**Three pre-colonial Vietnamese poems by or about women**

Ho Xuan Huong (1772-1822) is one of Vietnam’s most famous poets, with schools and streets named after her in most Vietnamese cities. She mastered elevated Chinese poetic forms, but used them to subversive ends – speaking frankly about the position of women (she was a concubine herself), having children out of wedlock, and sexual desire.

I’m including links to a website that reproduces the poem in nom (the demotic Vietnamese script – it looks like Chinese but it’s not), in quoc ngu (Romanized Vietnamese), and an English translation by John Balaban.

I. “The Condition of Woman.” This poem may be a fake, written in Ho Xuan Huong’s “voice.”

<http://nomfoundation.org/vnpf_new/index.php?IDcat=421&hn=2&cat=3&subcat=28>

II. “Spring-Watching Pavilion”

http://nomfoundation.org/vnpf\_new/index.php?IDcat=421&hn=2&cat=3&subcat=49

III. *Truyen Kieu* (“The Story of Kieu”) is a novel-length poem written by the Vietnamese official Nguyen Du (1766-1820), probably at the beginning of the 19th century. It is hands-down the most famous and beloved work of literature in Vietnamese.

*Truyen Kieu* is actually based on a trashy Chinese novel from that time. The original novel traces the trials and travails of Kieu as she is forced into prostitution, made a concubine of a rich playboy, married to a warlord, almost drowned in a river, et cetera. The Vietnamese version is written in exceptionally beautiful 6/8 verse and treats Kieu with extraordinary empathy.

I’ve cut and pasted the first several pages of Huynh Sang Thong’s translation (link to googlebook below), but it does not have the explanatory footnotes.

Selection from the beginning of *Truyen Kieu* (The Tale of Kieu) by Nguyen Du, translated by Huynh Sanh Thong

A hundred years in this life span on earth

talent and destiny are apt to feud.

You must go through a play of ebb and flow\*

and watch such things as make you sick at heart.

Is it so strange that losses balance gains?\*

Blue Heaven's wont to strike arose from spite.\*

By lamplight turn these scented leaves and read

a tale of love recorded in old books.

Under the Chia-ching reign when Ming held sway,\*

all lived at peace – both capitals stood strong.\*

There was a burgher in the clan of Vuong,\*

a man of modest wealth and middle rank.

He had a last-born son, Vuong Quan, his hope\*

to carry on a line of learned folk.

Two daughters, beauties both, had come before:

Thuy Kieu was oldest, younger was Thuy Van.\*

Bodies like slim plum branches, snow-pure souls:

each her own self, each perfect in her way.

In quiet grace Van was beyond compare:

her face a moon, her eyebrows two full curves;

her smile a flower, her voice the song of jade;

her hair the sheen of clouds, her skin white snow.

Yet Kieu possessed a keener, deeper charm,

surpassing Van in talents and in looks.

Her eyes were autumn streams, her brows spring hills.

Flowers grudged her glamour, willows her fresh hue.

A glance or two from her, and kingdoms rocked!

Supreme in looks, she had few peers in gifts.

By Heaven blessed with wit, she knew all skills:

she could write verse and paint, could sing and chant.

Of music she had mastered all five tones\*

and played the lute far better than Ai Chang.\*

She had composed a song called Cruel Fate\*

to mourn all women in soul-rending strains.

A paragon of grace for womanhood,\*

she neared that time when maidens pinned their hair.\*

She calmly lived behind drawn shades and drapes,

as wooers swarmed, unheeded, by the wall.\*

Swift swallows and spring days were shuttling by –

of ninety radiant ones three score had fled.

Young grass spread all its green to heaven's rim;

some blossoms marked pear branches with white dots.

Now came the Feast of Light in the third month\*

with graveyard rites and junkets on the green.

As merry pilgrims flocked from near and far,\*

the sisters and their brother went for a stroll.

Fine men and beauteous women on parade:

a crush of clothes, a rush of wheels and steeds.

Folks clambered burial knolls to strew and burn

sham gold or paper coins, and ashes swirled.

Now, as the sun was dipping toward the west,

the youngsters started homeward, hand in hand.

With leisured steps they walked along a brook,

admiring here and there a pretty view.

The rivulet, babbling, curled and wound its course

under a bridge that spanned it farther down.

Beside the road a mound of earth loomed up

where withered weeds, half yellow and half green.

Kieu asked: "Now that the Feast of Light is on,

why is no incense burning for this grave?"

Vuong Quan told her this tale from first to last:

"She was a famous singer once, Dam Tien.\*

Renowned for looks and talents in her day,

she lacked not lovers jostling at her door.\*

But fate makes roses fragile – in mid-spring\*

off broke the flower that breathed forth heaven's scents.

From overseas a stranger came to woo

and win a girl whose name spread far and wide.

But when the lover's boat sailed into port,

he found the pin had snapped, the vase had crashed.\*

A death-still silence filled the void, her room;\*

all tracks of horse or wheels had blurred to moss.

He wept, full of a grief no words could tell:

“Harsh is the fate that has kept us apart!

Since in this life we are not meant to meet,

let me pledge you my troth for our next life.”

He purchased both a coffin and a hearse\*

and rested her in dust beneath this mound,

among the grass and flowers. “For many moons,\*

who's come to tend a grave that no one claims?”

A well of pity lay within Kieu's heart:

as soon as she had heard her tears burst forth.\*

“How sorrowful is women's lot!” she cried.

“We all partake of woe, our common fate.

Creator, why are you so mean and cruel,

blighting green days and fading rose-fresh cheeks?\*

Alive, she played the wife to all the world,

alas, to end down there without a man!

Where are they now who shared in her embrace?\*

Where are they now who lusted for her charms?\*

Since no one else gives her a glance, a thought,

I'll light some incense candles while I'm here.

I'll mark our chance encounter on the road –

perhaps, down by the Yellow Springs, she'll know.”

She prayed in mumbled tones, then she knelt down

to make a few low bows before the tomb.

Dusk gathered on a patch of wilted weeds –

reed tassels swayed as gently blew the breeze.

She pulled a pin out of her hair and graved

four lines of stop-short verse on a tree's bark.\*

Deeper and deeper sank her soul in trance –

all hushed, she tarried there and would not leave.

The cloud on her fair face grew darker yet:

as sorrow ebbed or flowed, tears dropped or streamed.

Van said: "My sister, you should be laughed at,

lavishing tears on one long dead and gone!"

"Since ages out of mind," retorted Kieu,

"harsh fate has cursed all women, sparing none.\*

As I see her lie there, it hurts to think

what will become of me in later days."

"A fine speech you just made!" protested Quan.

"It jars the ears to hear you speak of her

and mean yourself. Dank air hangs heavy here –

day's failing, and there's still a long way home."

Kieu said: "When one who shines in talent dies,

the body passes on, the soul remains.

In her, perhaps, I've found a kindred heart:

let's wait and soon enough she may appear."

Before they could respond to what Kieu said,

a whirlwind rose from nowhere, raged and raved.

It blustered, strewing buds and shaking trees

and scattering whiffs of perfume in the air.

They strode along the path the whirlwind took

and plainly saw fresh footprints on the moss.

They stared at one another, terror-struck.

"You've heard the prayer of my pure faith!" Kieu cried.

"As kindred hearts, we've joined each other here –

transcending life and death, soul sisters meet."

Dam Tien had cared to manifest herself:

to what she'd written Kieu now added thanks.

A poet's feelings, rife with anguish, flowed:

she carved an old-style poem on the tree.\*

To leave or stay – they all were wavering still\*

when nearby rang the sound of harness bells.

They saw a youthful scholar come their way

astride a colt he rode with slackened rein.

He carried poems packing half his bag,\*

and tagging at his heels were some page boys.

His frisky horse's coat was dyed with snow.

His gown blent tints of grass and pale blue sky.

He spied them from afar, at once alit

and walked toward them to pay them his respects.

His figured slippers trod the green – the field

now sparkled like some jade-and-ruby grove.

Young Vuong stepped forth and greeted him he knew

while two shy maidens hid behind the flowers.

He came from somewhere not so far away,

Kim Trong, a scion of the noblest stock.\*

Born into wealth and talent, he'd received

his wit from heaven, a scholar's trade from men.

Manner and mien set him above the crowd:

he studied books indoors, lived high abroad.

Since birth he'd always called this region home –

he and young Vuong were classmates at their school.

His neighbors' fame had spread and reached his ear:

two beauties locked in their Bronze Sparrow Tower!\*

But, as if hills and streams had barred the way,

he had long sighed and dreamt of them, in vain.

How lucky, in this season of new leaves,\*

to roam about and find his yearned-for flowers!

He caught a fleeting glimpse of both afar:

spring orchid, autumn mum – a gorgeous pair!

Beautiful girl and talented young manó

what stirred their hearts their eyes still dared not say.

They hovered, rapture-bound, `tween wake and dream:

they could not stay, nor would they soon depart.

The dusk of sunset prompted thoughts of gloom –

he left, and longingly she watched him go.

Below a stream flowed clear, and by the bridge

a twilit willow rustled threads of silk.

Link to googlebooks:

http://books.google.com/books?id=95isiQ3ZhN4C&printsec=frontcover&dq=nguyen+du+kieu&lr=&as\_brr=0&as\_pt=ALLTYPES#v=onepage&q=nguyen%20du%20kieu&f=false