

The History of Vietnamese Feminism: Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, an Early Twentieth-Century Feminist

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the contributions of Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa to the history of Vietnamese feminism. She was among the earliest female intellectuals to advocate for and defend the roles and positions of women within the family and society. To conduct this study, we closely analyzed her articles published in *Đông Pháp thời báo* between 1926 and 1927, particularly those concerning women and family life, domesticity, women's education, and professional careers. Her contributions to the Vietnamese feminist movement in the early twentieth century are undeniable. This study aims to open further avenues for research on Vietnamese feminism in the early twentieth century.

KEYWORDS: feminism, early twentieth-century Vietnamese literature, Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, vocational education, family care.

1. INTRODUCTION

Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa was one of the most prominent female writers and journalists in early twentieth-century Vietnam. However, only in recent years has her work begun to receive sustained scholarly attention alongside the growing interest in early modern Vietnamese literature and women's writing. Her contributions to the development of modern Vietnamese literature were substantial, particularly through her novel *Tây Phương mỹ nhân* (1927), which is often regarded as her most representative literary work. The establishment of the "Phụ nữ tùng thư" collection by Nhà xuất bản Phụ nữ, which republishes and introduces writings by early twentieth-century women intellectuals, further repositioned her together with contemporary female writers and journalists under the category of "women's issues in Vietnam." This categorization implicitly affirms the emergence of a feminist orientation among Vietnamese intellectuals of the period.

This article argues that feminist consciousness in early twentieth-century Vietnam was not limited to later political discourses but had already been articulated by women intellectuals such as Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, Đạm Phương nữ sử, and Phan Thị Bạch Vân, alongside male intellectuals including Ngô Tất Tố, Phan Khôi, and Phạm Quỳnh. Their writings collectively contributed to the formation of a new discourse on women, education, domesticity, and social participation during a transformative historical period.

Feminist studies in Vietnam have expanded significantly since the early twenty-first century. Some scholars have focused on proto-feminist expressions in medieval Vietnamese literature, particularly through figures such as Đoàn Thị Điểm and Hồ Xuân Hương (Ngô Tự Lập, 2022, p. 60). Research on women's newspapers in the early twentieth century has also examined feminist mobilization and women's emancipation in relation to education, professional participation, and resistance to Confucian patriarchal structures (Mai Thị Mỹ Vĩ & Lê Thị Huyền, 2019). From a decolonial perspective, Đặng Thị Thái Hà (2024) analyzed early twentieth-century Vietnamese women's writing through the intersection of language and gender, emphasizing the use of the first-person pronoun "tôi" as an assertion of female subjectivity and individual identity in the emerging cultural marketplace.

Other scholars have highlighted debates surrounding women's education and women's social position in Vietnamese society. Studies on Phạm Quỳnh, for example, demonstrate contemporary concerns regarding "the position of women in Vietnamese society," women's education, and the ideal model of Vietnamese femininity (Đoàn Ánh Dương, 2022). More recently, Phuong Ngoc Nguyen (2023) positioned Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa as one of the earliest female novelists of modern Vietnamese literature and emphasized her construction of the "ideal woman" endowed with modern feminist consciousness and strong indigenous attachment. Meanwhile, Đặng Thị Vân Chi (2015) identified her as one of the first Vietnamese female intellectuals to advocate gender equality and women's freedom through literary representation.

Although these studies have acknowledged her importance in literature and intellectual history, they have largely treated her as a cultural figure rather than examining her systematically as a feminist thinker. Existing scholarship has not sufficiently



analyzed how her writings negotiated between women's emancipation and the preservation of domestic and familial responsibilities within Vietnamese society. This tension between liberation and moral domesticity constitutes one of the most distinctive features of Vietnamese feminist thought during the transitional period between Confucian tradition and modernity. Therefore, this article reconsiders Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa not merely as an early female intellectual, but as a foundational figure in the formation of indigenous Vietnamese feminist discourse in the early twentieth century.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This article employs the method of close reading of both the author's primary and secondary texts. Particular attention is given to *Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa – vấn đề phụ nữ ở nước ta* [*Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa – Women's Issues in Our Country*], compiled and introduced by Đoàn Ánh Dương (2023) and published by Nhà xuất bản Phụ nữ Việt Nam. In addition, methods of synthesis and analysis are employed to examine and interpret the issues raised in a systematic and coherent manner.

3. RESEARCH CONTENTS

3.1. Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa and Her Literary Activities

Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa (1896–1982), whose real name was Nguyễn Thị Thái, was born in Đa Phước village, Hòa Minh commune, Hòa Vang district, Quảng Nam province (now Hòa Minh ward, Liên Chiểu district, Đà Nẵng city). She began her writing career in the 1920s and contributed to numerous newspapers and journals, including *An Nam tạp chí*, *Đông Pháp thời báo*, *Thần Chung*, *Tiếng Dân*, *Thực Nghiệp dân báo*, *Nam Phong tạp chí*, and *Phụ nữ tân văn*.

In addition to her journalistic writings, her literary output included novels such as *Tây phương mỹ nhân* I and II (comprising fifteen chapters; Nhà in Bảo Tồn, Saigon, 1927), as well as several short novels, including *Đàn cầm khéo ngón dây*, *Nhi nữ tạo anh hùng*, and *Vì nghĩa quên mình*. She also produced works in various literary genres, such as poetic prose (*Vịnh miếu bà Triệu Ấu*), humorous dialogues (*Dạy luân lý*), satirical literature (*Văn sĩ ngâm thơ*), travel writing (*Bà Nà du ký*), and several other works.

3.2. When Did Feminism Begin?

Tracing the origins of feminist thought, Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa (1927a) argued that feminism originated in ancient times, during the primitive era of cave dwelling, through the notions of “respecting the mother” and “valuing women over men” (p. 112). In this early period, women played a crucial role in nurturing and sustaining the family.

However, as society gradually developed, physical strength became increasingly important in protecting and organizing tribal life. Consequently, the role of men rose in social significance. Women were no longer regarded as those capable of defending the tribe or securing the main sources of food; instead, they became dependent on men. According to Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, women were perceived as gentle, submissive, and physically weak, and therefore easily oppressed by men, ultimately forced to “accept their assigned fate” (1927a, p. 113). Furthermore, women were burdened with childbirth, childcare, and domestic responsibilities, which reinforced their dependence on men, similar to the argument proposed by Shulamith Firestone (1970). Firestone maintained that women's biological dependence on men for reproduction and childrearing constituted one of the fundamental causes of gender inequality. Thus, if “the tyranny of the biological family would be broken” (Firestone, 1970, p. 11), women could escape gender oppression. Patriarchal ideology, therefore, functioned as a mechanism restricting women's social power.

Moreover, as mothers, women could not abandon their children to pursue larger social ambitions in the same way men could, because they remained emotionally and materially tied to childcare and domestic concerns. When children became ill, mothers were consumed by anxiety and care, rendering social affairs secondary. Consequently, women were traditionally confined to the “bedroom and kitchen corner” (Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, 1927a, p. 113).

This, according to Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, became the rationale for women's dependence on and subordination to men. At home, women depended on their parents; after marriage, they depended on their husbands' status and identity. They were treated as “toys,” as “sexual machines,” and as “slaves” (Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, 1927a, p. 114) serving male interests. Women's social status thus became increasingly diminished.

Nevertheless, women were not inherently “without education or intellect” (Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, 1927a, p. 114). Rather, they possessed sufficient capability and intelligence to contribute to society if they were not constrained by the patriarchal ideology of



male superiority and female inferiority. Western feminism, therefore, sought to restore women's social role and "recover the rights that had long been lost" (Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, 1927a, p. 114).

This demonstrates that Western feminist ideas entered Vietnam relatively early. As early as 1927, Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa was already aware of, encouraging, and supporting feminist movements and feminist ideology as a means of improving women's social status. This also suggests that feminism did not arrive in Vietnam only in the early twenty-first century; rather, it had already been discussed nearly a century earlier.

3.3. *Women, Family, and Domesticity*

Although Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa absorbed feminist ideas at a relatively early stage, she still highly valued traditional family ethics. In her view, women were still responsible for caring for the family and children, preserving family values, and maintaining domestic duties, particularly cooking and household management. This demonstrates that her reception of Western feminism was adapted to the traditional Confucian conception of women's roles and positions within the family.

For Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa (1927b), serving one's husband and children remained a woman's primary responsibility. She argued that within the family, "cooking is the duty of women and girls" (p. 105). This reflects the continuing influence of gender performativity, as theorized by Judith Butler (1990), in which femininity is associated with obligation and prescribed social roles. In this sense, Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa still retained many traditional assumptions regarding women's positions within the family. At first glance, this perspective may appear to contradict the feminist orientation she pursued. However, it actually reveals a point of intersection between Western feminist thought and the Confucian patriarchal expectations imposed upon women in Vietnamese society.

In her writings on women's domestic responsibilities, she instructed women on how to prepare family meals and arrange household spaces in ways that were orderly, aesthetically pleasing, and especially hygienic (Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, 1927b, p. 107; 1927c, pp. 108–109).

3.4. *Women, Education, and Professional Careers*

According to Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, the most effective way to improve women's social roles and status was through intellectual education and stable professional careers that would enable them to support themselves, care for their families, and contribute to society. To achieve this goal, women first needed to be "trained in morality, provided with general knowledge, and guided toward practical professions" (Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, 1926a, p. 37).

For her, moral cultivation required intellectual education capable of broadening women's minds. Women should be educated to value "ethical principles and moral conduct" (Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, 1926a, p. 37), since these constituted enduring foundations of social morality. Such education would encourage women to respect virtue, preserve ethical standards, and avoid behaviors considered socially corrupt or morally destructive. Once women acquired knowledge, they would be able to strengthen their character, support their husbands, educate their children, and thereby contribute to prosperous families and a peaceful society.

However, she opposed the notion that women's education should merely serve the practical purpose of "earning rice" (Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, 1926a, p. 38). Instead, she believed that women should primarily be educated "to become fully human" (Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, 1926a, p. 38). This was especially important for married women, who needed to know how to manage the household, raise children, and assist their husbands in economic life. This perspective perhaps constitutes one of her distinctive contributions to feminist thought. Feminism, in her conception, was not solely about improving women's social status; it was also about raising women's awareness of their own roles, positions, and forms of power.

In addition to intellectual education, she argued that sending women abroad for study was "a necessary undertaking" (Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, 1927e, p. 110). Overseas education would broaden women's horizons, expose them to new ideas, and supplement what she considered lacking in Vietnamese women's intellectual and feminist consciousness, thereby helping to elevate their social position and enabling them to contribute to the advancement of Vietnamese women more broadly. Moreover, studying abroad would provide women with both "education and worldly experience" (Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, 1927e, p. 111). Such experiences would help Vietnamese women overcome timidity and fear, allowing them to participate more confidently in the modern world.

Alongside intellectual education, women should also learn a profession (Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, 1927d, p. 59) in order to support themselves and assist their families (Huỳnh Thị Bảo Hòa, 1927d, p. 61), rather than depending upon fathers, husbands, or

sons according to traditional notions such as “a mother’s status depends on her son” or “a woman’s worth depends on her husband.” Any profession was acceptable, provided that it suited women’s interests and enabled them to support themselves and contribute meaningfully to the family and society. Women who enjoyed studying could become teachers or midwives; those interested in domestic arts could specialize in household management and culinary skills; those interested in sericulture or weaving should master those crafts thoroughly. Through professional competence, women would gain a stronger voice and improve their social standing within both the family and society.

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