietnamese writers express their anxieties about this loss of human personhood through their narratives. The character Thuan in "Chinatown," the omnipresence of numerical designations, such as two thousand Chinatowns and one billion Chinese, serves as a metaphor for the dissolution of individuality within the crowd (Nguyen, 2017). Similarly, in "Angels," Pham (1988) portrays a character who is overwhelmed by the monotony of his routine life, highlighting how the human psychological machine functions within the confines of a repetitive and predictable existence. Nguyen Viet Ha's "Cơ hội của Chúa" (God's Opportunity) presents a monotonous civil servant's life, symbolized by the repetitive motion of cycling around the lake, which implicitly illustrates a nihilistic and existentially vacant existence (Nguyen, 2021).

Thirdly, the sense of life in Vietnamese novels often contains elements of loneliness, insecurity, and uncertainty. Heidegger posits that humans live in a state of anxiety and instability, constantly facing the inevitability of death. Sartre's view that human existence is fundamentally nothingness, with man always lonely and death ever-present, is echoed in contemporary Vietnamese literature. Authors like Nguyen Binh Phuong, Thuan, and Nguyen Viet Ha depict characters who experience profound existential crises, grappling with their sense of identity and place in the world.

In "Trí nhớ suy tàn" (Decaying Memory) by Nguyen Binh Phuong, the character Em struggles to locate his own existence, trapped in a vague and indistinct state. This existential fumbling is a representation of the amorphous and uncertain nature of human existence (Nguyen, 2000). In "God's Opportunity," the character Hoang's journey from Hanoi to Saigon, wandering from luxury hotels to slums, epitomizes the search for meaning in a world that offers none. Hoang's feelings of alienation, purposelessness, and confusion about life reflect the existentialist theme of living in an absurd and indifferent universe (Nguyen, 2021).

Lastly, the involvement and active participation in life, as espoused by existentialism, are also evident in Vietnamese literature. Sartre's assertion that "hell is other people," and the inescapability of responsibility for one's actions, is mirrored in the works of Nguyen Binh Phuong. Novels such as "Vào cõi" (Entering the Realm), "Bả giời," "Children Die of Old Age", "Sitting," and "At the Beginning" explore the inner struggles of characters as they confront their existential realities (Nguyen, 1991; 1994; 2000; Nguyen, B. P., 2006). These works portray lonely souls tormented by their pasts, grappling with present conditions, and feeling helpless against fate. Yet, they also express a desire to engage with life, overcome loneliness, and integrate with the community in the pursuit of happiness.

Nguyen Binh Phuong's characters, such as Vang in "Entering the Realm," strive to escape the constraints of their lives and seek better opportunities, embodying the existentialist ethos of actively shaping one's destiny. The struggles of characters like Khan, Em, and Hoan to break free from the monotony and deadlock of their lives illustrate the existentialist pursuit of authentic existence and self-affirmation. These narratives emphasize the importance of personal responsibility, the search for meaning, and the continuous effort to transcend one's circumstances (Pham, 2015).

The presence of existentialism in Vietnamese literature is profound and multifaceted. Vietnamese novels vividly reflect existential themes of emptiness, monotony, identity loss, loneliness, and the quest for meaning. Through the lens of existentialist philosophy, Vietnamese writers explore the human condition, highlighting the struggles of individuals to maintain their identities and find purpose in an absurd and indifferent world. The engagement with existentialism in Vietnamese literature not only underscores the universal relevance of existentialist themes but also enriches the cultural and intellectual discourse within Vietnam, providing a nuanced understanding of the complexities of human existence.

5. The Influence of Existentialism on Vietnamese Morality and Lifestyle

Existentialism's impact on Vietnamese morality and lifestyle is multifaceted, encompassing both positive and negative influences. The central tenet of existentialism, which is freedom, profoundly affects various ethical categories such as good and evil, conscience, honor, justice, and optimism. Do (2005) highlights that all ethical considerations are illuminated through the critical lens of freedom. This philosophical perspective, which emphasizes human existence, freedom, responsibility, and the meaning of life, significantly

shaped the lifestyle and morality of many, especially in South Vietnam before 1975. The assertion that “existence precedes essence” is particularly resonant in the Vietnamese context during periods of societal upheaval. Philosophers like Jaspers, Heidegger, and Sartre emphasized the human condition as one of struggle and absurdity, where individuals are thrown into a meaningless and irrational world, leading to feelings of alienation and abandonment (Heidegger, 2004). This existential perspective provided spiritual solace to the young generation in Southern Vietnam, who faced anxiety and existential crises amid the socio-political turmoil of the time (Luong, 2009).

Existentialism’s influence extended beyond personal reflection to active participation in socio-political movements. Sartre’s anti-war stance and his role in the “International Court of War Crimes” inspired Southern youth to protest against the Saigon regime and American intervention. This involvement is a testament to the existentialist ideals of engagement and responsibility. Sartre’s existentialist philosophy, which advocates for personal engagement and the taking on of societal responsibility, found a fertile ground in the Southern youth’s anti-war demonstrations and street protests against the Saigon and American puppet regimes. These youths recognized the necessity of involvement to liberate their lives from societal irrationalities and injustices. For example, Sartre’s thoughts and actions against war and American crimes significantly influenced the Southern struggle movement, with many youths and students participating in resistance efforts and secret organizations like the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam, embodying the existentialist ethos of engagement and taking part in societal change.

Beauvoir’s feminist existentialism, which advocates for women’s liberation and self-assertion, also contributed to transforming the traditionally passive and dependent lifestyle of Vietnamese women into one characterized by openness, dynamism, and independence (Bui, 2010). Beauvoir’s statement, “one is not born a woman but becomes a woman,” underscores the need for women to be self-conscious and active in liberating themselves without relying on external institutions or forces. This shift is evident in the increased participation of women in various social activities and their pursuit of meaningful, self-directed lives, aligning with the broader trends of social and cultural modernization. Existentialism’s impact facilitated a transformation from a closed, resigned, and dependent lifestyle to a new ethos of openness, independence, and active engagement. This change is particularly significant for Vietnamese women, who began to assert their subjectivity, engage

in diverse occupations, and participate actively in social activities, thereby living more meaningful lives.

However, the presence of existentialism in Vietnamese morality and lifestyle also brought about negative consequences. According to existential ethics, good is expressed through the aspects of freedom and responsibility for that freedom, while evil is the renunciation of good (Do, 2005). Sartre argued that “hell is other people,” suggesting that the presence of others often brings about discomfort and moral scrutiny. This idea, coupled with his belief that cowards make themselves cowards and heroes make themselves heroes through their actions, emphasizes the importance of personal responsibility. However, these existentialist notions also fostered a sense of rebellion and hedonism among some Vietnamese youth, particularly those disillusioned by the war and unable to find their way. This reactionary stance sometimes resulted in a lifestyle that prioritized personal desires over social and familial obligations, potentially leading to behaviors that deviate from societal norms and traditional values.

Moreover, the existentialist idea of man’s free choice according to existential ethics focuses on “projected” choice, meaning a choice following the will of each individual. This emphasis on individual freedom sometimes conflicted with the collective interests of society. When personal choices diverged from the nation’s customs and traditions, it risked creating trends that opposed common societal values. This misalignment highlights the tension between existentialist ideals and the cultural context of Vietnam, where communal values and social harmony are highly prized. The pursuit of individual freedom, if not aligned with societal expectations, can lead to deviations from societal norms and traditional values.

In South Vietnam, existentialism also influenced the moral thinking of individuals who were grappling with the chaotic and tragic conditions of the time. For those stuck in difficult situations during the war, existentialist philosophy offered a framework for understanding their human condition. Jaspers, for instance, highlighted the struggle between “law by day” and “passion by night,” while Camus depicted life as inherently meaningless and absurd. Sartre’s view of human life as “disgusting” and Heidegger’s portrayal of humans as beings thrown into a strange, unwelcoming world without refuge resonated deeply with many (Heidegger, 2004). These existentialist views provided a philosophical grounding for people seeking meaning and direction in a time of national crisis.

The existentialist emphasis on freedom and self-determination also resonated with the broader struggle for social and political liberation. During the turbulent years from 1954

to 1975, Vietnamese existentialism was not merely an imitation of its European counterpart but was deeply rooted in the particularities of Vietnamese culture and social structures. Influenced heavily by Vietnamese Buddhism, this philosophy emphasized the relational and social self, advocating for the liberation of the mind from oppressive social structures (Luong, 2009). This philosophical stance encouraged individuals to reflect on their own status and existence, awakening a desire for freedom and the right to live authentically.

Existentialism has had a profound and complex influence on Vietnamese morality and lifestyle. On one hand, it has inspired personal reflection, engagement, and the pursuit of freedom, contributing to significant social and cultural transformations, particularly among the youth and women. On the other hand, it has also led to challenges in balancing individual freedom with societal expectations, sometimes resulting in behaviors that deviate from traditional values. The existentialist emphasis on personal responsibility and self-determination continues to resonate in contemporary Vietnamese society, shaping the moral and ethical discourse and influencing the ways in which individuals navigate their existence.

6. The Orientation of Current Values Education in Vietnam

Studying existentialism and its presence in Vietnamese literature, morality, and lifestyle provides valuable insights for shaping the orientation of contemporary value education in Vietnam. This orientation involves integrating traditional national values with the creation of new ones, addressing the human condition, and building the spiritual life of individuals in the age of science and technology.

Firstly, existentialism encourages individuals to act, as the fate of each person lies in their own hands. Do (2005) asserts that existentialism views dishonesty as a distortion of reality and cowardice as a concealment of freedom based on circumstances. This philosophy inspires individuals to take responsibility for their decisions and to actively create new values. In Vietnam, this has translated into fostering positivity, initiative, and creativity among the younger generation. People are encouraged to think independently, break prejudices, overcome traditional limitations, and take responsibility for their actions.

However, existentialism's emphasis on individual freedom sometimes overlooks social moral standards, traditional values, and national customs. Therefore, while it is essential to promote proactive and innovative attitudes, it is equally important to remind individuals of their responsibility to preserve the nation's fine customs and traditions. This

balanced approach aims to build an advanced culture imbued with national identity, promoting the role of culture in socio-economic development. It also guards against trends that prioritize immediate enjoyment and neglect the nation's historical values, leading to the denial of traditional virtues (Nguyen; Slivka; Telegina; Zaitseva *et al.*, 2020).

Secondly, existential literary works highlight issues related to the human condition, guiding the education of aspiration and the will to live with human values. Vietnamese writers, influenced by existentialism, do not advocate for a hedonistic lifestyle or extreme personal freedom. Instead, they use existential themes to explore the complexities of human life in modern society, revealing its aesthetic and humanistic dimensions. Behind their seemingly pessimistic expressions, these works often shine with values of willpower, aspiration, and the affirmation of self-worth.

For example, Nguyen Binh Phuong's novels depict characters who struggle to find meaning and assert their individuality amid societal challenges (Nguyen, 2000; Nguyen, B. P., 2006). These narratives encourage individuals to live meaningful, active, and creative lives, surpassing mediocrity and embracing their unique identities. This existentialist perspective orients the younger generation to develop willpower, energy, and independence. It emphasizes the importance of overcoming difficulties and challenges, promoting exploration, discovery, and creativity in both scientific endeavors and practical human activities. Such an approach discourages passivity and dependency, urging individuals to live lives marked by personal achievements and distinct contributions (Nguyen; Pham; Nguyen, 2022).

Thirdly, existentialism warns of the dangers posed by the absolutization of scientific and technological progress, stressing the need to balance material advancements with cultural and spiritual development. Existentialists like Sartre and Heidegger cautioned against the dehumanizing effects of technology, emphasizing that technological advancements do not automatically lead to cultural or ethical progress. They highlighted the risk of losing human values such as empathy, understanding, and meaningful interpersonal connections in the face of technological dominance (Heidegger, 2004).

In the contemporary context, Vietnamese writers echo these concerns. For instance, Nguyen Viet Ha's novel "God's Opportunity" critiques the overreliance on technological civilization, warning that it can lead to a loss of human values and identity. Ha points out that while technology can enhance human capabilities, it also poses significant risks, such as environmental degradation, moral decline, and superficial interpersonal communication.

This perspective calls for a humanistic approach to technology, ensuring that technological progress is aligned with ethical and cultural development.

The orientation of current value education in Vietnam must therefore include an emphasis on spiritual life and cultural identity. This involves fostering a deep understanding of human values and ethical principles alongside scientific and technological knowledge. By doing so, education can help individuals navigate the challenges posed by modern technological advancements while maintaining their cultural and spiritual integrity (Nguyen, 2022a).

In summary, the study of existentialism provides valuable lessons for the orientation of contemporary value education in Vietnam. It highlights the need to balance traditional values with new ones, foster a deep understanding of the human condition, and build a robust spiritual life in the age of science and technology. This approach encourages individuals to take responsibility for their actions, engage in meaningful and creative endeavors, and maintain their cultural and ethical integrity in the face of technological advancements.

By integrating existentialist insights with traditional Vietnamese values, current value education can guide individuals to live meaningful, responsible, and culturally enriched lives. This holistic approach not only addresses the immediate challenges posed by modernity but also ensures the preservation and enhancement of Vietnam's cultural and ethical heritage, fostering a society that values both innovation and tradition (Nguyen et al., 2023).

Incorporating existentialist principles into value education helps bridge the gap between individual freedom and social responsibility. It encourages young people to be proactive and creative while also respecting and preserving traditional values. This balanced approach can lead to a more harmonious and progressive society, where individuals are empowered to pursue personal growth and contribute positively to the community. By fostering an environment that values both personal freedom and social responsibility, contemporary value education in Vietnam can help build a society that is resilient, ethical, and culturally vibrant (Luong, 2009).

As existentialism continues to influence Vietnamese literature, morality, and lifestyle, its integration into value education provides a framework for addressing the complexities of modern life. This philosophical perspective encourages individuals to reflect on their existence, embrace their freedom, and take responsibility for their actions, ultimately leading to a more enlightened and ethical society. By drawing on the rich tradition of existentialist thought, current value education in Vietnam can inspire a new generation of individuals who

are both culturally grounded and forward-thinking, capable of navigating the challenges of the modern world with wisdom and integrity.

7. Conclusion

This study elucidates the significant influence of existentialism on Vietnamese literature, morality, and lifestyle, and its implications for contemporary value education. The presence of existentialism in Vietnamese literature is prominently reflected in themes of emptiness, monotony, identity loss, and existential anxiety. These themes mirror the broader human condition and highlight the struggles of individuals to maintain their identities and find meaning in an absurd and indifferent world. Existentialist principles emphasize human existence, freedom, and responsibility, shaping the moral and lifestyle choices of many Vietnamese people, particularly during periods of socio-political upheaval.

The research findings underscore the profound impact of existentialism on Vietnamese morality and lifestyle. Existentialism encourages personal responsibility, the pursuit of authentic existence, and active engagement in socio-political movements. However, it also leads to challenges in balancing individual freedom with societal expectations, sometimes resulting in behaviors that deviate from traditional values. The emphasis on personal choice and self-determination resonates with the broader struggle for social and political liberation, reflecting the deeply rooted influence of Vietnamese culture and social structures on existentialist thought.

In terms of contemporary value education, the study suggests integrating traditional values with new existentialist ideals to address issues related to the human condition and emphasize spiritual development in the age of science and technology. Existentialism's focus on individual freedom and responsibility can inspire proactive and innovative attitudes among the younger generation, fostering a culture of positivity, initiative, and creativity. However, it is crucial to balance this with the preservation of traditional values and societal moral standards to avoid the risk of trends that deviate from societal norms and historical virtues.

The research highlights the need for a holistic approach to value education that balances material advancements with cultural and spiritual development. Existentialism warns against the dehumanizing effects of technology and stresses the importance of maintaining human values such as empathy, understanding, and meaningful interpersonal

connections. By fostering a deep understanding of human values and ethical principles alongside scientific and technological knowledge, value education in Vietnam can help individuals navigate modern challenges while preserving their cultural and spiritual integrity.

Overall, the integration of existentialist principles with traditional Vietnamese values in value education can guide individuals to live meaningful, responsible, and culturally enriched lives. This balanced approach addresses the immediate challenges posed by modernity while ensuring the preservation and enhancement of Vietnam's cultural and ethical heritage. By fostering an environment that values both personal freedom and social responsibility, contemporary value education in Vietnam can build a society that is resilient, ethical, and culturally vibrant.

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