

*Commentary by
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The Cleansing Power of Poetry

When power leads man towards arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations... When power corrupts, poetry cleanses. For art establishes the basic human truth which must serve as the touchstone of our judgement... If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him.

—John F. Kennedy
(Amherst College, 1963)

John Balaban's translation of *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Ho Xuan Huong* (Copper Canyon Press, 2000) is as important a work on Vietnamese poetry and culture as any by a non-Vietnamese since the U.S. Marines landed in DaNang in 1965. Strong words I know, but in writing this review, I have let myself be guided by the Vietnamese dichotomy of *Tinh*—feeling—and *Ly* (pronounced Lee)—reason. Thus, my objective assessment is grounded in my own subjectivity. Therefore, let me introduce myself.

I was born in the village of Su Lo Dong (or “Master Confucius Village East”) about ten miles south of Hue, the imperial capital of a Vietnam that was unified from 1802 until August 1945 when the last emperor, Bao Dai, abdicated and handed his sword and his seal to a three-man delegation. (One of them, laureate poet Cu Huy Can, is now 81 and serves as chairman of the Scientific Council of the Trung Tam Nghien Cuu Quoc Hoc: Center for National Culture Studies.) My ancestors

came from the North following the Nguyen Lords who were competing with the Trinh Lords for the succession to the Le throne in early 18th century. They settled in central Vietnam. My father was a laureate of the last imperial examinations in 1919, when they were abolished by the French colonial administration. The French conquest of Vietnam in 1884 darkened the landscape and the future of the country with the thick veil of “Quoc Han” (“national shame”), affecting every citizen and humiliating the gentry-scholar class of my father, his friends, and his relatives. Many of them withdrew from the “dusty world” of officialdom and cooperation with the foreign masters, while others accepted positions in the new royal Vietnamese administrations. My father withdrew to his village, away from things “that disturb the ears and irritate the eyes,” devoting all his time and energy to his self-appointed role as the Intellectual-Scholar-in-Residence. In such a position he was also the moral leader of the community. We were not rich, but we lived comfortably on the income from the land my father inherited from my grandfather, a mandarin in the Department of Ceremonials.

When I turned seven, my father taught each of my brothers and me how “to be a human being” first and later a *quan tu* (literally, son of the king, or a gentleman). That education was based on studying Confucius, reading poetry by great Vietnamese poets as well as some famous Chinese poets, and doing Chinese calligraphy. I was attracted to the Chinese character, each representing a figure, a stylized picture, and a feeling. I still remember the day when I was ten years old and I had the honor—much disputed by my brothers—to serve chrysanthemum tea to his friends who gathered at our home on the fifteenth of the eighth month “to welcome autumn.” My father and his friends not only discussed poetry; they also talked politics, or how to get rid of the “national shame.” They exchanged views about Vietnamese patriotic leaders both at home and abroad, leaders like Phan Boi Chau (1867-1940) and Nguyen Ai Quoc who emerged in September 1945 as Ho Chi Minh, President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Their patriotic poems and messages were smuggled into Vietnam from abroad—from Japan, China, and France. By the time I was admitted to Quoc Hoc (National Studies) School, the most prestigious and competitive institution in Vietnam—attended by the late President Ngo Dinh Diem, Ho Chi Minh, General Vo Nguyen Giap and practically all of the major political figures of post-World War II Vietnam—I considered myself already educated on how to be a “human being.”

In the mid-1960s, after the November 1, 1963, *coup d'etat* that ended with the murder of President Diem and my subsequent departure from public, diplomatic service, I spent a great deal of time speaking publicly (at schools, associations, churches), for peace in Vietnam. I was convinced then that without the moral authority of President Diem, an anti-colonial nationalist who, at age 32, resigned

as Minister of the Interior when the French refused to grant Vietnam independence, there would be no one who could negotiate with President Ho Chi Minh who, at Diem's death stated, "after all, President Diem was a patriot." Without Diem, no one would be able to lead "South Vietnam" to a place of respect within the world, I believed. I worked closely with the American Friends Service Committee (Quakers), the Committee of Responsibility (COR), and the Fellowship of Reconciliation. I corresponded with John Balaban in 1969 and in May of that year I formally spoke at Penn State University, where Balaban then taught, before an audience of thousands.

To be a human being and a Vietnamese during the turbulent times in which I grew up meant to know Vietnamese culture and poetry and to search for the ways and means to rid the country of foreign domination. *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Ho Xuan Huong* gives us extended insight into that world. Although the poetry of Ho Xuan Huong was taught at school, it was not as popular as the *Truyen Kieu (The Tale of Kieu)*. But she attracted more curiosity and greater admiration among the more "open-minded" scholars. The authoritative Foreign Languages Publications directed by Dr. Nguyen Khac Vien during the 1970s and 1980s in Hanoi, offered a number of poems by Ho Xuan Huong in its 1972 *Anthologie de la Littérature Vietnamiennne*. A lengthy presentation of the famous poetess concludes: "The content and the literary qualities of her work made her poems enjoy a great popularity, undisputed by any other writing of the same time. It must be recognized that her play of words, the often transparent evocations in Vietnamese, are literally *untranslatable*" [my emphasis].

So when John Balaban, whom I had known for over three decades, confided in me that he was going to translate the poetry of Ho Xuan Huong, my first reaction was surprise. After some reflection, recalling his translation of Vietnamese Ca Dao folk poetry, his deep love for the Vietnamese culture, and his affection for the Vietnamese people, I formally encouraged him. I felt both proud and concerned as if I were just being informed by my own brother that he was going to be a monk. Knowing the impossibility of his task, I offered him a prayer to the Buddha of Compassion, for the character "poetry" is made of two components, "word" and "temple." Prayer aside, I hoped that because of his exceptional background and his meticulous work on *Ca Dao Vietnam: An Anthology of Vietnamese Folk Poetry* (Unicorn Press, 1980), he might succeed. We did not discuss his "Ho Xuan Huong" project for years. In 1994, when I read his long article on the poetry of Vietnam in the Winter, 1994, issue of *Asian Art & Culture*, published by the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution, I had a hunch that someday soon Balaban

would bring out some work on Ho Xuan Huong, whom he identified as “a curious Vietnamese woman who flourished around 1800.” In this excellent study, Balaban devoted over two pages to “one of the most gifted Vietnamese poets of all times” (37), and he translated one of her poems, “Canh Thu” (“Autumn Landscape”). The translation was up to my expectations. I strongly recommend this article to anyone who wishes to know about the essentials of Vietnamese poetry.

In 1967, as a conscientious objector, Balaban was sent to Vietnam as a voluntary instructor at the University of Can Tho in the deep south of southern Vietnam, where, as he once wrote, “the Mekong like the Mississippi, runs flat and muddy ... [and] its branches are called Cuu Long (Nine Dragons). Like dragons, the great rivers of Vietnam—the Red and the Black in the North, the Perfume in the Center (Hue), the Mekong in the South—give nurture and good fortune, for it is along the alluvial plains of the tributaries that the Vietnamese have prospered over the long centuries” (“Introduction,” *Ca Dao Vietnam*). His poetical description of the geography of Vietnam shows that Balaban also realized that Vietnam was one country, from North to South and had existed for a very long time as a nation with a definite culture, a culture of poetry harmonizing the three major systems of religion and philosophy, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and the original culture of rice-growing peoples. Yet when the United States got involved in Vietnam, its declared mission, misdirected but sincere (two components that form the basis of human tragedy both in East and West) was to “to build a nation” for Vietnam, a nation strong enough to resist the red tide coming from the North (China) and beyond (USSR). Soon Balaban discovered that Vietnam had existed long before the United States of America.

When his university was bombed and he was forced to switch jobs, he became the field representative for a private medical group that treated war-injured children. Days among the dying and his deep sense of history and the “pale fate” (*bac menh*) of the living, sent Balaban searching for the ancient weight of the “Vietnamese past to serve as a denial of the present, as an assurance against the future.” He found Vietnamese antiquity by chance, in *Ca Dao*, the oral poems of Vietnam, the living artifacts of a cultural tradition that goes back at least two thousand years. In 1971-72, he returned to Vietnam to collect and record these poems-songs; he published them in 1974. Balaban was and still is the first American to study and translate *Ca Dao*, the oldest foundation of Vietnamese poetry.

So much for who I am and some background on John Balaban. With a good-sized pot of lotus tea and a “blue Hue ceramic” cup and while enjoying the coolest July month in Washington, DC in 80 years, I shall

now put words to the multitude of feelings and thoughts I have developed since I read and re-read *Spring Essence* several days ago.

First, the cover. I showed the cover to some Vietnamese. The majority had no opinion; one or two suggested politely that it was a “misleading introduction to her poetic expression.” Because I have never bought books based on their covers, I had at first no opinion. Then in the spirit of Ho Xuan Huong’s curious and teasing mind, I asked myself: “What would she think of the cover?” I found a poem “Banh Troi Nuoc,” the title referring to a kind of cake popular in northern Vietnam, the land of her birth, as a possible answer:

The Floating Cake

My body is white; my fate, softly rounded,
Rising and sinking like mountains in streams.
Whatever way hands may shape me,
At center my heart is red and true. (*Spring Essence* 16)

How would Ho Xuan Huong react to my audacity in trying to speak on her behalf? I do not have her heavenly e-mail address at her home on the left bank of Hoan Kiem (Lake of the Returned Sword) in Hanoi, but my guess is that she would roar into laughter and urge us to laugh with her.

The introduction chronicles her life and her time and the evolution of the Vietnamese language she used to write. The *Nom* is a writing system devised by Vietnamese literati to represent the sound system of their language through a native, or “southern,” calligraphic script. From about the 10th century on into the 20th, this script was the repository of Vietnamese literature, political essays, and philosophy, as well as religious and medical treatises. The famed *Truyen Kieu* (*The Tale of Kieu*) by Nguyen Du (1765-1820) was written in *Nom*. *Nom* and *Han* (Chinese) are historically important to the Vietnamese literary language which now uses the *Quoc Ngu* “national script” introduced by Alexandre de Rhodes in the 17th century—a roman alphabet more accessible than *Nom* and making it possible for the masses of Vietnamese to become literate. Recently, Vietnamese scholars have recognized the importance of *Nom* and *Han* and have begun actively promoting their study and preservation. In the U.S., John Balaban is a co-founder of the *Han-Nom* Foundation for the same purpose. Readers are advised to read carefully this meticulous introduction to fully understand the text.

For the first time, in a foreign publication, the original *Noms* is printed alongside the translation. Each poem is arranged to appear like a silkscreen work of art. There are a total of 48 poems translated, followed by fourteen pages of well-researched explanatory endnotes, four pages of references and notes. I have never before seen a book of poetry presented and designed to look as handsome as a collector's rare edition and which is yet as professional as a textbook.

But what about the quality of the translations? To judge, in essence, is to compare. Perhaps it is unfair for me to do so, but I will set Balaban's work against the very highest standard of Mr. Huynh Sanh Thong, a friend of mine and the so-far unsurpassed translator of *The Tale of Kieu*, acclaimed as the best, as a classic. In his excellent *The Heritage of Vietnamese Poetry*, an anthology of major and better known poems from the 10th century to early 20th centuries (Yale University Press, 1970) Mr. Thong translated twenty-one Ho Xuan Huong poems, including "Floating Cake." Here is Mr. Thong's translation of "*Banh Troi Nuoc*":

The cake that drifts in water

My body is both white and round
 In water I now swim, now sink.
 The hand that kneads me may be rough—
 I still shall keep my true-red heart. (99)

Mr. Thong's translation of the title is literal and is made of six words and Balaban's only three. But both convey the same meaning. For this particular poem, only, I think Balaban's stinting use of words (in the text of this poem, Balaban uses 29 words, Mr. Thong 30) is more in tune with the poetic essence and the sharpness of Ho Xuan Huong's thoughts and expression.

Reviewing Ho Xuan Huong's poetry, reading and rereading both texts and translations, I discovered the deep and lasting cleansing power of her poems, the penetrating flavor of her humor, the acrobatic use of words to convey a mosaic of feelings and sounds, of mystical and naked reality. For no logical reason I was thinking of an old friend whom I met in 1988 during my first trip to Hanoi since 1943 on assignment for *National Geographic Magazine*. In the 1940's we were together at Quoc Hoc (National Studies School) in Hue. He joined the Viet Minh in 1944 and spent many years in the liberated zones in northern Vietnam, was a political commissar at the Battle of Dien Bien Phu in the spring of 1954 that ended the First Indochina War. It was a windy, cold evening and we were looking

for a good *pho* (a popular dish among Vietnamese). We found one. When we said goodbye, he said: “Whenever I have had the occasion to savor a good *pho* in the company of a friend, I have thought of a Ho Xuan Huong poem. A good *pho* and a poem of Ho Xuan Huong excite your body, your brain, and elevate your soul.” On such an occasion, he “liked to thank Heaven and Buddha for allowing him to be born in the land of Ho Xuan Huong and *pho*.”

Pho can be found in Vietnamese communities in the U.S. and I’m sure Vietnamese in America will be thankful for Balaban’s having had the patience, the courage, and the talent to translate Ho Xuan Huong. Balaban finished his work after a decade of nurturing. That in itself is a victory. But to, as the French say, translate without betraying (*traduire c’est trahir*) the essence and meaning of Ho Xuan Huong work—that is his real triumph.

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