



OLD HORIZON BY HỒ DZẺNH FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MEMORY

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Hồ Dzếnh's *Old Horizon* (Chân trời cũ) from the perspective of memory studies, focusing on two interrelated dimensions: the construction of memories of kin and the formation of personal and cultural identity. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach that integrates literary analysis with memory studies, the article argues that memories of kin in *Old Horizon* are not merely recollections of the past but dynamic, emotionally charged experiences shaped by the author's complex sensory perceptions. These memories are characterized by a profound sense of "thân-thương" (close-affectionate), which is closely intertwined with experiences of loss and tragedy. The article further demonstrates that the work functions as a constructive practice of memory through which Hồ Dzếnh reconstructs the cultural and emotional foundations of his identity. Specifically, *Old Horizon* reveals two defining dimensions of identity: the author's Sino-Vietnamese cultural heritage and a literary sensibility characterized by melancholy and compassion. By linking remembered experiences with present interpretive needs, the work not only reconstructs the past but also illuminates the intellectual and emotional origins of Hồ Dzếnh's literary world.

Keywords: Hồ Dzếnh, Chân trời cũ, memory studies, identity, memory-kin, autobiography.

Introduction

Hồ Dzếnh (1916-1991) was a Chinese-Vietnamese poet and writer. His father was a Cantonese immigrant, while his mother was Vietnamese. During his childhood, he lived with his family in Thanh Hóa before later moving to Hanoi. He worked simultaneously as a writer, journalist, and teacher. In 1937, Hồ Dzếnh began his literary career with several poems published in *Thanh-Nghệ-Tĩnh Tân Văn* and *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn*. His poetry collection *Maternal Homeland* (*Quê ngoại*, 1942) and short story collection *Old Horizon* (*Chân trời cũ*, 1943) are widely regarded as his most notable works.

Old Horizon is an autobiographical collection comprising seventeen short stories about "kin," written between 1937 and 1943. The work was first published in 1943 and later republished, with some revisions, in 1946.

In general, *Old Horizon* has been recognized by both scholars and readers as a moving portrayal

of childhood, homeland, and family, characterized by a sincere and unhurried narrative voice imbued with compassion and sorrow (Vu, 2019). Within the collection, "I" functions both as the main character and as the narrator whose background closely corresponds to that of the author's childhood (Nguyen, 2018, p. 71). Alongside portraits of kin, *Old Horizon* can also be read as Hồ Dzếnh's self-portrait, constructed through a dialogue between memory and the present (Tran, n.d.).

This dual nature may be explained by the characteristics of autobiography itself, which is a literary genre in which the author narrates the story of his or her own life. The main character of the narrative is the author (Do, 2004, p. 1905). In autobiography, memories are not assembled as random recollections, but organized as a story, a novel (Do, 2004, p. 1906).

At its core, therefore, *Old Horizon* represents a reconstruction of personal memory through Hồ Dzếnh's retrospective contemplation of the

past in relation to the present. As the author himself observes, the past leaves a powerful impression, with things seen and heard tinged with an extraordinary hue (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 119). Consequently, memory in *Old Horizon* reveals a range of issues that are significant not only for understanding the work itself but also for comprehending the author's literary world.

Accordingly, this article examines *Old Horizon*—the 2022 edition published by Kim Đồng Publishing House, which contains fifteen stories—from the perspective of memory. Drawing upon key ideas in memory studies, the article focuses on two principal dimensions: the realm of memory concerning “kin” and the disclosure of identity.

1. Memory and Memory Studies

Memory is a way of (re)imagining the past, encompassing both what is remembered and the process of remembering itself.

Memory differs from history, although both share a concern with the past. Whereas memory is inherently subjective, affective, and often fragmentary, emerging from the lived experiences of individuals or groups, history is to some extent objective, purposeful, and systematic, relying on concrete and verifiable evidence in its pursuit of collective truths and shared understandings.

Unlike history, memory does not seek to attain universality or comprehensive truth. Due to its subjective and experiential nature, memory constitutes a process through which individuals and communities select and construct their own pasts. Individuals and communities remember-and forget-selectively, and this selectivity is a prerequisite for the meaning-making (Rigney, 2019, p. 375).

Ultimately, such acts of remembering and meaning-making are shaped by present needs. Depending on present circumstances, individuals and communities preserve and construct different memories. In this sense, representations of memory often reveal more about the present condition of the remembering subject or community—their desires, expectations, and rejections—than about the actual events in the past (Neumann, 2008, p. 333).

Memory is therefore dynamic in nature. It possesses the capacity for reflection and reconstruction while simultaneously participating

in the formation and reconfiguration of identity in response to present concerns.

It should also be noted that, on the one hand, memory operates through individual psychological processes associated with specific events, thereby generating *mnemonic focal points* (tiêu điểm kí ức). On the other hand, it functions within the social and cultural frameworks of communities to which individuals belong. Consequently, the privacy of memory can never be separated from the network of cultural symbols and social practices in which the remembering subject participates (Nguyen, 2025, p. 455), a network that necessarily encompasses questions of identity.

This broad understanding of memory is one of the key outcomes of memory studies, a field that has developed rapidly from the 1980s onward in response to ideological fragmentation, the formation and reconfiguration of nation-states, and the need to rethink and retell stories of the past and collective identity. Originating from investigations of individual memory, memory studies has evolved into a highly interdisciplinary field characterized by the diversity in concepts, theoretical orientations, and methodological approaches.

Literature, with its unique capacity to reveal the internal processes of remembering, reconstructing, and forgetting—including thoughts, emotions, and perspectives across multiple levels of experience (Milevski & Wetenkamp, 2022, p. 199)—has given rise to a particularly vibrant research branch known as *literary memory studies*.

Memory and literature intersect in their shared inability-and refusal-to provide complete or exhaustive representations of the past. Like memory itself, literature operates through acts of selection: deciding what to narrate and what to omit, what to reveal and what to conceal, while organizing past events around specific focal points. Moreover, through its aesthetic qualities, figurative language, and multilayered density, literature possesses the power to render memories memorable. It provides reasons for remembering and modes through which their meanings may be contemplated. In this way, literature not only preserves memory but also shapes it; it not only represents memory but also functions as a remedy against amnesia and as a catalyst for bringing

marginalized or forgotten groups back into the sphere of remembrance (Rigney, 2019, p. 378).

Drawing upon these perspectives of memory and memory studies, this article argues that *Old Horizon*, as an autobiographical collection, represents an effort to preserve and reconstruct the past in response to the life changes experienced by the author(-changes that affected the durability and quality of memory itself (Assmann, 2008, p. 111)). The work demonstrates a subtle interplay between individual memory and collective (familial) memory, filtered through the author's personal reflections and closely linked to an exploration of the origins of identity in relation to realities.

2. *Old Horizon*: The Realm of Memory Concerning "Kin"

Given the distinctive and highly individualized conception of "kin" in *Old Horizon*, it is first necessary to clarify the concept of "kin" as it is employed in this study, alongside the framework of memory.

In the common sense, "kin" generally refer to individuals connected through blood ties, marriage, or close emotional bonds and shared experiences, most often within a family or kinship network. This sense has remained largely consistent throughout human history.

However, within *kinship studies*-particularly since the latter half of the twentieth century-the concept of kin has undergone significant transformation. Rather than being defined solely by blood relations, marriage, lineage, or economic obligations, kin is increasingly understood as a matter of choice and construction based on shared experiences, care, and emotional attachment. Accordingly, kin is no longer regarded as a fixed biological condition but as a fluid, ambivalent, and socially constructed relationship shaped through interactions among individuals, communities, culture, and society.

Drawing upon this overview perspective, this article proposes a characteristic understanding of kin for analyzing the realm of memory in Hồ Dzếnh's *Old Horizon*.

Accordingly, *kin*, on the one hand, is a psychological-affective experience, inseparable from socio-cultural context, on the other hand, are

those who evoke a sense of familiarity, intimacy, safety, dependence, and, most importantly, a feeling of "thân-thương" (close-affectionate), arising from the awareness of shared experiences and perceived commonality.

Under this understanding, kin may or may not be connected through blood, lineage, or marriage; sometimes, they need not even be human beings. Since kinship is constructed rather than given, the state of being kin may emerge, persist, or disappear over time. Individuals may accept, reject, or remain ambivalent toward particular kin, while simultaneously being accepted, rejected, or ambiguously positioned by others. Similar dynamics operate on the socio-cultural level as well - either acceptance or rejection, or a state of duality regarding kin - who are "products" of social conventions, of cultural structures, or vice versa.

In *Old Horizon*, kin belong not only to the sphere of kinship (studies) but also to that of memory (studies). Consequently, they possess characteristics situated at the intersection of both domains. We therefore propose the concept of "memory-kin" (người thân kí ức). Such figures display four primary characteristics:

1. Memory-kin are relatively unilateral in the subject's re-imagination/re-examination, thus showing the movement of the subject's *sense of kin* (cảm quan người thân) toward kin.

2. Due to the selective nature of memory, memory-kin are (re)imagined around mnemonic focal points which generate or link to the quality of "thân-thương" and specific manifestations.

3. Because memory is shaped by present needs, memory-kin constitute *updated images* of kin, redefining both "intersection" and "distance" in accordance with the subject's current circumstances.

4. These processes operate within broader social and cultural frameworks.

From this perspective, kin function as central mnemonic focal points in *Old Horizon*. They include both concrete individuals (whether related by blood or not) and more abstract entities such as places and nations. They appear through the author's dynamic reassessment, characterized by acceptance and appreciation as well as rejection, uncertainty, and ambivalence. Rather than existing

independently, these features interact within broader socio-cultural contexts that inevitably shape the author's sense of kin. Nevertheless, what unites them is a shared quality of tragedy-sorrow, hardship, and cruel destiny-which form the mnemonic core through which Hồ Dzếnh experiences the feeling of "thân-thương." He is not merely a witness to these sufferings, but a participant in them.

This pattern is particularly evident in the memories of blood kin: his father, mother, two elder brothers, and younger sister.

The mother and father are the two kin to whom the author devotes the most space to portray the "tragic" nature of their fates-particularly the mother. The author portrays her both as a representative of the Vietnamese rural woman-self-sacrificing, industrious, and resilient-and as an individual burdened by unique hardships. Following the loss of her husband, she struggled alone to raise her children, only to find herself lonely and unsupported in old age.

As a result, *Old Horizon* is haunted by recurring images of a poor, sorrowful, and lonely mother. She appears from lamentations about a marriage of poverty that has faded with time (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 9), to a haggard, weary appearance when waiting to give bread to her child in the sad twilight (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 11); from recounting family circumstances in front of the teacher (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 17), to reassuring words about borrowing money "temporarily" to pay tuition, and to the quiet tolerance when one son fell astray in life, despite her old age and weakness (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 128).

Every time looking back, the author, therefore, is overwhelmed by feelings of guilt and regret. The image of an elderly woman leaning on a walking stick, waiting in vain for her absent "children," becomes one of the most painful memories in the autobiographical collection and also a reminder of the author's failures as a son. (Ho, 1943/2022, pp. 126-127, 133) - in awareness of his own indifference, selfishness, and unfulfilled responsibility in the reality of many years away from home without ever thinking about returning (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 38).

A similar experience of tragedy also appears

in the memory of the father - visualized in the contrast of family life before and after his death.

In the author's memories, it was the father who made the family prosperous from nothing, with sweat, tears, perseverance, unwavering determination, and honesty like a railway track (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 10). From an unknown foreigner like many of compatriots when he first came to Vietnam, the father gradually gained a respectable position in the region thanks to his early learning of French to work as an interpreter, then at the salt administration, and later became a timber merchant (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 43). The father was also well-versed in literature and had extensive connections with both Vietnamese and foreigners. This often left the author proud and respectful (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 54).

However, since the father's death from bone disease (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 49), although he no longer exists physically, in the author's memory, amidst the decline and division of the family, he remains present, at least in the photograph on the altar, in all the events of decline and division: from the mother gradually selling off the house and then the white horse (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 57) to the mother and the second wife fighting (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 61); from the younger sister Dìn leaving home (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 66) to the miserable plight of the three sons (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 56).

Even now - waking up from a dream at noon with the strange sound of roosters crowing, the image of the father returning on horseback, trembling as if waiting for a faint breeze to vanish (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 56) still appears in the author's "eyes" as a fleeting, majestic image of a past that quickly disappears in the wheel of fate, both reminiscent of the nomadic Chinese people and belonging to the sense of time - "a fleeting foal passing by the window" (bóng câu qua cửa sổ).

It should be added that, in the stream of memories, the author envisioned his father and mother not only through their individual lives, but also through the cultural flavors of their two nations. If his father was talented, strong, and serious from his eyes, ears, and speech - belonging to the Chinese soul - then his mother was kind, tolerant, and forgiving - reflecting the soul of

Vietnam. If the father's presence was tinged with the northern ocean breeze (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 22), then the mother's presence was gentle, like the ferryman's song on the southern Ghép River (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 24). And amidst the turbulent time, they met and became husband and wife.

Then, from the turbulent lives of his parents, the narrator sadly perceived a harsh destiny, a dark and sorrowful fate (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 20), not only belonging to their own lives but also "inherited" into the lives of his two older brothers and younger sister.

From memories, the narrator always felt an "invisible distance" creeping into the familial bond between himself and his siblings, making them distant despite living close together. That distance could be due to age (Ho, 1943/2022, pp. 136-137), due to half-siblings (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 61), or perhaps due to personal feelings (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 127). But whatever the reason, it is this distance that creates the "tragic" nature in their fates and relationships. In the face of the siblings' "suffering," the narrator was always in a dilemma - hesitant to help but unable to, or even causing further "harm", leading the siblings down irreversible paths.

It can be said that, from parents to siblings - typical kin - Hồ Dzếnh wrote about them with both their own unique characteristics and with a shared, vague yet clear sense of fate. In the author's memory, their lives were more sad than happy, and tragedy and hardship hung over them.

Among the blood kin, noteworthy are those with Chinese blood or ancestry, such as the father, sister-in-law, and nephew - whom the author viewed beyond their individual personalities, feeling compassion for the shared fate of lonely immigrants - living under the prejudice and discrimination of the local people. Most poignant are the pieces of writing about the sister-in-law and nephew.

While a refined young lady from a wealthy family in China, because of the work of restoring the lineage, she had to become a daughter-in-law in a poor family, a wife to a miserable husband, a displaced woman (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 31). Having been accustomed to being pampered, she had to grind rice; from her floral blouse and silk shoes,

she changed to an indigo blouse and buffalo hide sandals (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 33). She ate meagerly and often cried because of her mother-in-law's hardships (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 32). In her, the narrator often felt a longing to return home, a loneliness that deepens when her two closest kin (her husband (the eldest brother) and the narrator) are absent (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 43). As for the orphaned nephew, who was displaced to Vietnam due to war, the narrator also recognized that same alienation and loneliness, but within the family, especially after the death of the father (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 152). The proof is that the nephew did not dare to ask for money to buy notebooks (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 155), he had to save money for candy before wretched meals (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 153) and he endured the contemptuous attitude of his teacher as well (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 155).

However, the above is not all the feelings the author has about kin. In *Old Horizon*, Hồ Dzếnh not only showed deep affection for his blood kin, but also, to some extent, resisted and rejected those kin in whom he found no "thân-thương" and who, on the contrary, were the cause of the "tragic" nature of fates of other kin.

This is the case with uncle Nhì and maternal uncle, respectively in their relationship with the mother/father-absent family and sister Yên/brother Phụng.

Uncle Nhì's stinginess, upon the first meeting, led the narrator to have negative thoughts about a part of the extended family that had disappeared in China (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 72). Then, a year after the father's death, his reappearance, marked by disappointment rather than compassion (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 78), and sitting and smoking opium while waiting for that large sum of money to return to China (whereas the mother frantically borrowed money) (Ho, 1943/2022, pp. 80-81), further intensified the feeling of distance. Meanwhile, the maternal uncle truly evoked a feeling of alienation, even "hatred," in the narrator, despite the mother's mention of the pressure of *traditional kinship*: Blood is thicker than water (Một giọt máu đào hơn ao nước lã) (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 102). This is because, by intuition, on that early morning when Yên hurriedly left, the narrator knew that it was the maternal uncle who had

humiliated her (Ho, 1943/2022, pp. 106, 112), and thus indirectly shattered the love affair that Yên and Phụng - two “kin” not related by blood - and the narrator had longed for. From this event, their lives carried a great question, a lingering sadness, a terrible tragedy: Yên and her small family suffered multiple deaths (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 107), while Phụng was “dragged” into an iron carriage - often used to transport livestock to the New World (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 118).

In these cases, it can be seen that, on the one hand, Hồ Dzếnh resisted these kin with whom the author did not feel any connection or empathy with them; on the other hand, with Yên and Phụng, because they lived together and shared joys and sorrows, the narrator also carried within himself the ups and downs of their lives (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 113).

Furthermore, besides the kin, who are humans, throughout the autobiographical pieces, although not directly mentioned, the birthplace and distant ancestral home also feature “symbolic kin” in the author’s imagination. There, the author does not view Thanh Hóa and China as soulless places; instead, he finds “thân-thương” - not specific, but pervasive within the force of memory. Due to the distance from his hometown and the reality of not being in contact with his blood kin, Thanh Hóa and China have taken on the function of “symbolic kin,” providing the feeling of “thân-thương,” belonging, protection, and connection to the author in his “unsatisfactory” reality.

Thanh Hóa is envisioned in contrast to the capital city of Hanoi - a place that witnessed the joys and sorrows of adulthood, cherished in the poetic descriptions of childhood about a tranquil, idyllic suburban area with cool, windy fields, peaceful sunsets accompanied by the flutes of the Mường people, and forests where glimpses of indigo clothing can be seen, playing a role of a source of solace for the author’s soul when far from home. Meanwhile, China appears as a mythical, distant yet always beckoning and haunting figure, and whenever mentioned, the author is always drawn to it, feeling the intertwined love of family, lineage, and homeland through the father’s stories of his paternal family, through the impression of the desert winds of Mongolia, Shaanxi, and Gansu, and the forests of the Guangxi region (Ho,

1943/2022, p. 46). And in the hypothetical situation of having to choose between the two, for the author, crying would be the only answer. It is because he understood the complex state of mind of a person whose blood contains two kinds of essence, besides allowing his heart to be moved to the very end by a love that has existed for a thousand years without explanation (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 148).

In short, with *Old Horizon*, Hồ Dzếnh opened up the realm of memory concerning “kin” that is selective and unique. There, kin can be blood kin belonging to the family, and at the same time, kin outside the family, and non-human kin. These “kin” exist within the author’s complex, the core of which is the “tragic” nature of fate - the very thing that creates the feeling of “thân-thương” and endless remorse in the author.

3. *Old Horizon*: The Disclosure of Identity

Conceptually, identity is commonly understood as the set of characteristics that distinguish one individual from another. While Romantic thought tended to regard identity as fixed and essential, contemporary scholarship increasingly emphasizes its fluidity and dynamic nature (Thomsen, 2025, p. 256). Investigating identity therefore involves addressing two interrelated issues: the uniqueness of an entity in relation to other beings and the continuity of that entity through changes in time and space (Nguyen, 2023, p. 1235).

Memory, because of its dynamic character and its close relationship to the present needs of the subject, constitutes a crucial factor in the formation of identity. Through what individuals choose to remember and forget, as well as through the narratives they construct about their past (Shoemaker, 2015, p. 881), their identities become discernible. Ultimately, memory is the means through which individuals imagine and narrate themselves-both their past selves and present selves. Such narratives do not exist in isolation but emerge through interactions with others and are articulated through specific forms of storytelling (Ricoeur, 1990/1992, pp. 147-148). In turn, identity, continuously transformed and reconstructed, generates new perspectives on the past and thus produces new memories.

Identity and memory therefore exist in a

reciprocal and dialectical relationship. Viewed from the perspective of memory, identity reflects an ongoing process through which individuals negotiate their understanding of themselves from the past to the present reference point.

In *Old Horizon*, Hồ Dzếnh not only constructs a realm of memory centered on “kin,” but also discloses the origins of his personal identity. Through memory, he paints a self-portrait marked by two defining characteristics: a Sino-Vietnamese hybrid identity and a temperament characterized by melancholy and compassion.

The first dimension of this identity derives from his mixed cultural heritage. Born to a Cantonese father and a Vietnamese mother, Hồ Dzếnh occupied a liminal position between two cultural traditions. Yet geographical distance and emotional separation (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 34) rendered China a distant presence, appearing in his imagination like a veil of mist hovering over the Vietnamese landscape. Even so, through selective memories of China, readers can discern how this ancestral origin shaped his aesthetic sensibility. The influence of Chinese cultural heritage can be observed in his classical literary style, his dignified and somewhat mythic imagination, his nostalgic narrative voice, and his persistent fascination with an ancestral homeland that remains both distant and alluring (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 40). It is evident in his evocation of invisible bonds that transcend rational explanation (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 155) and in his references to classical Chinese poetry, such as *A Night Mooring at Maple Bridge* (*Phong kiều dạ bạc*) (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 28-29). This Chinese dimension extends beyond *Old Horizon* into his poetry, where it frequently appears as a longing for origins and a desire to reconnect with ancestral roots (the case of *Homesick* (*Tu hương*)).

If China appears as a misty layer covering Hồ Dzếnh’s inner world, Vietnam represents the atmosphere he breathes daily—a lived reality that is immediate, intimate, and concrete. From rural landscapes to his childhood experiences among ordinary Vietnamese people, his attachment to Vietnam developed naturally and profoundly. This attachment nurtured his appreciation for simplicity, sincerity, and the beauty of everyday life. Within

the cultural context of colonial Vietnam during a period of transition between East and West, the idealized vision of the *Maternal Homeland* (*Quê ngoại*, 1942), especially in contrast to the cosmopolitan allure of Hanoi, constitutes one of the clearest manifestations of this sentiment (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 125). Through his affection for his mother’s homeland, Hồ Dzếnh gradually extended his sense of belonging toward the Vietnamese cultural spirit itself, which became a fundamental component of his identity (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 147).

Alongside this hybrid cultural identity, *Old Horizon* reveals another dual dimension of Hồ Dzếnh’s selfhood: melancholy and compassion.

Melancholy appears both as an inherent personality trait (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 13, 34) and as the consequence of a childhood marked by loss, suffering, and the hardships endured by those he regarded as kin. Throughout the autobiographical collection, Hồ Dzếnh repeatedly mourns alongside the tragic destinies of family members and close companions, particularly women. Their images continue to haunt his memory whenever he reflects upon his own life (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 64). The sorrowful figure of his sister-in-law kneeling before her husband’s anger (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 145), Yên’s terrified expression as she departs (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 105), and the mistreatment suffered by his younger sister (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 64) all become enduring symbols of human vulnerability and suffering.

From an aesthetic perspective, the unhappy and difficult lives of these kin also serve as the foundation for the distinctive sense of incompleteness that characterizes Hồ Dzếnh’s literary works. The origins of this sensibility can be traced to the unfinished love stories he witnessed or personally experienced: the failed relationships of his elder brothers (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 140, 94), the separation of Yên and Phụng, and his own disappointments in love (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 140). These experiences were eventually transformed into a broader reflection on the beauty and sadness of incompleteness, most memorably expressed in his celebrated poem *Hesitation* (*Ngập ngừng*), where fulfillment is portrayed not as the culmination of love but as the end of its poetic possibility.

Accompanying this melancholy is an equally profound sense of compassion. As a sensitive and emotionally receptive individual, Hồ Dzếnh expresses sincere sympathy for the suffering of those around him. This compassion emerges simultaneously from the perspective of the child who directly experienced these events and from the mature author who later reflects upon them. Consequently, his compassion possesses both the innocence of childhood and the depth of adult reflection.

Numerous episodes in *Old Horizon* illustrate this quality. He initially resents his mother for forcing his sister-in-law to perform exhausting labor, only later recognizing that his mother herself was a victim of long-standing hardship and inherited social prejudices (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 32-33). He criticizes his second brother's seemingly self-destructive lifestyle before coming to understand the overwhelming pressures that shaped it (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 133-135). Likewise, his affection for his sister-in-law combines sympathy for her suffering with gratitude for the lessons in kindness and humanity she imparted to him (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 34-35).

Importantly, Hồ Dzếnh's compassion extends beyond individual relationships and becomes a broader ethical principle. Through an artist's sensibility, he transforms familial affection into a universal form of love that transcends conventional notions of kinship, nationality, and personal attachment. For him, genuine love possesses the capacity to embrace all that is worthy of reverence and care (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 93-94).

At the same time, Hồ Dzếnh's personal identity cannot be separated from collective identity. The characteristics disclosed through his memories reveal not only his inner self but also the identities of those around him and, then, the generation of lower-middle-class intellectuals who lived in colonial Vietnam during the first half of the twentieth century. Their lives were marked by encounters and separations, tensions between personal aspirations and collective responsibilities, and difficult choices shaped simultaneously by individual desires and historical circumstances.

Nevertheless, in Hồ Dzếnh's case, the hybrid Sino-Vietnamese identity and the intertwined

qualities of melancholy and compassion ultimately became guiding principles throughout his life (Ho, 1943/2022, p. 157). These dimensions of identity formed the foundation of his decision to pursue literature as a means of affirming existence itself. Through writing, he transformed suffering into artistic value (the case of the poem *Cultivation is a realm of blessing* (*Tu là cõi phúc*)). *Old Horizon* demonstrates how literature enabled him to reconstruct the past, revisit and reinterpret his relationships with kin, and ultimately gained a deeper understanding of him and the choices that defined his life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, viewed through the lens of memory, Hồ Dzếnh's *Old Horizon* (*Chân trời cũ*) can be understood as an attempt to reconstruct the past through processes of selection and reflection. The work presents a distinctive realm of memory centered on "kin," expanding conventional understandings of kin (and kinship), and revealing the complex emotional relationships that connect the narrator to those he regards as kin. At the core of these relationships lies the feeling of "thân-thương" (close-affectionate) inseparable from experiences of suffering and tragedy.

Alongside this mnemonic realm of kin, Hồ Dzếnh also constructs a self-portrait that discloses the foundations of his identity. Through memory, he reveals a hybrid Sino-Vietnamese identity as well as a temperament characterized by melancholy and compassion. These dimensions of identity are not merely personal attributes but emerge through continuous interaction with family history, cultural inheritance, and lived experience.

Consequently, *Old Horizon* demonstrates how memory functions as a constructive process through which identity is continuously negotiated and redefined. By revisiting and reinterpreting the past, Hồ Dzếnh not only preserves memory but also establishes a personal philosophy grounded in self-awareness, responsibility, and humanistic values. Ultimately, art and literature become the means through which he transforms memory into meaning and affirms both his identity and his way of being in the world.

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