

Teaching Xuân Diệu: How To Read Queer Identity Into Poetry And Why It Matters

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ABSTRACT: With the widespread reputation as the "King of Love Poems" in Vietnam, Ngô Xuân Diệu's writing and poetry is widely learned by Vietnamese students and citizens. Yet, despite being celebrated, Xuân Diệu's primary source of inspiration - his romantic relationships with men - has largely been neglected by the public and the national curriculum of Vietnam. This essay will examine this precise issue and explain why changing the public perception of Xuân Diệu as an individual matters.

KEYWORDS: Poetry, New Poetry, Xuan Dieu, queer identity, historical figure, national curriculum.

■ Introduction

With a reputation as one of the most famous poets in Vietnam, Ngô Xuân Diệu (1916-1985) worked with one central principle: to love and to serve for love. Throughout his career, Xuân Diệu was known as a romantic, lyrical poet and a key figure in 20th-century Vietnam's "New Poetry Movement," a group of writers interested in liberating individualistic identity. His poems are not only learned by heart by Vietnamese citizens—"Vội vàng," "Giục giã," and "Dây đàn bỗng đứt," to name several—but also taught by the national curriculum. His poems are characterized by intense yearnings to live, to love, and to sympathize with nature and humankind. These publicly accepted attributes have thus formed Xuân Diệu's reputation as "a big romance poet."

Yet, despite being celebrated, Xuân Diệu's primary source of inspiration—his romantic relationships with men—has largely been neglected. Unlike the relationships of heterosexual writers and poets who are also studied in the high school curriculum, the love life of Xuân Diệu is seldom mentioned in Vietnamese classrooms.¹

While the feelings of other male poets inspire his work in complex ways, Xuân Diệu's personal life is consistently denied as a "normal friendship." This essay aims to reframe Xuân Diệu's significant relationships with male colleagues, using Hoàng Cát as a case study, to demonstrate why it is crucial to appreciate Xuân Diệu's work on its own terms. In doing so, we can begin to understand its bravery and not perpetuate discrimination against his sexual orientation in today's culture.

Before the New Poetry Movement, an important literary movement in 1930s Vietnam, poets rarely discussed their own identity in their work. Even if the poems were about love, they were not often writing about their own relationships or experiences with it. Instead, poems had a more nationalistic agenda. Xuân Diệu was bold enough to show his individualism as a person with feelings and emotions. As scholars Lại Nguyên Ân and Alec Holcombe put it in their 2010 essay, "The Heart and Mind of the Poet Xuân Diệu": "Critics saw in his verse a profound sense of the fleeting passage of time and the precar-

iousness of life, both of which intensified the lust for youth, spring, and love that emanated from his poetry."² Indeed, Xuân Diệu, grew to become one of the three most significant poets in the New Poetry Movement.

His poems should not only be recognized in an academic context for their beautiful word choices but also be studied as representative poems of Xuân Diệu's personal life. However, they have been hindered or disguised as unimportant precisely because they illustrate homosexuality. Even today, the public can only be exposed to these poems through unofficial news sources, with such homophobic headlines as "Xuân Diệu: the poet who came from 'the third world.'"³ It was not until recently that his sexual orientation became publicly recognized, especially in a Western academic context. Importantly, current scholars began to mention this aspect as one of the major factors forming Xuân Diệu's identity.⁴ Studied in parallel with discussions of Xuân Diệu's sexual orientation in colleagues' memoirs or interviews, his poems are all evidence of his romantic adoration for men.

Although it is not taught in the curriculum, Xuân Diệu wrote about his homoerotic desire early on in the poem, "Tình trai" ("Men Love"), about the relationship between the famous French poets Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine. "Men Love" became one of the very first poems which discussed homoeroticism in a straightforward manner. The poem has since gained more popularity among younger generations who appreciate its meaning and impact. The poem reads:

*"I remember Rimbaud with Verlaine,
Were two poets that fell into wine.
Got drunk in new poems, deeply in friendship,
Despite manners, let go of the old paths.*

*Walking parallelly on the path
Two fresh souls with that fragrant scents
They walked, the weak hand in the strong one
Listening to the music of love in the air*

*It is nonsense to tell the old stories
Forget all the lipsticks and colorful bralettes,
Ignore the existence of paradise or inferno
Without any hesitation, they are in love."*⁵

As one of the poems from his most successful book, "Thơ thơ," published in 1938, the national curriculum of Vietnam has often overlooked the importance of its meaning, despite Xuân Diệu's bravery in showcasing his community in a positive light. In fact, Xuân Diệu was one of the first Vietnamese writers to write about homosexual love openly in poems such as "Men Love" or, as we shall see later, in his love poem for Hoàng Cát, "Beach."

Willfull Ignorance and its inability to stop Xuân Diệu's Public Recognition:

Before providing a deeper insight into his relationships, it is necessary to offer a background on the poet's public portrayal in the media for a better grasp of this issue. In many cultures, homosexuality has been traditionally viewed as a "malignancy" and a sensitive topic to mention in public, especially in the Asian or Vietnamese context. This culturally produced fear of and prejudice against homosexuals has sometimes manifested in legal restrictions or, in extreme cases, bullying and even violence against homosexuals. Indeed, people who were a part of the sexual minority groups in the early 20th century were distinguished and humiliated for their sexual orientation and sexual identity. This discrimination has never been entirely erased in the mass consciousness of Vietnam. Indeed, the idea of having a massively important poet in the culture with many great masterworks but who is also gay would be shameful and grotesque to them.

There were rumors about Xuân Diệu's sexuality in Hanoi at the time. However, as for his and Huy Can's power, the topic is considered sensitive, and no one has been willing to discuss it publicly. It was not until 1993, in the memoir by the famous writer Tô Hoài, "Cat bụi chan ai," that his sexual orientation was explicitly addressed. "Wherever Xuan Diệu is," he writes, "he is an amorous adventurer with his men love."⁶

In high school education, there is no direct mention of Xuân Diệu's homoeroticism in the classroom, as this topic is perceived as "too sensitive" and "inappropriate." In textbooks, the bibliography of Xuân Diệu is quite lengthy, but neither the former nor the new version of the Vietnamese book cite this particular aspect. Xuân Diệu's sexual orientation could, however, be discussed on internet platforms publicly. For younger generations, his sexual orientation is no longer an insight only acknowledged by his close friends but has become something perceived as a fact, which is a revolutionary step in changing the public perception.

While people have grown more open-minded, not everyone talks about Diệu respectfully. Word choice, again, became a ruthless weapon against him with the existence of tabloids and articles declaring Xuân Diệu's homosexuality to be a "malignancy." In an interview in 2013, Hoàng Cát, who was still alive at the time, was asked about the root of Xuân Diệu's lifestyle despite the existence of homophobia and as someone who has experienced this discrimination. His answer paves the

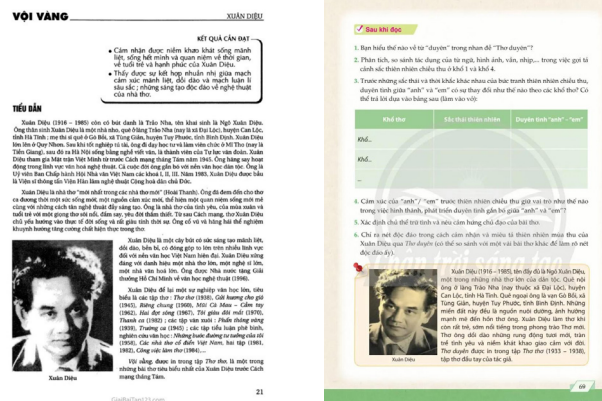


Figure 1: None of the textbooks mentioned Xuân Diệu's relationships or his sexual orientation, even with his lengthy bibliography.

way for a more positive perspective of homosexuality:

"Xuân Diệu was the peak no one could overcome. His romantic poems were in the journals of those who had been in love, who were in love, and who would be in love. His poems portray the face of love, the tender love, whatever the gender they aimed for. At the time, being homosexual was something cruelly humiliating, in comparison to now, where our community has become a more inclusive, open-minded one, as this is a life issue. The proportion of gay people around the world is high, and same-sex marriage has been recognized in many nations."⁷

He beamed and continued, "I believe that it is wise and humane. God created us like that; everyone yearns for love and to be loved, whatever gender they are."⁸ It wasn't the first time Xuân Diệu's life had been celebrated and acknowledged on his own terms. Likewise, in the Nhan Dan News, published in 1989, a critic and colleague who experienced conflicting affairs with Xuân Diệu argued:

"For those who love Xuân Diệu's poems, apprehend his sorrowful romantic poems, without discrimination between boys and girls, therefore need to comprehend his innermost feelings and predestined fate, fondly long and await for all his life. Never had we seen him gloomy nor disappointed, never had he aged, forever stays at his very first."⁹

Literary critic Hoài Thanh, who is celebrated mainly for the influential book on the Vietnamese New Poetry Movement, "Thi Nhân Việt Nam," described Xuân Diệu as "The poet whom only youngsters love, and for those who in love with his poems, they have to be addicted to them." By citing all the genuine feelings, the tender of love, the beauty of life into one career, we can discuss

Xuân Diệu in a way that successfully dispels archaic stereotypes.

Thus, Chu Văn Sơn, a populous critic of the newer generation, concluded the unusual phenomenon of the public's celebration of Xuân Diệu by stating, "In Xuân Diệu's poetry, there are plenty of places with difficulties to discriminate

whether the character he portrayed belonged to which gender. As there was neither male nor female in his poetry, the only gender was beauty.¹⁰ Indeed, similar to what Hoàng Cát said regarding love, Chu Văn Sơn states that "androgyny" must be the only gender in Xuân Diệu's poetry. Such a statement changes the way we interpret the poem, too. For such androgynous poems, such as "Đẹp", as an illustration, portrays a beauty of no particular gender. It reads:

*"The prettiness of you when these eyebrows furrowed
The eyebrows, which are as green as the forest
As innocent as the morning air
As vigorous as the midsummer afternoon."¹¹*

Essentially, by possessing the sensitivity to capture beauty in any form, Xuân Diệu succeeded in his career, winning the hearts of people who can empathize with his genuine feelings. Moreover, they can appreciate being in love with femininity or masculinity, which are the writer's aims.

"HOÀNG CÁT" - A New Way of Understanding The Artistic Muse:

Accepting Xuân Diệu as a national literary figure means accepting all of Xuân Diệu, including his relationships with men. How could we teach the work of the poet while honoring who he was as a person? How could it change our understanding of his writings? As the topic of "Tình trai" and "Biển" is new to the curriculum, it is suggested that it can be brought into the textbooks to educate either teachers or the younger generations about queer rights to form an open-minded community. In closing, we can turn to the relationship with Hoàng Cát to demonstrate how Xuân Diệu's love affairs are inextricably bound up with his writings. Hoàng Cát (1942) was born in Nghệ An, Vietnam, and met Xuân Diệu in 1958 in his hometown. The two become close. It is worth mentioning that the name Hoàng Cát can be understood as "Sand" in Vietnamese. This name soon became one metaphor for Xuân Diệu's poems, notably the famous "Biển," which insinuated either "Ocean" or "Beach."

Themes of oceans and shorelines reoccur in Xuân Diệu's poetry. Starting with the poem "Biển," or "Ocean," Xuân Diệu expressed his conflicted feelings for Hoàng Cát by stating:

*"Never have I ever deserved to be the ocean
Yet I want you to be the white sand
Lengthy peaceful beach walk
Shining as constellations..."*

The lines are so straightforward so direct, to the point of revealing Xuân Diệu's sincere feelings with evocative images. The unique feature of the poem is that it does not use such simple comparisons such as "I am the marine waves" but rather, "Never have I ever deserved to be the ocean." These lines are not aimed to describe or compare but instead speak for his lifelong desire. The poem continues:

*"I long to be marine waves,
Kiss you, the sand, all persistently*

*Quietly, tenderly kissing
Til forever fall our amorous lips apart."¹²*

The melodious symphony of the poem resembles the picturesque scenery of the shore, the deep marine in a calm midsummer afternoon, without the interruption of wind. Deliberately wandering on the beach all alone. From the very beginning of the poem, Xuân Diệu's confidence in his muse is evident. His impossible desire for him is to "be the ocean," in this case, not for its superior impact but to caress his muse incessantly. Waves, what Xuân Diệu wished to be, demonstrate his desire: subsequent swells travel into the shore of sand, with the tantalizing hope of seeking connection, but not without its unknownst disappearance afterward. Despite being corralled to the beachside with no sound, yet all around, without asking for a proper payback for this love. In this case, another comparison can be made: flowers ask to be fragrant, resulting in being withered away at the end.

The metaphor in "Beach" is symbolized by unfulfilled yet compassionate devotion. However, without having the mindset and greed subjugated by the generation, his quest for being loved was left to despair. Undoubtedly, Xuân Diệu is aware of heartache. On the other hand, he apprehends in-depth how he might bruise him blue; in one of his classic poems, "Love," he once mentioned: "To love is the scarification where your heart dies a bit/ Because so rarely could you be loved back." However, this had never been the case for the poet himself. In a poem entitled "Bài thơ tuổi nhỏ," which translates to "The poem of youth," he proudly indicated his maxim:

*"There is no way to live without love
Without adoration, without cherishing anybody."¹³*

Another essential aspect of the poet that should be considered is his word choice. Contradictory to such demands and expectations from his context, Xuân Diệu judiciously chose the gender-neutral pronoun "kẻ" to affirm his adoration for androgyny. Viewing the issue from the other perspective, Hoàng Cát, in that same intimate interview from 2013, shared with the press:

"Speaking all frankly, Xuân Diệu did love me. It is not without me acknowledging, yet I only loved him platonically. I could not love him romantically like how boys and girls are in love with each other, or like a homosexual person because I am a normal person. However, when it comes to either intellectually or emotionally, I deeply adored him. Was so in love that I spoiled him..."¹⁴

The Vietnamese language has complexities that cannot be translated in this context. Hoàng Cát used the word "thương" to talk about Xuân Diệu during the interview. This word, however, apart from how he indicated the way Xuân Diệu was in love with him, as "yêu." "Yêu" means to cherish somebody romantically, while "thương" is an adoration that can be made between relatives or between familial members. "Thương" is much more impactful than "yêu." Indeed, the locals define "thương" as the type of emotion earned highest in the human

emotional system. Vietnamese dwellers hold a belief in which "yêu" is the love for which people yearn for the other. In contrast, "thường" means hanging on forever, even between platonic mutuals. As can be inferred, even in this context, with much empathy and adoration of Hoàng Cát for Xuân Diệu, he still discriminated against him and Xuân Diệu by using the word "normal." The conservative mindset remains somewhere still, as there was a belief that how being homosexual is abnormal.

The ocean was an artistic space for Xuân Diệu and for Vietnamese poets in his circle. They used it to express possibilities and impossibilities alike. As the female poet Xuân Quỳnh, representing a younger generation of poets, writes in "Sóng" or "Wave":

*"How can I become
Like the hundreds of thousands of small waves
In the great sea of love
And lap forever against your shore?"¹⁵*

Similarly, in "Ocean," Xuân Diệu yearned to be the waves. The two writers both shared the desire to tenderly hug their loved ones, metaphors as either "Sand" or "Shore." They shared a belief that they did not deserve to be the ocean but instead wanted to be the waves or even ripples because those seemingly insignificant ripples would yet still be able to "lap against" their beloved.

■ Conclusion

It is essential for intellectuals to investigate an artist's personal life in their research, both for the sake of the art itself and out of respect for the artist. Indeed, out of respect for Xuân Diệu, who passed away decades ago, considering his sexuality and love life in relation to his artistic works should not be controversial but essential. Like his junior Xuân Quỳnh, his relationships with other artists must be considered in the classroom, which would also help promote the normalization of homosexuality in the culture at large. This would be a revolutionary step for Xuân Diệu, and a crucial aspect of his legacy would no longer be denied.

In an artistic and literary context, recognizing Xuân Diệu as a person with homoerotic desires would provide a new beginning for research and understanding of his works. It would promote more profound insights into his poetry criticism, including a more complicated and comprehensive portrayal of Xuân Diệu's subjects in general. Such recognition would leave a positive and lasting impact, where "malignancy" or "disability" would no longer be words associated with homosexuality. Having a historical figure in Vietnam whose poems are already publicly celebrated and who is gay evidences the ubiquity and importance of this sexual minority in the arts.

Despite manners and stereotypes, or Xuân Diệu's own insecurity of being exposed, his desire to represent his community was always present. He wrote of homosexual love in overt ways, portraying the infamous relationship of Rimbaud and Verlaine and being inspired enough by their romance to write "Tình trai," and even publishing it in the masterpiece book "Thơ thơ" with other honored poems. He wrote of homosexual love in disguised ways, too, such as in his dedicated

poem "Biển," for his love for Hoàng Cát. The bravery to write explicitly and implicitly about homosexuality can be seen as a dedication to those like him and to himself. The knowledge of his queer identity enriches the legacy of romantic literature for all, paving the way for a new appreciation and a continuation of works in this tradition.

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■ References

1. For example, Lưu Quang Vũ and Xuân Quỳnh's love story or Nguyễn Trãi's relationship with Hồ Xuân Hương as the very basic illustrations, these writers' love sequels are shared and students are encouraged to discover them.
2. Lại Nguyên Ân and Alec Holcombe, "The Heart and Mind of the Poet Xuân Diệu: 1954–1958," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Summer 2010).
3. The third world, here, is the local term of Vietnamese (especially for older generations) used to describe people in the Queer community. This one is considered homophobic for their discrimination of gay people, as if this minority group is not in the same world as others.
4. "The Heart and Mind of the Poet Xuân Diệu" and Nguyễn Quốc Vinh's "Deviant Bodies and Dynamics of Displacement of Homoerotic Desire," for example, or in the Vietnamese context, "Xuân Diệu & Tô Hoài: Mỗi tình trai" (2014).
5. Xuân Diệu, "Tình trai" "Thơ thơ" (1938).
6. "Đào hoa những mối tình trai" can also be translated as "men-killer."
7. Hoàng Cát's interview, 2013. Translations mine.
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