

**THE VIETNAMESE FOLK  
LITERATURE**

by

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD .....	3
PART ONE.....	12
THE PROVERBS .....	12
CHAPTER I .....	16
CHAPTER II.....	36
PSYCHOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS.....	36
CHAPTER III .....	47
Sociological And Geo-Historical Observations .....	47
CHAPTER IV .....	55
METEOROLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC OBSERVATIONS.....	55
PART TWO.....	62
THE FOLKSONGS.....	62
GENERAL FEATURES .....	62
CHAPTER V .....	67
CHAPTER VI .....	82
ROMANTIC SONGS.....	82
CHAPTER VII .....	155
INSTRUCTIONAL SONGS .....	155
CHAPTER VIII.....	178
SPECIAL SONGS .....	178
PART THREE.....	193
THE TALES OF GOLDEN TIMES.....	193
GENERAL FEATURES.....	193
CHAPTER IX.....	195
INSTRUCTIONAL TALES .....	195
CHAPTER X.....	227
EDUCATIONAL TALES .....	227
CHAPTER XI.....	279
ENTERTAINING TALES.....	279
WHY DO WE STUDY THE VIETNAMESE FOLK LITERATURE ? .....	297
CONCLUSION .....	352
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	354

## FOREWORD

*In my previous work, *The Masterpieces of Vietnamese Literature*, I endeavored to reveal to the foreign reader the wealth of our ancient written literature. Although I was determined to confine myself to the simple role of translator, I have been induced to set forth briefly the psychology of these scholars of old, their conception of life, their moral principles, their reasons for joy or sadness. They were undoubtedly the elite of our nation; nevertheless, I did not point out that their literary works interpreted somewhat imperfectly the very psychology of the Vietnamese people taken as a whole. Heirs and defenders of the philosophical teachings which had come from China, the Vietnamese scholars somehow remained detached from the strong currents of ideas and feelings that stirred up the heart of the nation. Of course, there were continual exchanges between the Chinese contribution and the native thought, especially since the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; however, these were still not sufficient for the scholars' literature to represent in itself the true Vietnam of old.*

*Besides, the reader may have noticed that the scholars, works have been mainly concerned about metaphysical, psychological and moral subjects: family, fatherland, love, man's destiny, the vanity of all mankind's trifles, and so on. Very little was written about the Vietnamese people's social and economic life, habits and customs. That was certainly an aristocratic attitude, but it also left a deplorable gap, fortunately filled by the folk literature. The study of the later thus promises to offer a considerable psychological and sociological interest.*

*It is known that the folk literature includes proverbs, songs and ancient tales. What qualifies these works as folk literature?*

*One would be tempted to answer: the anonymity of their authors, or rather their collective authorship. Nevertheless, we must realize that a proverb, a song or a tale is necessarily created first by somebody,*

usually anonymous, but sometimes well known too. For example, the following proverb taken in the Gia Huấn ca of Nguyễn Trãi:

**Thương người như thể thương thân**

*Have compassion for others as for yourself*

or the following song:

**Gối rơm theo phận gối rơm,**

**Có đâu dưới thấp mà chồm lên cao ?**

*The straw pillow has to stay in the position of a straw pillow,*

*How dares it jump up from its lowly position to a higher one?*

*taken from the Lục Vân Tiên by Nguyễn Đình Chiểu.*

Therefore, the main characteristic of the folk literature is that such a proverb, song or tale has fallen into the public domain, is present on all tongues, in all memories, in fact because it perfectly reflects everybody's ideas and feelings. So, in my opinion, it would be better to replace the criterion of collective creation by that of public appropriation. I do not mean to say that the folk literature is not sometimes the result of a collective creation, for its present wording is probably not the original wording which must have undergone many modifications throughout the centuries.

Can we date the folk literature's works? This erudite question is extremely difficult. Some writers (particularly Trương Tửu in his Kinh Thi Việt Nam) have tried to solve it by following three clues:

### **1. The Language:**

**a/** The folk works containing no Sino-Vietnamese word would have dated back to prehistoric times. For instance, the following song:

**Lạy trời mưa xuống**

**Lấy nước tôi uống**

**Lấy ruộng tôi cấy,**

**Cho đầy nồi cơm.**

*Pray Heaven let it rain*

*To give us water to drink*

*To fertilize our rice fields,  
And so to fill our rice pots.*

*b/ In contrast, works having any Sino-Vietnamese word would date back to the Chinese domination or the succeeding independence period.*

*2. The psychological tendency:*

*a/ The unsophisticated works would belong to the prehistoric period because in those ancient times the Vietnamese people lived very simply under the patriarchal or even matriarchal system, without any conflict of interests or emotional problems. For instance, the following song:*

*Ông tiền ông tiên  
Ông có đồng tiền  
Ông giắt mái tai  
Ông cài lưng khố  
Ông ra hàng phố  
Ông mua miếng trầu  
Ông nhai tóp tép,  
Ông mua con chếp  
Về ông ăn cơm  
Ông mua mớ rơm  
Về ông để thổi  
Ông mua cái chổi  
Về ông quét nhà  
Ông mua con gà  
Về cho ăn thóc  
Ông mua con cóc  
Về thả gặm giường  
Ông mua năm hương  
Về ông cúng cụ.*

*Mr. So and So is as happy as an angel  
He has some coins  
That he puts close by his ears*

*Or hides in his loin cloth.  
 He goes out into the street  
 To buy a quid of betel  
 That he chews noisily.  
 He buys a carp  
 That he will eat with rice  
 He buys a bundle of straw  
 To be burnt in the kitchen.  
 He buys a broom  
 To sweep his house  
 He buys a chicken  
 That he will feed with unhusked rice.  
 He buys a toad  
 To be released under his bed.  
 He buys a stick of incense  
 To be burnt on the altar of his ancestors.*

*b/ With the Chinese domination Confucianism was introduced into Vietnam. It is a rationalist philosophy preaching an authoritative regime in society and family, and the supremacy of reason over instinct. The Vietnamese people reacted with mischievous jests against this stern discipline so unsuited to their temperament, good-hearted and freedom-loving. The following song is an example:*

***Gái chính chuyên lấy được chín chồng  
 Vô viên bỏ lọ gánh gồng đi chơi.  
 Không may quang đứt lọ rơi,  
 Bò ra lồm ngổm chín noi chín chồng.***

*The virtuous woman has married nine husbands  
 She kneads into balls, put them in a jar to carry with her  
 in a basket<sup>1</sup> when she strolls along the streets.  
 Unfortunately, the basket trap breaks, and down falls her jar  
 From which crawl in turmoil her nine husbands  
 in nine different directions.*

---

<sup>1</sup> The traditional way to carry heavy loads in Nord Vietnam is by means of two baskets suspended at the ends of a six-foot long bamboo pole which the carrier balances on his left or right shoulder.

*c/ After freeing herself from Chinese domination, the independent Vietnam had no time to relax into a peaceful life. Compelled to endure a deadly struggle against her too powerful Northern neighbour, she had also to expand her “vital space” southward because of her fast-growing population. Of a thoroughly peaceful nature, the Vietnamese people had thus been forced to live in a state of continuous alarm and to prepare all their sons for the battle front. Only the privileged class, the scholars unfit for physical exertion, and the women remained at home. The latter group therefore monopolized the economic power, and attained a much stronger position in both society and family than that allowed by the Confucianist philosophy and the moral or legal regulations that derived from it. Thus, the very important role given to women in folk tales and songs is understandable, a role that is placed rather low in both the Chinese literature and the works of the Vietnamese scholars.*

### *3. The shift in rhythm in the folk songs.*

*Indeed, Trương Tửu asserts that the 6/8 rhythm, so characteristically Vietnamese, does not date back to as early as the foundation of the Vietnamese nation. Rather, it has been the result of a long metamorphosis. For instance, in the song quoted above:*

*Lấy trời mưa xuống  
Lấy nước tôi uống  
Lấy ruộng tôi cấy Cho  
đầy nồi cơm*

*if the first two verses are completely irrelevant to the 6/8 rhythm, the third and fourth ones obviously draw nearer to it. From then on, assumes Trương Tửu:*

*a/ The songs created on a free rhythm, completely different from the 6/8 one, would have appeared in the first centuries of our history;*

*b/ Those created on still coarse rhythms but coming close to the 6/8 rhythm, would have appeared during the Chinese domination;*

*c/ Those created on the 6/8 rhythm would have dated back to the period after national independence.*

*As this is not intended to be an erudition work, no discussions of the above theory will follow.*

*Can we classify folk works by region? In other words, can we tell the local origin of each work, whether it comes from the North, the Central or the South of Vietnam? Probably, if one is patient enough. But in my opinion, this erudition issue is not of any importance.*

*One reason is that the Vietnamese are an extremely homogeneous people. Except for the mountainous ethnic minorities whose number is only a very small fraction of the population, the Vietnamese descend from a single race which, from its Red River Delta cradle, has gradually moved southward down to the Cambodian frontiers, in relatively recent times. Let us briefly review the two main areas of expansion.*

*- Gradual annexation of Champa from 1069 to 1697 by the Lý, Trần, Lê kings, and finally by the Nguyễn princes;*

*- Gradual annexation of Lower Cochinchina (which was part of the Khmer kingdom) by the Nguyễn princes from 1708 to the arrival of the French in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.*

*Besides, during their southward expansion, the Vietnamese people brought with them their culture, their customs, their literature, so that many proverbs and tales are found almost identical throughout the three regions. The songs from the Center bear the particular mark of the Chàm people, and those of the newly acquired South have innuendoes peculiar to that region.*

*What classification, then, are we going to adopt to study the folk literature? In my previous work, I discerned three great periods in the old literature:*

- the beginning comprising the Lý, Trần, Hồ dynasties;
- the development period, during the Lê dynasty interrupted by the Mạc interregnum; and
- the full blooming period stretching from 1740 to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*This classification fits the evolution of the prevalent philosophy in each of those great historic periods, on the one hand, and the widespread increase of the nôm's use in literature on the other hand. Undoubtedly, such classification would not be available for the study of folk literature, given the difficulties set forth above concerning the dating of folk works. For the same reason, a geographical classification must be dispensed with. What is then to be done?*

*First, we notice that the scholars' literature is composed almost solely of poems, worse, poems composed on a very few rigid patterns: the Đường Luật (verse of 5 or 7 words), the Lục Bát (alternated verses of 6 and 8 words), the Song Thất Lục Bát (2 verses of 7 alternated with 2 of 6/8), and the Á Đào song.*

*Fortunately, the folk literature is much more diversified.*

*1. Avoiding the long philosophical dissertations of which the scholars are fond, the folk writer tries to condense high rules of behavior with his village's customs, the meteorological signs from the clouds' color or the birds' song.... - in short sentences, easy to memorize, most often rhymed, sometimes not, but always giving a sharp picture that holds the attention. These are proverbs.*

*2. To express his feelings of joy, sadness, hope, disappointments in love, family or fatherland, the folk writer uses verses always easy to be recited melodiously, or even sung in the tune of some popular melodies, with or without music. These are songs.*

*3. Finally, the folk writer uses prose to express ideas and feelings in story form, his imagination being given free reign. These are tales.*

*Thus, what distinguishes the three forms of the folk literature we just looked into is neither their form nor their substance, but the spirit in which they have been composed.*

*Certainly, form may be used to distinguish the tale, always in prose, from the song and the proverb (the proverb, even if not rhymed, is always a short sentence and cannot be confused with the tale). But the criterion of form is not enough when we want to distinguish the song from the rhymed proverb. Indeed, it is not unusual to verify that some proverbs, listed as such in one anthology, are classified as songs in another anthology, or vice versa.*

*There is no difference in substance among the proverb, the song and the tale. A single topic such as friendship, can be developed at the same time by proverbs, songs and tales. The proverb will condense in short sentences the duties of friendship, or the way, fair or unfair, in which friends behave toward each other. The song will exalt the joy of friendship or bemoan the false friends' betrayals. And finally, the tale will develop a little drama, put on stage more or less actual characters to relate some adventures which have happened to true or false friends.*

*However, the song is often but the developed form of the proverb, or conversely the proverb is but the concise form of the song. For instance:*

*Proverb:*

***Trâu cột ghét trâu ăn***  
*The yoked buffalo hates the grazing one.*

*Song:*

***Trâu cột thì ghét trâu ăn,***  
***Quan võ thì ghét quan văn dài quần.***  
*As the fastened buffalo hates the grazing one,*  
*So does the officer hate the long-robed civil servant.*

*Proverb:*

*Tốt gỗ hơn nước sơn  
Xấu người đẹp nét còn hơn đẹp người.  
As good wood is better than a fine coat of paint  
So is a virtuous, ugly woman better than a bad beautiful one.*

*The true criterion differentiating the three forms of the folk literature is therefore the spirit which has inspired their creation. The proverb teaches; it is the voice of reason. The song moves; it is the voice of the heart. Finally, the tale diverts while teaching and touches the reader's heart by adding a bit of imagination. Of course, this criterion is not to be rigidly applied: it is easy to find in some proverbs deep affection or indignation, as well as to find in some songs very interesting sociological information. In spite of these somewhat blurred fluctuations, I do believe that the above criterion is sound. It will guide us in the classification of proverbs, songs and tales; moreover, it will show us in which spirit we have to study them.*

*Last but not least, this study period - we must not forget - concerns itself only with the pre-French domination. Because of this domination, radical transformations have taken place in all domains, cultural as well as political, economic and social.*

## PART ONE

### THE PROVERBS

#### GENERAL FEATURES

Proverbs are short sentences, very easy to remember.  
How?

1. Most often, by the use of  
rhyme:

a/ which may be two words<sup>1</sup> in the same sentence. These two rhymed words' positions are movable. Occasionally, the first word rhymes with the second as follows:

*Lo bò trắng răng*  
*To be anxious about the cow's white teeth*

The second word may also rhyme with the fourth one:

*Tốt danh hơn lành áo*  
*Good fame is better than fine clothes.*

---

<sup>1</sup> In general, words in the Vietnamese language are mono-syllabic

b/ Sometimes proverbs consist of two verses. In that case, the last word in the first verse rhymes with the first one in the second verse:

*Lấy vợ xem tông*  
*Lấy chồng xem giống*  
*Before taking a wife, inquire about her ancestors*

*Before taking a husband, inquire about his family.*  
or with the third:

**Một miếng giữa làng  
Bằng một sàng xó bếp.**

*A morsel eaten at the village banquet  
Is worth a basketful eaten in the corner of your  
kitchen.* or the fourth:

**Sống vì mồ mả  
Không sống vì cả bát cơm.**  
*Your life depends on your ancestors' tombs  
And not on the rice you eat.* or with the fifth:

**Biết thì thưa thớt**

**Không biết thì dựa cột mà nghe.**

*Speak if you know,  
Other wise you'd better lean on the post and listen.*  
or finally with the sixth word of the second verse:

**Một cây làm chẳng lên non  
Ba cây chụm lại nên hòn núi cao.**

*A lone tree cannot make a forest  
But three trees gathered together form a high hill.*

Sometimes proverbs are not rhymed. Even then, they are easy to remember by means of two other ways:

**a/** by the parallelism between the two parts of the sentence:

**Giàu điếc sang đui.**

*The rich man is deaf and the nobleman is blind.*

**No nên bụt**

**Đói nên ma.**

*Surfeited, one behaves like Buddha  
Starved, one becomes a demon.*

**b/** or by a striking image:

**Chó cắn áo rách**

*The dog barks after ragged clothes.*

**Máu loãng còn hơn nước lã.**

*Diluted blood is better than pure water.*

***Ăn cháo đái bát.***

*He urinates into the bowl from which he just ate soup.*

It is necessary to distinguish proverbs from idioms that do not express a moral rule or some other observation. Idioms are ready-made phrases that come spontaneously when the common man wants to express an idea, for these phrases are colourful, picturesque, easily remembered and often repetitive. For instance:

About a fertile region, it is said to have:

***Tiền rừng bạc bể.***

*As much money as there are trees in the forest or water in the oceans.*

A slanderer is compared to:

***Miệng hùm, nọc rắn.***

*The tiger's mouth or the snake's venom.*

To place some ill-famed fellow in the hierarchy of this contemptible class, the following verdict is used:

***Đầu trộm đuôi cướp.***

*At the head of thieves, and at the tail of pirates.*

The stupid man is pitilessly mocked at in the following comparison:

***Dốt đặc cán mai.***

*His ignorance is as dense as a spade's handle.*

Two paramours are defined as:

***Già nhân ngãi non vợ chồng.***

*More than lovers and less than a married couple.*

The bittersweet words exchanged between the members of a disunited family sound at times light and at times heavy:

***Tiếng bấc tiếng chì.***

*Words of cork and words of lead.*

and so on.

An extensive study of idioms would be useful to show more fully the numerous and very ingenious rhetoric forms used by the common people. But, as the main purpose of this work is to reveal to the foreign reader the psychology and customs of the Vietnamese people, it will be confined to the study of proverbs.

The proverb, as we know, teaches. What does it teach? First, moral precepts. Then, lessons of experience acquired from the observation of human behaviour, of sociological facts or of natural phenomena. There are therefore four groups of proverbs:

1. Moral precepts;
2. Psychological observations;
3. Sociological observations;
4. Observations of natural phenomena.

# CHAPTER 1

## MORAL PRECEPTS

**F**rom the large storehouse of moral precepts inherited from folk wisdom, two opposite trends emerge: one, dogmatic, with a clear relationship to the best Confucianist teaching; the other, utilitarian, derived rather from self-interest. But we should not conclude that the dogmatic moral precepts appeared only after the introduction of Confucianism into Vietnam. This doctrine merely codified and systematized moral rules in a society which had already reached some degree of social and economic development. The ancient Vietnamese society, as that of the ancient Chinese, subsisted on agriculture, livestock, fishing and hunting, at different technical levels. The fulfillment of those various social tasks necessarily required a social organization founded on the authority of the pater familias, the rights of ownership and inheritance, loyalty, joint responsibility, charity, and so on. Thus, very probably, many dogmatic moral precepts actually preceded Confucianism rather than originated from it. It remains true, though, that Confucianism, a broad and coherent synthesis of already existing and later acquired ideas, had a profound influence on the Vietnamese people after it was introduced into Vietnam.

So, if I said beforehand that the dogmatic morals show their evident kinship to the best Confucianist teaching, I simply meant that they corresponded with Confucianism rather than originated from it.

### 1. Dogmatic Morals.

Although usually illiterate, the common people greatly admired the Confucianist doctrine taught in schools, the study of which opened the way to the highest social ranks. Their veneration was such that it became superstitious.

*Một chữ thánh, một gánh vàng.*

*A word from the holy master is equal to a load of gold.*

And if one found at home or in the streets a sheet of written paper, he would hasten to pick it up and would respectfully burn it afterwards instead of throwing it into the garbage can.

This veneration for Confucianism was perfectly understandable because the doctrine was marvelously adjusted to the Vietnamese mode of living, and this veneration was even to increase with the great privileges granted by the monarchical regime. It is no wonder, therefore, that the common people willingly welcomed the principal Confucianist dogmas, a brief survey of which follows.

The Confucianist education aimed at teaching its disciples the art of:

- improving themselves;
- managing their domestic affairs;
- governing their country;
- pacifying the world.

We will follow this order, while noting that political matters concerned only the scholars; the common people took almost no interest in them, as is evidenced by the following proverb:

***Thành đổ đã có chúa xây  
Việc gì gái góa lo ngày lo đêm.***  
*If the citadel has fallen, the king must restore it. Silly is  
the widow who worries about it day and night.*

This attitude was entirely different from the scholars':

***Quốc gia hưng vong, thất phu hữu trách.***  
*Even the humble citizen must share responsibility  
in the prosperity or decadence of his country.*

We will search later for the reasons behind these divergent points of view. For now, let's confine ourselves to study, among the dogmatic morals, only three elements:

- Duties toward oneself;
- Duties toward the family;
- Duties toward society.

## **Duties Towards Oneself.**

There are three distinct groups: the physical, the moral, and the economic duties.

**a/ Physical duties.** “A sound mind in a sound body”, this twofold aim of Hellenic education was not achieved, we must admit, in perfect balance by our people, for whom the intellectual concerns prevail over the bodily ones. We should not look in our ancient proverbs for exhortations to sports, a field most often reserved for athletes striving for fame in military exploits. In these proverbs, only some precepts advising cleanliness and temperance can be found. Even these disclose a preoccupation more of a moral rather than a physical nature.

### *About cleanliness:*

**1- *Đói cho sạch  
Rách cho thơm.***

*If you be hungry, be clean,  
If your clothes be worn out, let them be sweet smelling.*

**2. *Nhà sạch thì mát  
Bát sạch ngon cơm.***  
*A clean house is cool  
A clean bowl gives appetite.*

### *About temperance:*

**3. *Ăn ít ngon nhiều.***  
*Less eating, more appetite.*

**4. *Tửu nhập ngôn xuất.***  
*When alcohol goes in, words go out.*

**b/ Moral Duties.** Unlike the above, there are plenty of moral counsels. A careful study of these reveals the essentially intellectual tendencies of our race deeply impregnated with Confucianist and Buddhist thinkings. First, honesty:

**5. *Giấy rách giữ lấy lề.***  
*The more a book is worn out, the more it must be taken care of.*

**6. Tốt danh hơn lành áo.**

*A good name is better than fine clothes.*

**7. Trâu chết để da**

**Người ta chết để tiếng.**

*The dead buffalo leaves its skin*

*The dead man leaves behind his reputation.*

**8. Sống đực sao bằng thác trong.**

*Better to die with honor than to live in dishonor.*

To achieve honesty, one should obviously start with being frank:

**9. Ăn mặn nói ngay**

**Còn hơn ăn chay nói dối.**

*To eat meat and speak frankly*

*Is better than to fast and lie.*

**10. Một câu nói ngay**

**Bằng làm chay cả tháng.**

*A sincere word is equal to a whole month of lent.*

**11. Một lời nói dối**

**Sám hối bảy ngày.**

*Expiating one lie*

*Needs seven days' repentance.*

Our ancestors were aware that the flesh is weak, and that the most honest person may be induced to bad behaviour by his passion. So they wisely recommended moderation of desires as a brake to all sinful activities:

**12. Có hoa mừng hoa**

**Có nụ mừng nụ.**

*Welcome a flower*

*Also welcome a bud.*

That does not imply that our ancient education wanted to form effeminate men ready to cringe before difficulties of unfairness. If it is wise to accept a modest way of living, it is cowardly to abdicate all will and perseverance.

**13. Chớ thấy sông cả  
Mà ngã tay chèo. On  
a large river**

*Do not panic and abandon the rudder.*

**14. Có chí làm quan  
Có gan làm giàu.**

*He who has a strong will becomes a mandarin  
He who is audacious becomes wealthy.*

**15. Còn nước còn tát.**

*Keep on drawing as long as there is still water.*

**16. Hữu chí cánh thành.**

*Success will reward your efforts.*

**17. Thua keo này**

**Bày keo khác.**

*If you be beaten in a match  
Try another.*

**18. Nước chảy đá mòn.**

*Running water may wear down a stone.*

**19. Công nợ trả dần**

**Cháo húp quanh bát.**

*Debts are to be paid gradually  
As hot soup is to be eaten around its bowl.*

Will and perseverance must chiefly be applied to work and study:

**20. Giàu đâu những kẻ ngủ trưa**

***Sang đầu những kẻ say sưa tối ngày.***

*Those who get up late never become rich*

*Those who are drunk day and night never stand in high social position.*

**21. Ăn nễ ngồi không**

***Non đồng cũng lở.***

*If you do nothing but eat*

*Even a copper mountain of yours would be fast used up.*

**22. Tấc đất tấc vàng.**

*An inch of land is worth an ounce of gold.*

**23. Hay học thì sang**

***Hay làm mới có.***

*By dint of study, you will be a high official*

*By dint of work, you will be wealthy.*

**24. Có đi mới đến**

***Có học mới hay.***

*If you wish to be in some place, you have to go there*

*If you wish to become a learned man, you have to study.*

**25. Một kho vàng Không**

***bằng một nang chữ. A***

*warehouse of gold*

*Is not worth a belly full of characters.*

**26. Dao có mài mới sắc**

***Người có học mới khôn.***

*To be cutting, a knife must be sharpened*

*To be wise, a person must study.*

As you acquire a great fortune through work, study or luck, it will be rapidly dissipated if you do not maintain it with caution and thrift, two essential virtues of the peasant.

**27. Kiến tha lâu cũng đầy tổ.**

*By virtue of long work, the ant succeeds in filling up its nest.*

**28. Làm khi lành**

**Để dành khi đau.**

*Work while you are healthy  
To protect yourself when you get sick.*

**29. Ăn mắm thì ngắm về sau.**

*While eating pickle, think of the coming thirst.*

**30. Ăn tối lo mai.**

*At dinner tonight, worry about tomorrow's lunch.*

### **Duties Toward the Family**

Up to the beginnings of this century and even beyond to the great social and literary revolution of the 1930's, the Vietnamese family was very tightly structured. It was not unusual to see three or four generations living under the same roof and submitting to the supreme authority of the pater familias. Indeed, the individual was nothing in our ancient society; he could fully grow only within two communities: the one established by blood ties, i.e., the family; and the other comprising all individuals living under the same laws and customs, which form in the narrow sense the village and in the larger sense the fatherland.

Concerning the role of parents with their children:

**31. Yêu cho vọt**

**Ghét cho chơi.**

*If you love your children, whip them  
If you hate them, let them play.*

**32. Con dại cái mang.**

*The mother is responsible for her children's misdeeds.*

**33. Con hư tại mẹ**

**Cháu hư tại bà.**

*It is the mother's fault if her child is naughty  
And if a grandchild does not behave, it is the grandmother's fault.*

**34. Công cha như núi Thái Sơn  
Công mẹ như nước trong nguồn chảy ra.**  
*The father's beneficences are as great as a giant mountain  
And the mother's are as infinite as water flowing from a source.*

**35. Cá không ăn muối cá ươn  
Con cưỡng cha mẹ trăm đường con hư.**  
*As unsalted fish is soon rotten,  
So the disobedient child will be spoiled.*

Filial devotion was particularly put to the test when one wanted to marry. The Confucianist morals indeed required a complete submission to the parents' decision:

**36. Cha mẹ đặt đâu  
Con phải ngồi đấy.** *Where  
the parents place you, There  
you must sit.*

Nevertheless, our people's frame of mind generally induced the parents not to violently oppose their children's wishes:

**37. Ép dầu ép mỡ  
Ai nỡ ép duyên.**  
*One can squeeze oil seeds  
But must not impose a reluctant marriage.*

About duties of the wife toward her husband:

**38. Thuyền theo lái  
Gái theo chồng.**  
*Like the boat moving according to its helm,  
The wife must obey her husband.*

About duties between siblings:

**39. Anh em như thể chân tay.**  
*Siblings are as the limbs of a body.*

**40. Lọt sàng xuống nia.**

*What goes through the sieve will gather in the winnowing basket.  
(meaning that one must not worry if one brother is better off than another, particularly in the sharing of the paternal estate)*

**41. Chị ngã em nâng  
Đừng thấy chị ngã em bưng miệng cười.**

*If your sister falls down, help her up  
Don't burst out laughing at her.*

**42. Anh em khinh trước  
Làng nước khinh sau.  
By scorning one another**

*Brothers give their neighbours opportunity to scorn them.*

About duties to the extended family:

**43. Máu loãng còn hơn nước lã.  
Diluted blood is thicker than pure water.  
(a distant cousin is better than a stranger)**

**44. Một giọt máu đào  
Hơn ao nước lã.  
A drop of diluted blood**

*Is better than a pond of clean water.*

*(The affection of one family member is more precious than that of many strangers.)*

**45. Sẩy vai cha còn chú  
Sẩy mẹ bú dì.**

*If your father were missing, you would still have your uncle;  
If your mother were missing, your aunt would be there to feed you.*

**46. Sẩy vai xuống cánh tay.  
What falls from the shoulders comes down to the arms.**

**47. Môi hở răng lạnh.**

*When the lips part, the teeth feel cold.*

**48. Tay đứt ruột xót.**

*When the hand bleeds, the bowels hurt.*

**Duties Toward Society**

Nowadays, in big cities tenants in the same building are strangers to one another. It was different in the old days, when all inhabitants of a village were well acquainted with one another and felt united. The holy duties of hospitality, charity and gratitude are losing ground more and more in our individualistic society where man has become a wolf to his fellowmen. This has been the unavoidable result of the fast-paced way of living. We can perhaps only direct a thrilling thought back to the good old days by reading the following proverbs that would make many of our contemporaries laugh; but we are firmly convinced that these proverbs will again be honoured when our unfortunate country has gone through its present harsh ordeal.

About humanity and charity:

**49. Làm phúc cũng như làm giàu.**

*By helping others, you accumulate your own wealth.*

**50. Miếng khi đói**

**Bằng gói khi no.**

*A small morsel given to a hungry man*

*Is equal to a large parcel given when he is full.*

**51. Dù xây chín đợt phù đồ**

**Không bằng làm phúc cứu cho một người.**

*Building a nine-story stupa*

*Bears no comparison to helping an unfortunate person.*

About hospitality:

**52. Lo chật bụng**

**Lo chi chật nhà.**

*Worry about your mean heart  
Rather than about your narrow house.  
(to receive people coming to ask for hospitality)*

About solidarity:

**53. Một con sâu làm rầu nồi canh.**  
*One sole worm ruins a whole pot of soup.*

**54. Một con ngựa đau  
Cả tàu chê cỏ.**  
*When a horse is sick  
All its companions in the stable refuse to be fed.*

**55. Trâu chết bò cũng lột da.**  
*If the buffalo dies, the cow will also be skinned.*

**56. Ngựa chạy có bầy  
Chim bay có bạn.**  
*Horses run in herds  
And so do birds fly in flocks.*

About gratitude:

**57. Ăn cây nào  
Rào cây ấy.**  
*Make a fence around the tree  
The fruits of which you eat.*

**58. Ăn quả nhớ kẻ trồng cây.**  
*When eating a fruit, think of him who has planted its tree.*

**59. Uống nước nhớ nguồn.**  
*When drinking water, think of its source.*

## **2. Utilitarian Morals**

Much more instructive than the dogmatic morals are the utilitarian ones. Indeed, the former are only adaptations of the scholars' teachings by the common people, whereas the latter are truly the people's voice, the exact expression of their thoughts and feeling.

### 1/ Realistic Precepts.

They treat all subjects. We may say that they comprise the folk wisdom encyclopedia, the vade-mecum of what we now would call Public Relations. Let us try to pick up some aphorisms.

Nothing is more ridiculous or hateful than the ass believing itself to be a phoenix. Our ancestors understood it, and explained to the youth:

**60. *Khôn cho người rái***

***Dại cho người thương***

***Dở dở ương ương***

***Chỉ tổ người ghét.***

*The wise is admired*

*And the ignorant may get sympathy, But  
the fool who doesn't know he is a fool  
Makes himself hated by everybody.*

The choice of your future husband is an important decision on which depends the happiness or misfortune of your whole life. As such, you must give it your most careful attention.

**61. *Lấy vợ xem tông***

***Lấy chồng xem giống.***

*Before taking a wife, inquire about her ancestors;  
Before taking a husband, inquire about his family.*

**62. *Dâu dũ mất họ, Chó***

***dũ mất láng giềng.***

*A naughty daughter-in-law alienates the family;  
A naughty dog keeps away the neighbourhood.*

**63. *Nồi nào vung ấy.***

*To each boiler its lid.*

(one must marry someone of the same social rank)

**64. Cái nết đánh chết cái đẹp.**

*Virtue is more valuable than beauty.*

Now, you have to manage your family gently but firmly. The simplest way to success is to begin as early as possible:

**65. Uốn cây từ thửa còn non**

***Dậy con từ thửa hã còn thơ ngây.***

*A branch is to be bent when it is still tender*

*A child is to be educated when he is still young.*

**66. Dậy con từ thửa còn thơ**

***Dậy vợ từ thửa bư vợ mới về.***

*As a child is to be educated when he is still young*

*So is your wife when you have just married her.*

You have to manage your own life. To guide you, nothing is better than experience:

**67. Có đại mới nên khôn. From**

*past mistakes comes wisdom.*

**68. Học bất như hành.**

*Theoretical learning is not as valuable as practical experience.*

**69. Trăm hay không bằng tay quen.**

*Experience outruns study.*

**70. Đi một ngày đàng**

***Học một sàng khôn. A***

*day's journey*

*Supplies a basketful of wisdom.*

**71. Hơn một ngày**

***Hay một chức.***

*An extra day of life*

*Brings experience.*

**72. Bảy mươi học bảy mươi mốt.**

*A seventy-year old has something to learn from a seventy-one-year old.*

Experience will give you a thousand useful recipes for success in life. Do you feel weak standing by yourself? Solidarity with others may give you strength:

**73. Một cây làm chẳng nên non  
Ba cây chụm lại nên hòn núi cao.**

*A lone tree cannot make a forest  
But three trees gathered together form a high hill.*

**74. Khôn độc không bằng ngốc đàn.**

*A lone wise man is worth less than a bunch of fools.*

**75. Mạ nhờ nước**

**Nước nhờ mạ.**

*Young rice plants need water (to grow) Water  
needs young rice plants (to remain cool).*

Indiscriminate association may be foolish because:

**76. Ở bầu thì tròn**

**Ở ống thì dài.**

*In a gourd one becomes round  
And long in a pipe.*

**77. Gần mực thì đen**

**Gần đèn thì sáng.**

*Near ink one blackens oneself  
Near a lamp there is light.*

**78. Gần lửa rát mặt.**

*Standing near the fire, you may burn your face.*

**79. Học thầy không tày học bạn.**

*One learns from friends more than from the teacher.*

Above all, be cautious in your speech:

**80. Tai vách mạch rừng.**  
*Walls have ears, and forests have fissures.*

**81. Ăn có nhai  
Nói có nghĩ.**  
*Chew slowly while eating,  
Think over while speaking.*

**82. Một lời nói, một gói vàng  
Một lời nói, một gói tội.**  
*A word may be a piece of gold or a sin.*

**83. Ăn bớt bát  
Nói bớt lời.**  
*Eat fewer bowls (servings of rice)  
Speak fewer words.*

**84. Ăn lắm thì hết miếng ngon  
Nói lắm thì hết lời khôn hóa rồ.**  
*From eating too much, food is no longer appetizing  
From speaking too much, wise words become foolish ones.*

**85. Biết thì thưa thốt  
Không biết thì dựa cột mà nghe.**  
*Speak if you know;  
Otherwise, you'd better lean on the post and listen.*

**86. Đa ngôn đa quá.**  
*Much speaking, much erring.*

**87. Chửi cha không bằng pha tiếng.**  
*To caricature someone's voice is worse than to insult his father.*

Be careful also about your acts:

**88. Cái sẩy nẩy cái ung.**  
*A scratch easily becomes an abscess.*

(a little quarrel may become a fierce hatred)

**89. Một sự nhin Là  
chín sự lành. Control  
your anger once**

*And nine times peace will be with you.*

**90. No mất ngon  
Giận mất khôn.**

*You have no appetite when you are full  
Likewise, you lose wisdom when you get angry.*

**91. Đánh chó ngó chúa.**

*Before beating a dog, look for its master.*

Avoid having contention with others:

**92. Vỏ quít dày có móng tay nhọn .**

*The thick tangerine skin must expect to be cut by a sharp nail.*

**93. Được kiện mười bốn quan năm  
Thua kiện mười lăm quan chẵn.**

*If your lawsuit be lost, you pay fifteen (strings of coins)  
And not less than fourteen and a half if you win it.*

**94. Chưa đánh được người mặt đỏ như vang  
Đánh được người mặt vàng như nghệ.**

*Before beating your enemy your face is red (with anger) After  
having beaten him your face turns yellow (from anxiety).*

Also avoid being in debt:

**95. Nhất tội nhì nợ.**

*The worst things are first punishment, then debt.*

If you are meeting someone too nice, beware:

**96. Cá vàng bụng bọ.**

*The goldfish has a belly full of worms.*

**97. Mật ngọt chết ruồi.**  
*Sweet honey entraps flies.*

Since people do frivolously judge you by your appearance rather than your real worth, do not think it useless to give society a good impression of yourself by wearing decent clothes:

**98. Đói trong ruột không ai biết**  
**Rách ngoài cất lăm kẻ hay.**  
*Outwardly, hunger is unknown*  
*But ragged clothes are easily seen.*

Foster useful relations:

**99. Bán anh em xa**  
**Mua láng giềng gần.**  
*Neglect your far-off brothers if necessary*  
*And care for your close-by neighbours.*

Do not give in to vanity:

**100. Được tiếng khen**  
**Ho hen chẳng còn.**  
*He who wants to be praised*  
*Often loses his breath.*

Perseverance is good, but not stubbornness over an obvious mistake:

**101. Già néo đứt giây.**  
*A rope fastened too tightly will snap.*

**102. Già kén kẹn hom.**  
*A too careful choice sometimes ends badly.*

(Girls who want to select too carefully a perfect husband run the risk of marrying a worthless one in the end)

A good reputation being the best way to success, maintain it carefully under any circumstance:

**103. Mua danh ba vạn**  
**Bán danh ba đồng.**  
*Reputation is bought with 30,000 coins*

*And sold for only three.*

Finally, if money is needed to enjoy life, it is absurd to keep it at the risk of losing one's life. If needed, one must give up money to save one's life:

**104. Một mặt người, mười mặt của.**  
*Life is worth ten times more than wealth.*

**105. Người làm nên của**  
**Của không làm nên người.**  
*Man makes money*  
*Never does money make man.*

(a counsel given to people, sick or engaged in lawsuits, who hesitate spending money to recover their health or freedom).

### **Doubtful Moral Precepts.**

An overview of the psychology of our folk people will be found at the end of the book. For now, let me just point out without any foregone conclusion that the concerns of the common people are keenly different from those of the scholars. Whereas the latter enjoyed praising heroism:

**Kiến nghĩa bất vi vô dũng dã.**

*He is a coward who comes upon an opportunity to fulfill his duties and fails to do them.*

Or brotherhood:

**Tứ hải giai huynh đệ.**  
*Within four seas, all men are brothers.*

the common man was less enthusiastic about those transcendental virtues. Readily he advocates selfishness:

**106. Ăn cỗ đi trước,**  
**Lội nước đi sau.**  
*To attend a banquet, go first;*  
*To ford a river, go behind.*

**107. Ăn tìu đến**  
**Đánh nhau tìu đi.**

*Go where there is feasting  
Run away from where there is fighting.*

**108. Cái ách giữa đường  
Mang quàng vào cổ.**  
*A ticklish affair encountered on the road  
Don't be so silly as to take it upon yourself.*

**109. Ăn no nằm ngủ  
Chớ bầu chủ mà lo.**  
*Eat well and sleep well  
Never warrant another's debt.*

**110. Cháy nhà hàng xóm  
Bằng chân như vại.**  
*If there is a fire in your neighbour's house  
Stay at home.*

The common man also appreciates laziness:

**111. Lắm thóc nhọc xay.**  
*Much paddy, much tiresome grinding.*

Opportunism:

**112. Đi nước Lào ăn mắm ngóe.**  
*When traveling in Laos, eat frog's pickle.*  
(rightly or wrongly, that is considered as a Laotian national dish).

**113. Đi với Bụt mặc áo cà sa  
Đi với ma mặc áo giấy.**  
*In the company of Buddha, wear a cassock; In  
the company of ghosts, wear paper clothes.*  
(Ghosts: fearsome people. When the cult of ancestors is celebrated,  
ghosts are usually offered paper clothes which will be burnt.)

**114. Gió chiều nào che chiều ấy.**  
*Take shelter according to the wind's direction.*

**115. Nhập gia tùy tục**

**Đáo giang tùy khúc.**

*When visiting a family, observe its customs. When sailing along a river, follow its meanderings.*

Cynism:

**116. Cười ba tháng, ai cười ba năm?**

*Let them laugh at you for three months, nobody will do it after three years.*

**117. Ai cười hở mười cái răng .**

*He who laughs show his teeth.*

*(He only wrongs himself)*

## CHAPTER 11

### PSYCHOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS.

The Vietnamese, who is fairly shrewd, looks at himself, others, and social regulations, with eyes so very keen and so realistic as to become materialistic. We will notice that most of these psychological observations implicitly include a precept of utilitarian morals. The following proverb warding against vanity:

*Được tiếng khen*

*Ho hen chẳng còn.*

*He who wants to be praised*

*Often loses his breath.*

may be considered as an observation as well as an advice.

As such, the greatest difficulty in studying the psychological observations is their great number and their infinitely varied gist which touches on all topics. The following classification, though not the best, is simple:

1. human nature;
2. relations between members of a community;
3. human vices;
4. social regulations.

#### 1. Human Nature

Living in a very simple world where the essential preoccupations are agricultural works, peace in the family and the hamlet, the common Vietnamese cannot be a very subtle psychologist. However, his sound mind helps him to find out the great laws of human nature.

First, he is convinced that Reason works in the same way for all men, that what pleases or displeases one also pleases or displeases others:

**118. Suy bụng ta ra bụng người.**  
*From our own conclusions, we can deduce others'.*

**119. Bụng trâu làm sao, bụng bò làm vậy.**  
*As the buffalo feels, so feels the cow.*

The folk Vietnamese also learns that opinions are often tainted with subjectivity:

**120. Yêu nên tốt, ghét nên xấu.**  
*What is loved is good, what is hated is ugly.*

that it is useless to try to satisfy everybody:

**121. Ai uốn câu cho vừa miệng cá.**  
*Who can curve the hook to fit every fish's mouth?*

that our feelings are often fickle:

**122. Có mới nới cũ.**  
*A newly acquired thing makes one forget the old.*

**123. Yêu nhau lắm, cắn nhau đau.**  
*The more they love each other, the more they hate each other afterwards.*

**124. Đứng núi này trông núi nọ.**  
*Standing on the top of a mountain, we look at another.*  
*(The grass is greener beyond the fence )*

**125. Được voi đòi tiên.**  
*He who has an elephant covets a fairy.*

that misfortune brings in compassion:

**126. Ăn nhạt mới biết thương mèo.**  
*In fasting we learn to pity cats.*

(which are fond of fish, but are often fed with rice only).

that finally, necessity compels men to do acts of which their reason disapproves:

**127. Đói đầu gối phải bò.**  
*When the belly is empty, the knees must creep.*

## 2. Relations Between Members Of A Community

### a/ Parents and Children.

To the Vietnamese people, whose principal religion is the cult of ancestors, having children is a duty that only monks may be exempt from:

***Bất hiếu hữu tam, vô hậu vi đại.***  
*Among the three crimes of filial impiety,*  
*The greatest is to die without descendants.*

What may be the reasons for such concern? Economic, not to have the familial patrimony be divided? Political, to constitute a powerful nation with a large population? Religious, so that the ancestors' souls would not wander around in the Dead kingdom? Whatever the reason, birth control was and is not going to be welcomed in Vietnam.

***128. Có con tội sống***  
***Không con tội chết.***  
*To have children is a torment in life*  
*(on account of worries they give)*  
*But without them, it is a torture after death.*  
*(because nobody will celebrate your cult).*

***129. Trẻ cậy cha***  
***Già cậy con.***  
*The young rely on their father;*  
*The old rely on their children.*

***130. Tre già măng mọc.***  
*When the bamboo gets old, bamboo shoots appear.*

As stressed earlier, Vietnamese parents did not show their children the excessive affection the Western people give theirs (which incidentally is going into our modern customs). However, their paternal or maternal love was no less strong:

***131. Con vua vua dẫu***

*Con chúa chúa yêu. The  
king loves his children And  
the prince loves his.*

**132. Con đầu cháu sớm.**  
(Are particularly cherished)  
*The first child and the first grandchild.*

**133. Nước mắt chảy xuôi.**  
*Tears run down.*  
(Loves goes from parents to children,  
and rarely in the opposite direction.)

**134. Hùm dữ chẳng nỡ ăn thịt con.** *Even the  
ferocious tiger does not devour its cubs. (parents could  
not help forgiving their prodigal children)*

**135. Chết cha ăn cơm với cá  
Chết mẹ lá liếm đầu đường.**  
*The fatherless child has fish to eat with rice The  
motherless one must lick leaves on the roads.  
(maternal love is greater than paternal love)*

Sons are preferred to daughters, because only they can celebrate the cult of ancestors:

**136. Một trai là có  
Mười gái là không.**  
*A son is valuable  
Ten daughters are worthless.*

Conversely, the children generally cared piously for their old parents, even and especially if the latter were poor:

**137. Con không chê cha mẹ khó  
Chó không chê chủ nhà nghèo.** *Children do  
not complain about their poor parents Dogs do not  
complain about their poor masters.*

The keen observer may nevertheless note that filial piety did not generally equal paternal love; it is a law of human nature.

**138. Cha mẹ nuôi con bằng trời bằng bể**

**Con nuôi cha mẹ con kể từng ngày.**

*As immense as sky and ocean, are the cares given by parents to their children*

*But the latter count every care they give their parents.*

**b/ Husband and wife:**

Although generally arranged by their parents and not by the married persons themselves, Vietnamese marriages were mostly happy. Love was not necessarily missing, and in its place, reciprocal esteem and consciousness of one's duties could constitute a stronger basis:

**139. Thuận vợ thuận chồng**

**Tát bể Đông cũng cạn.**

*When husband and wife agree with each other*

*They may drain off the Eastern sea.*

**140. Cơm chẳng lành**

**Canh chẳng ngọt.**

*Rice is never well cooked by an unhappy couple*

*Nor the soup well seasoned.*

**141. Thứ nhất vợ dại trong nhà**

**Thứ hai nhà dột, thứ ba nợ đời.**

*The worst troubles are: first, to have a silly wife, Secondly, to live under a leaking roof, and thirdly, to be in debt.*

**142. Chồng ăn chả**

**Vợ ăn nem.**

*The husband eats pies*

*And the wife enjoys hash.*

The position of women in Vietnamese society will be expounded further through songs and tales. Suffice it to say for the moment that their position was strengthened by the coming of children.

**143. Gái có con  
Như bồ hòn có rễ.  
A wife having children**

*Is similar to a rooted tree.*

and that men willingly recognized their wives' merits:

**144. Vắng đàn bà  
Gà bới bếp.**

*When the housewife is absent  
The hens feed themselves in the kitchen.*

**145. Vắng trẻ quanh nhà  
Vắng đàn bà quanh bếp.  
A house without children is sad  
A kitchen without a housewife is deserted.**

c/ Members of a large family:

Vietnamese malice delighted in disparaging the bad side of things rather than recognizing the good one. We will not dwell too long then on the frictions in the Vietnamese family which are as frequent as in any society.

First, selfishness turned away wealthy people from their poor relatives:

**146. Anh em ai đầy nồi nấy.  
Everyone has to fill his ricepot himself.**

**147. Giàu là họ  
Khó người dung.  
The wealthy people are considered as family members  
And the poor as strangers.**

There was also the eternal resentment and rivalry between sisters-in-law, because several couples lived under the same roof. Fortunately,

modern customs allow the young man who takes a wife to establish his home apart:

**148. Giặc nhà Ngô**  
**Không bằng bà cô bên chồng.**  
*Chineses pirates*  
*Are less fearsome than the husband's sisters.*

#### **d/ Employers and Employees**

I wish I could affirm that proverbs concerning employer and employees were also inspired by mischievous jest more than by their unprejudiced observation. But I cannot. If servants waited on their masters with devotion and attachment, I must recognize that it was different with employees hired for a particular work, for instance the building of a house or at harvest time. Whereas the former considered themselves and were considered as part of the master's family, the latter only tried to cheat as ingeniously as possible in a contract which was, in their opinion, exploiting them. Their only weapon was idleness when the boss was not there to watch over them. Whereupon the severe proverbs:

**149. Cơm nhà chúa**  
**Múa tối ngày.** *They eat*  
*the boss's rice And dance*  
*night and day.*

**150. Vắng chúa nhà**  
**Gà vọc niêu tôm.**  
*When the master is away, Hens*  
*dabble in the shrimp-pot.*

### **3. Human Vices**

The Vietnamese are by nature teasers. Historically, we may interpret that tendency as a weapon of the oppressed, because our people was incessantly oppressed, either administratively by the mandarins, in addition to Chinese and French governors, or economically by landlords and usurers. Songs and tales presented later will amply illustrate this peculiarity of the Vietnamese spirit.

In the proverbs, human vices were subject to much scoffing. To get a clear idea, we will classify them into two categories:

The vices stemming from foolishness: vanity, boasting, conceit, snobbishness, laziness, and the more serious forms stemming from wickedness: hypocrisy, cynicism, slander, selfishness and ingratitude.

a/ Stupidity and its various aspects.

It is the defect which the Vietnamese peasant, rival of the Danube peasant, most readily mocked at. Here are some portraits of the stupid man:

**151. Cắn cơm không vỡ.**  
*He doesn't know how to chew rice.*

**152. Đơm đó ngọn tre.**  
*He puts his nets at the top of the bamboos.*  
*(instead of along the stream)*

**153. Bịt mắt bắt chim.**  
*With bandaged eyes, he hopes to catch birds.*

**154. Khôn nhà dại chợ.**  
*Wise at home, he is silly in the market.*

The vain fellow:

**155. Con nhà lính**  
**Tính nhà quan.**  
*Son of a soldier*  
*He behaves like a mandarin's son.*

**156. Húng mọc, tía tô cũng mọc.**  
*The wild vegetable vies with the mint in growing.*

**157. Nói ba voi không được bát nước sáo.**

*He promised three elephants out of which, he could not even make  
a bowl of meat.*

**158. Nói một tấc đến trời.**

*His boastings are an inch near the sky.*

**159. Trong đom đóm, ngoài bó đuốc.**

*Inside, it's only a glow-worm light  
Outside, it seems as bright as a torch.*

The conceited:

**160. Đánh trống qua cửa nhà sấm.**

*He beats the drum in front of the thunder house.*

**161. Múa rìu qua mắt thợ.**

*He flourishes the plane before the master carpenter.*

**162. Đũa mốc chòi mâm son.**

*Mouldy chopsticks dare lift up to a lackered tray.*

**163. Ăn mỳ đòi xôi gấc.**

*The beggar asks for sticky rice stewed with red tint.*

The snob:

**164. Bụt nhà không thiêng lại đi cầu Thích Ca  
ngoài đường.**

*He disregards his home's Buddha to worship another in the street.*

**165. Gánh vàng đi đổ sông Ngô.**

*He carries gold to throw it into the Chinese river.*

The fellow who sees others' defects:

**166. Chân mình thì lấm mê mê  
Đi cầm bó đuốc mà rê chân người.**

*His own feet are all dirty.*

*Yet, he checks the cleanliness of others' feet with a torch.*

**167. Chó chê mèo lắm lông.**

*The dog criticizes the cat for its excessive fur.  
(actually, both are equally furry)*

**168. Việc người thì sáng  
Việc nhà thì quáng.** *Very  
shrewd on others' affairs He is  
blind to his own.*

The lazy:

The Vietnamese people, mostly poor, must work hard to earn their living. So, the lazy one who depends upon others for his living is despised everywhere.

**169. Há miệng chờ sung.**

*He opens his mouth, waiting for the sycamore fruits to fall into it.*

**170. Ăn như thuyền chở mã  
Làm như ả chơi trăng**

*When he eats, you would say a boat loaded with votive paper  
(in large quantities, because of its lightness)  
But when he works, he looks like a lady strolling under moonlight.  
(i.e. slothfully)*

**171. Người giàu tham việc  
Thất nghiệp tham ăn.**

*The wealthy likes to work  
The idler thinks only of eating.*

**b/ Wickedness and its various aspects:**

The hypocrite and the cynic:

If smooth talk is highly esteemed by the scholars, it is despised by the more forthright common people. Here is how the hypocrite is seen:

**172. Miệng thơm thót**

***Dạ ớt ngâm. His  
mouth is sweet  
But his heart is pickled with hot peppers.***

***173. Thương miệng thương môi  
Thương miếng sôỉ miếng thịt.  
His condolences start only from his lips  
And aim at the meat and rice (of the funeral banquet).***

At the opposite end, cynicism is no less unpleasant. As much as the common people hate false virtue, they also mistrust he who offends it scurrilously:

***174. Cố đảỉ ảỉ sôỉ.  
He puts up with anything to get some steamed rice.***

The slander:

Of simple and gentle nature, the common people avoid carefully slander, this plague of sophisticated societies:

***175. Lưỡỉ khôỉ xươỉ nhiềủ đườỉ lắỉ lếủ.  
The boneless tongue has many tortuous ways.***

***176. Lưỡỉ mềủ độủ quỏ đườỉ ong.  
The soft tongue is more dangerous than the bee's sting.***

The selfish:

We knew that, by prudence, the common Vietnamese is readily selfish. Nevertheless, he is disgusted with vice's ugliness when he sees it in others:

***177. Chửỏ quỏ cầủ đảỉ cắỉ đượỉ.  
As soon as he crossed the bridge, he took its spans off.***

***178. Giầủ đięủ sảỉ đườỉ.  
The wealthy are deaf and the noble are blind.***

The ungrateful:

Ingratitude most shocks the common people who cannot understand this meanness:

**179. Ăn cháo đái bát.**

*He urinates into the bowl from which he just ate soup.*

**180. Ăn sung ngồi gốc cây sung Ăn  
rồi lại ném tứ tung ngũ hoành.**

*He sits at the foot of a sycamore  
And throws all around its fruits he just ate.*

**181. Có bát sứ tình phụ bát đàn.**

*As soon as he gets a chinaware bowl, he disregards the  
earthenware one.*

**182. Được chim bẻ ná  
Được cá quên nơm.**

*When the bird is shot, he shatters his cross-bow  
When the fish is caught, he forgets his fish tackle.*

**183. Khởi rên quên thầy.**

*He forgets the physician as soon as he recovers his health.*

#### **4. Social Regulations**

How does the common Vietnamese see the world? Does he find it well ruled, in accordance with the moral precepts taught by the wise masters? Is virtue always rewarded and wickedness punished? Before this great question, at the same time metaphysical and practical, the common Vietnamese adopts three attitudes. Imbued with Confucianist and Buddhist teaching, he believes in the law of causation: There is imminent justice because good must come from good and evil from evil. But he is not so foolish as not to be aware that the struggle for life is fierce, that success goes sometimes to the bold, cunning and rich people, and not always to the virtuous one. And last, he may always take refuge in the philosophy of the meek, i. e. to comfort himself by stating that fortune is fleeting and perilous.

**a/ Law of causation:**

Its generality:

**184. Ăn mặn khát nước.**  
*Salty food brings in thirst.*

**185. Cây thẳng bóng ngay  
Cây nghiêng bóng vạy .**  
*A straight tree gives straight shade  
A tortuous tree gives tortuous shade.*

Its application to heredity:

**186. Con nhà tông chẳng giống lông cũng giống cánh.**  
*Children from a good family always take after their ancestors,  
either by their feather or by their wings.*  
(a valuable man is compared to a bird who darts up the sky).

**187. Rau nào sâu ấy.**  
*For each kind of vegetable, there is a particular worm.*

Its application to virtue and vice:

**188. Ác giả ác báo .**  
*The wicked will encounter wickedness.*

**189. Ở hiền gặp lành .**  
*The virtuous will meet happiness.*

**190. Đường đi hay tối  
Nói dối hay cùng.**  
*A long travel will end in darkness  
A liar in the long run will contradict himself.*

**191. Khôn ngoan chẳng độ thật thà.**  
*Cleverness cannot equal sincerity.*

**192. Thật thà là cha quỷ quái.**  
*Sincerity defeats trickery.*

**193. Của làm ra để trên gác**

*Của cò bạc để ngoài sân  
Của phù vân để ngoài ngõ. Wealth  
earned by work is safe at home That  
earned by gambling stays in the yard  
Ephemeral acquisitions lie outdoors.*

**b/ Struggle for life**

First secure your living:

**194. Có thực mới vực được đạo.**  
*Virtue cannot dwell with starvation.*

Force defeats right:

**195. Cá lớn nuốt cá bé.**  
*Big fish devour little ones.*

**196. Cả vú lấp miệng em.**  
*A big breast covers the child's mouth.*

But one can replace brutal force by cleverness or flexibility:

**197. Lạt mềm buộc chặt.**  
*Supple thongs bind tightly.*

**198. Ngọt lọt đến xương.**  
*Sweet words go through bones.*

People are weak when, but may become a great force by gathering together:

**199. Góp gió thành bão.**  
*Many winds make a storm.*

**200. Chúng khẩu đồng từ  
Ông Sư cũng chết.**  
*When all people express the same opinion  
Even the monk must die.*

(even a man as virtuous as the monk cannot avoid the sentence

imposed upon him by a fanatic crowd)

Nevertheless, if a crowd is strong by its mass, it usually does not act wisely, because it is irresponsible, and everybody often means nobody:

**201. Lắm sãi không ai đóng cửa chùa.**

*A pagoda with several monks has its doors watched by no one.*

**202. Cha chung không ai khóc.**

*No child bewails over a common father.*

**203. Lắm thầy thổi ma.**

*With several witches, the corpse risks putrefaction.*

*(because they cannot agree on the funeral's date).*

In an organized society, the most fearsome power is not the one pertaining to force, but to money:

**204. Mạnh về gạo**

**Bạo về tiền.** *Strength*

*is due to rice Boldness*

*to money.*

**205. Nén bạc đâm toạc tờ giấy.**

*A bar of silver tears up the sheet of paper.*

*(moneys perverts judgement)*

**206. No nên bụt**

**Đói nên ma.**

*Surfeited, one behaves like Buddha*

*Starved, one becomes a demon.*

**207. Cái khó bó cái khôn.**

*Poverty binds wisdom.*

Therefore, in such a society ruled by strength, cleverness or money, the weak people are beaten beforehand:

**208. Chó cắn áo rách.**

*The dog barks after ragged clothes.*

**209. Nhờ gió bẻ măng.**

*While the wind is blowing, thieves break the bamboo shoots.*

**210. Dâu đổ bìm bìm leo.**

*Once the fence is fallen, the bindweed climbs up.*

**211. Mềm nắn rắn buông.**

*The soft are seized, the hard are released.*

**212. Khó giữ đầu**

**Giàu giữ của.**

*The poor guard their heads*

*The rich guard their wealth.*

c/ The philosophy of the weak people

In the awful gearing of that society, are the weak people to be inevitably and forever crushed? Fortunately not. Because the laws for which they hope in their grimmest hours of distress are working.

Law of vicissitude:

**213. Sông có khúc**

**Người có lúc.**

*Each river has its meanderings*

*Everyone has his ups and downs.*

**214. Ai giàu ba họ**

**Ai khó ba đời.**

*Nobody's three families are all wealthy*

*No family remains poor for three generations. (everyone's three families are: his father's, his mother's and his wife's)*

**215. Ai nắm tay đến tối?**

**Ai gói tay đến sáng?**

*Who can clinch his fist till night?*

*Who can rest his head on his elbow till morning?*

**216. Cười người chớ có cười lâu  
Cười người hôm trước hôm sau người cười.**

*Don't laugh at anybody  
For he who is laughing today will be laughed at tomorrow.*

**217. Mưa chẳng qua Ngọ  
Gió chẳng qua Mùi. Rain  
won't pour beyond noon.  
Gusty wind won't blow beyond 2 p.m.**

Law of compensation:

**218. Trèo cao ngã đau.**  
*The higher one climbs, the more painful the downfall.*

**219. Lớn người to cái ngã.**  
*Big stature, heavy downfall.*

**220. To đầu khó chui.**  
*Big heads have difficulty creeping into anywhere.*

**221. Ăn cơm với cáy thì ngáy o o.  
Ăn cơm thịt bò thì lo ngay ngáy.**  
*Crab eaters peacefully snore  
Beef eaters are continually anxious.*

**222. Voi chết vì ngà, chim chết vì lông.**  
*Elephants die for their ivory  
Birds for their feathers.*

It is therefore concluded that to live happy, we should live in seclusion. And if we remain unhappy, comfort ourselves that such is our fate:

**223. Giàu tại phận, khó tại duyên.**  
*Wealth and poverty are settled by fate.*

Fatalism goes even further. Since our fate is arranged by Heaven. Heaven will not let us starve:

**224. Trời sinh trời dưỡng.**

*Heaven gives life, He also takes care of it.*

**225. Trời sinh voi, Trời sinh cỏ.**

*Heaven who creates elephants also creates grass.*

## CHAPTER III.

### Sociological And Geo-Historical Observations

#### 1. Customs and Prejudices.

After the long Chinese domination, the Vietnamese adopted the absolute monarchy system taken after the Chinese. Something remained essentially Vietnamese, however: the village autonomy, which was a remnant of the feudal system in the ancient Van Lang kingdom. This autonomy is expounded on in the following proverbs:

**226. Chợ có lễ**

**Quê có thói.**

*The city has its regulations*

*So does the village.*

**227. Phép vua thua lệ làng.**

*The king's laws give way to the village customs.*

and asserts itself in all internal affairs of the village. The government collects taxes and orders drudgery only through the village. Futhermore, civil lawsuits and even police regulations are solely solved by the village authorities, except in case of contest, by the mandarins.

Even the honours granted by the Government are recognized as valid only after they are consecrated by a banquet offered to all villagers:

**228. Vô vọng bắt thành quan.**

*Without the consecration banquet you are not recognized as a mandarin.*

Thus, the village becomes a primordial center of interests, the rendez-vous of all ambitions. The supreme dishonour is to be a "blank fellow" (bạch đình), i.e., untitled. Titles yet abound. Besides the legal officers, the village mayor, the deputy mayor, the militia chief, the hamlet chief, etc... numerous professionals or simply honorary groups are created such as the scholars', the Seniors', which give right to speak in the village meetings, and the supreme honour to be invited to the

village ceremonies. Many of these honorary titles, granted by the village to supplement its budget, are to be bought at high prices. Anyhow, people willingly ruin themselves to acquire titles, as is proved by the following proverb:

**229. Bán gia tài mua danh phận**  
*Sell your patrimony to buy honours.*

What is the compensation? First, you are no longer uncivilly referred to as Second Uncle, Third Aunt, or worse Scamp Tèo's father, Prostitute Hĩm's mother. A short digression here is necessary.

It is a habit in peasant families, especially in those where infant mortality is high, to give children some crude first names, in order to discourage the devils who are believed to be tempted to call to their service the children with beautiful names, i.e., to cause their death. Therefore, instead of being so vulgarly named, what an honor to be called Mr. the First Notability of the village, and so on. What a pleasure to receive his portion of pork proffered in ceremonies, the portion of course being in accordance with the importance of each title:

**230. Một miếng giữa làng**  
**Bằng sàng xó bếp.**  
*A morsel eaten at the village banquet*  
*Equals a basketful eaten in the corner of your kitchen.*

Therefore, the peasants endeavour to live peacefully behind their bamboo hedges, under the protection of the village hall and as far away as possible from the administrative mechanism of the government. Sometimes, they still have to resort to it as when there is a lawsuit, or to solicit a dignitary. These forced contacts are disappointing and always costly, as it is said in the following proverb:

**231. Cửa vào quan như than vào lò.**  
*Money put into the yamen is like coal put into a stove.*

**232. Quan thì xa, bản nha thì gần.**  
*The mandarin is far off, but his clerks are near.*

(People have difficulty in appealing to the mandarin, who sees and hears only through his clerks' eyes and ears. So, it is wise to be on good terms with the latter by gifts.)

The ancient society submissively agreed to the supremacy of the scholars:

**233. Nhất sĩ nhì nông.**

*First come the scholars, then the farmers.*

The supremacy of the scholars is understandable in a society where the only way to have access to honours was success in literary examinations. But the peasant's practical and waggish mind makes him add:

***Hết gạo chạy rông***

***Nhất nông nhì sĩ.***

*But when the rice is lacking,*

*The scholars run anxiously to borrow it.*

*In such case, farmers come before scholars.*

Gifted with a naturally melodious language, the Vietnamese is a born musician. But imbued as he was with Confucianist morals, he considered dishonorable the profession of comedians who were exposed to jokes forbidden to young ladies of good upbringing:

**234. Xướng ca vô loài.**

*Singers are social outcasts.*

Similarly, he did not appreciate the inn maids, perhaps still more exposed than the comedians:

**235. Mèo lành chẳng ở mả**

***Á lành chẳng ở hàng cơm.***

*A good cat does not wander among cemeteries*

*A good girl does not live in inns.*

Unwilling either to justify or to condemn these old-time prejudices, I note only that they are understandable in the context of the cultural and economic background from which they originated.

## 2. Religious and Superstitious Beliefs

This very important topic will be examined in depth following the section on songs and tales. Only some proverbs on the subject will be presented here:

About festivals:

**236. Tết đến sau lưng  
Ông vui thì mừng, con cháu thì lo.**

*When the New Year comes,  
Ancestors are glad whereas their descendants are anxious.  
(because of the high expenses required for the New Year.)*

**237. Đi lễ quanh năm  
Không bằng ngày rằm tháng giêng.**

*Prayers made throughout the year  
Are not worth those made on the 15th day of the first month.*

About the tombs' influence:

**238. Đồi trước đắp năm  
Đồi sau ấm mồ.**

*A tomb well built by a previous generation  
Brings happiness to the following ones.*

**239. Làm quan có mã  
Kẻ cả có giòng.**

*Those whose ancestors' tombs are well placed become mandarins  
Those whose ancestry was noble becomes illustrious.*

**240. Sống về mồ mã  
Không sống về cả bát cơm.**

*Your life depends on your ancestors' tombs  
More than on the rice you eat.*

Other superstitions:

**241. Dù ai buôn bán trăm nghề**

***Đi ngày con nước trở về tay không.***

*Whatever your business,  
If your journey starts on a flood-tide day, you will come back with  
empty hands.*

### **3. Historic or Geographic References**

Historic references:

***242. Kỳ nào lúa mọc đòng đòng  
Giỗ vua Thái Tổ, Thái Tông mưa rào.*** *When  
the young rice-plants become sheathed ears, Comes  
the anniversary of the two first Lê emperors.*

(Emperors Lê Thái Tổ (1428-1433) and Lê Thái Tông (1433-1442); their anniversaries occur in the 8<sup>th</sup> lunar month, when it rains abundantly and the young rice-plants become sheathed ears; in the 10<sup>th</sup> month, they become fully ripe and are harvested.)

***243. Nước Nam có bốn anh hùng:  
Tường gian, Viêm láo, Khiêm khùng, Thuyết ngu.***  
*Vietnam has four heroes  
Tường the cheat, Viêm the arrogant, Khiêm the crazy  
and Thuyết the stupid.*

(Those four high mandarins lived at the time Vietnam was losing its independence to the French. The two regents Tôn Thất Thuyết and Nguyễn Văn Tường dethroned or assassinated successively emperor Dục Đức, Hiệp Hòa and Kiến Phúc. In the night of the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of the 4th month of the year Ất Dậu (1885), they ordered a surprise attack against the French, whereas Thuyết fled to China.)

Hoàng Kế Viêm was famous for his pride and arrogance toward his colleagues. He defended Sơn Tây city against the French, but after Emperor Hàm Nghi's exodus, he rejoined the French puppet Emperor Đồng Khánh to oppose the insurgents.

About Ông Ích Khiêm, a great warrior who repressed many insurrections, the following anecdote is narrated: One day, he invited several high mandarins to dinner. From the beginning to the end of the

banquet, only dog meat was served in various dishes. Great amazement among the guests; some of them could not endure this meat and asked for another. Then Ông Ích Khiêm told them:

- Yes, Excellencies, from the first table to the last there is but dog. All are dogs.

We must admit that he deserved his nickname of Crazy.

**244. Đây vua không Khả  
Đào mã không Bài.**

*In the king's exile, Khả did not participate  
Nor did Bài in the violation of the imperial tombs.*

(Ngô Đình Khả, former President Ngô Đình Diệm's father, opposed the exile of Emperor Thành Thái. Prime Minister Nguyễn Hữu Bài opposed the violation of imperial tombs ordered by the French Protectorate who wanted to seize the treasure buried there.)

Regional characteristics:

**245. Thứ nhất kinh kỳ  
Thứ nhì Phố Hiến.**

*The most flourishing city is the Capital  
Then comes Phố Hiến.*

(Phố Hiến was a trading center established by foreigners in the 16th and 17th centuries, near Hưng Yên. Business prospered there. Indeed, the Trịnh princes welcomed foreigners who helped them manufacture guns used in their fight against the Nguyễn princes.)

**246. Trai Cầu Vòng Yên Thế  
Gái Nội Duệ Cầu Lim.**

*Valiant are the boys of Cầu Vòng, Yên Thế  
Graceful are the girls of Nội Duệ, Cầu Lim.*

(The village Cầu Vòng, in Yên Thế prefecture, is at the foot of the Cái Kinh mountain range. Thanks to its rough terrain, it was used as a maquis by revolutionaries and also as a refuge by pirates. Its inhabitants were famous for their intrepidity. Nội Duệ and Cầu Lim are two villages of Tiên Du district, Bắc Ninh province. Situated in the middle of a verdant open country, they are famous for the beauty of their women, who, in addition, are sweet in love affairs. We will later get acquainted with them in the chapter on love songs.)

**247. Bơi Đăm, rước Đá, hội Thầy,  
Vui thì vui vậy chẳng tày già La.**

*Regates of Đăm, processions of Đá, anniversaries of Thầy,  
All these festivals, although magnificent,  
cannot compared to those of La.*

(Đăm: Trung Tụ village, Từ Liêm district, Hà Đông province. Đá: Yên Sở village, Đan Phượng district, same province. Thầy: Reverend Từ Đạo Hạnh, a famous monk who died in Sài Sơn village, Quốc Oai district, Sơn Tây province, and was worshipped there. La: La Khê village, La Nội district, Hà Đông province.)

**248. Dưa La, cà Láng, tương Bần,  
Nước mắm Vạn Vân, cá rô đầm Sét.**

*Famous for their exquisite flavour are:*

*The salted vegetables of La, the eggplants of Láng, the bean sauce  
of Bần,*

*The fish sauce of Vạn Vân and the arabos of Sét marsh.*

(Láng: Yên Lãng village near Hanoi. Bần: Bần Yên Nhân village, Mỹ Hào district, Hưng Yên province. Vân: Vân Hải district, Hà Đông province. )

**249. Cam xã Đoài  
Xoài Bình Định.**

*Delicious are the oranges of Xã Đoài  
And the mangoes of Bình Định*

**250. Quan xứ Nghệ  
Lính lệ xứ Thanh.**

*Mandarins (superb as those) of Nghệ An  
Soldiers (undisciplined as those ) of Thanh Hóa.*

(Thanh Hóa and Nghệ An were native provinces of emperor lê and prince Trịnh; their inhabitants enjoyed many privileges under the Lê dynasty.)

**251. Đi bộ thì khiếp Hải Vân  
Đi thuyền thì sợ sóng thần Hang Dơi.**

*In walking one is terrified by the Cloudy Pass  
And in sailing by the diabolic waves in front of the Bat cave.*  
(Obstacles to communication between the North and the South. The Cloudy pass is between Huế anh Đà Nẵng. The Bat cave is under this pass. )

**252. Trai An Thái  
Gái An Vinh.**

*Fearsome are the An Thai young men  
And An Vinh young ladies.*

(These two villages are in Bích Khê district, homeland of emperor Quang Trung. Their inhabitants, girls as well as boys, are well trained in wrestling and boxing.)

**253. Bình Định tốt nhà  
Phú Yên tốt ruộng  
Khánh Hòa tốt trâu.**

*There are fine houses in Bình Định  
Fertile rice fields in Phú Yên  
And superb buffaloes in Khánh Hòa.*

(three rich provinces in Central Vietnam which is otherwise rather poor.)

**254. Quảng Nam hay cãi  
Quảng Ngãi hay co Bình  
Định hay lo  
Thừa Thiên ních hết.**

*Quảng Nam people are fond of arguing,  
Quảng Ngãi people are quarrelsome,  
Bình Định people worry about anything and everything  
And those of Thừa Thiên take everything.*

(because the latter live in the Capital, site of all lawsuits and maneuvers for promotions and transfers of the mandarins.)

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **METEOROLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC OBSERVATIONS**

#### **1. Weather Forecastings**

Situated in the tropical zone and heavily influenced by the monsoon, Vietnam sometimes gets too much water and sometimes not enough. Too much, and there is flood which devastates entire provinces, carrying away people, cattle and houses towards the terrifying abyss of the sea. Not enough, and there is drought not less terrifying with cracked ricefields, wilted rice-plants, wells where there remains but nauseous mud. Both bring famine and death.

Of course, people have responded by building dikes and dams (the latter only under the French occupation). But what can man's weakness do against the titanesque forces of Nature? So, the lives of the Vietnamese depend mostly on weather conditions that vary drastically from one year to another. This also explains how meticulously the Vietnamese people observe natural phenomena to forecast the weather. This practice may seem quite rudimentary, a little whimsical, but sometimes it proves to be surprisingly accurate. Yet, let's not forget that most of these forecasts made by North Vietnamese are applicable to their own region.

In observing the moon and the stars:

**255. Muốn ăn lúa tháng năm  
Xem trăng rằm tháng bảy.**

*To know whether there will be fifth month harvest rice to eat,  
Please observe the full moon in the seventh month.*

**256. Quảng cạn tán mưa**

*If the moon be showing a little halo, there will be drought;  
A large halo indicates coming rain.*

**257. Đầy sao thì nắng**

**Vầng sao thì mưa.**

*A starry sky announces sunny weather  
And blurred stars announce rainfall.*

**258. Móng Đông vòng Tây**

**Chẳng mưa đây cũng gió giật .**

*Rainbow in the East or West  
Is sign of persistent rain or strong wind.*

**259. Móng dài trời lụt**

**Móng cụt trời mưa.**

*A long rainbow presages flood  
A short one precedes only rain.*

In observing the clouds:

**260. Mây xanh thì nắng**

**Mây trắng thì mưa.**

*Blue clouds announce fine weather  
White clouds forecast bad weather.*

**261. Mỡ gà thì gió**

**Máu chó thì mưa.**

*Clouds as yellow as hen fat announce strong wind;  
If they be like dog blood, they announce rainfall.*

**262. Thâm Đông, hồng Tây, dưng may**

**Ai đi ở lại ba ngày hãy đi.**

*Whether it is darkened East, reddening West, or head wind,  
Stay home three days before journeying.  
(because they are premonitory signs of storm )*

**263. Con đặng Đông vừa trông vừa chạy**

**Con đặng Nam vừa làm vừa chơi.**

*If clouds gathered in the East, go quickly to take shelter.  
If they gathered in the South, you may keep on working or playing.*

In observing the plants:

**264. Tre ngà trở hoa**

**Lúa mùa rồi hỏng.**

*If the bamboo tree is blossoming  
The tenth month harvest will be endangered.*

**265. Mùa hè đang nắng**

**Cỏ gà trắng thì mưa.**

*In summer, during a drought,  
If the couch-grass whitens, the rain is coming.*

In observing insects and birds:

**266. Tháng bảy heo may**

**Chuồn chuồn bay thì bão.**

*In the seventh month, when the wind is blowing  
If dragon-flies appear, it's a sign of coming storm.*

**267. Chuồn chuồn liệng thì nắng**

**Chim én liệng thì mưa.**

*Dragon-flies gliding in the sky announce sunny weather  
But gliding swallows announce rain.*

**268. Đang mưa quạ kêu thì nắng**

**Đang nắng quạ kêu thì mưa.**

*If the crow caws while it's raining, it's a sign of sunny weather to  
come;*

*If it caws while the sun shines, it's a sign of coming rain.*

## **2. Professional Experiences.**

Under the monarchical regime, there was a mandarin entrusted with developing agriculture, but this high official had no scientific laboratory; his task consisted merely of populating the waste lands, of appointing some village authorities to head them, and of

ordering the digging of irrigation canals. No question of agronomic science. The clever peasant overcame this somehow by careful observations.

**269. Thứ nhất cây nở**

**Thứ hai bỏ phân.**

*First, plough the soil when dry*

*Secondly, manure it well.*

(dry ploughing allows lumps of earth to be well aerated )

**270. Người đẹp về lụa**

**Lúa tốt về phân.**

*People are beautiful thanks to silk clothes*

*Rice-plants grow well thanks to fertilizers.*

**271. Ăn kỹ no lâu**

**Cày sâu tốt lúa.**

*By careful chewing one is satiated for a long time*

*By deep ploughing, rice plants grow well.*

**272. Tốt giống, tốt mạ**

**Tốt mạ, tốt lúa.**

*From good seeds, you will have healthy young rice plants*

*From healthy young rice plants, you will have good paddy.*

**273. Thừa mạ thì bán**

**Chớ có cấy rậm ăn rơm.**

*If you have too many young rice-plants, sell some of them*

*Don't transplant them too close together, you will only have straw.*

**274. Cây thưa thì thóc**

**Cây dày thì cóc được ăn.**

*Plant seedlings thinly, then you will have good harvest*

*But if you plant them too closely, you will have nothing to eat.*

**275. Khoai đất lạ**

**Mạ đất quen.**

*Plant potatoes in new lands  
But plant rice in well worked fields.*

**276. Năm cỏ, giỏ thóc.**  
*A wisp of grass weeded out gives a basket of rice.*

**277. Xanh nhà hơn già đồng.**  
*Better to bring home green paddy than let it mature in the fields.*

**278. Trời nắng tốt dưa  
Trời mưa tốt lúa.**  
*The sun makes good watermelons  
The rain makes good rice-plants.*

**279. Được mùa cau  
Đau mùa lúa. Good  
crop of areca-nuts  
Brings poor crop of rice.**

The peasant's experience extends also to stock farming:

**280. Lợi thì nuôi lợn nái  
Hại thì nuôi bồ câu.**  
*Advantageous is pig raising  
Damaging is pigeon breeding.*

**281. Thứ nhất thả cá  
Thứ nhì gá bạc.**  
*Most advantageous of all is fish breeding  
Much more than running a gambling house.*

**282. Tằm có lúa  
Ruộng có mùa.**  
*As silk worm has its time of hatching  
The ricefield has its time of harvest.*

**283. Tổ trắng mười bốn được tằm**

*Tỏ trăng hôm rằm thì được lúa chiêm. Moonlight in the  
fourteenth night, silk worms will be healthy Moonlight in the  
fifteenth night, the fifth month harvest will be abundant.*

**284. Gà nâu chân thấp mình to  
Để nhiều trứng lớn con vừa khéo nuôi  
Chả nên nuôi giống pha mùi  
Để không được mấy, con nuôi vụng về.**  
*The brown-feather hen, with short feet and a big body  
Lays many eggs that she nurtures well.  
Don't raise motley feathered hens  
Laying few eggs that they nurture poorly.*

**285. Chó khôn tứ túc huyền đề Tai  
thì hơi cúp, đuôi thì hơi cong.  
Giống nào mõm nhọn đít vòng  
Ăn càn cắn bậy ấy không ra gì.**  
*The good dog has its four paws evenly black  
Ears a little lowered, and a somewhat bent tail.  
But the one with a pointed muzzle and a swelling haunch  
Devours gluttonously and barks without rhyme nor reason.*

**286. Trâu năm sáu tuổi còn nhanh  
Bò năm sáu tuổi đã tranh côi già.  
Đông chiêm xin chó nuôi bò Mùa  
đông tháng giá bò rò làm sao? The  
five/ six year old buffalo is still brisk  
But the five/six year old cow is already getting old.  
In low ricefields, don't breed cows  
Which will become numbed with cold during the winter.**  
(The low ricefields are intended for the fifth month harvest. They are  
tilled in winter, the eleventh month).

About trade:

**287. Được mùa buôn vải buôn vóc  
Mất mùa buôn thóc buôn gạo.**

*In good harvest years, deal in fabric  
In bad harvest years, deal in cereals.*

About craftsmen:

**288. *Làm ruộng thì ra  
Làm nhà thì thiếu.***

*In agriculture, earnings exceed expectations; In  
building a house, expenses exceed estimates.*

Let us now leave the proverbs, which number several thousands and keep on increasing everyday. The reader should note that all the 288 proverbs quoted above refer to the period before the 20th century. It would be interesting to quote some more recent proverbs as well, such as those developed during the French occupation, or the Ngô Đình Diệm's rule, or the communist regime. Unfortunately, it has not been possible for me to do so for two reasons:

1. My documentation of recent proverbs is still too incomplete for a comprehensive survey.
2. My only aim is to show a coherent image of the Vietnamese people, of their spiritual and social life. This image is of course static, centered on the Vietnam of the past that knew neither electricity nor airplanes, machine-guns nor cars, the Vietnam that lived peacefully in the shade of its pagodas and its bamboo hedges, unaware in its ignorant and splendid isolation that immobility in a moving world was suicide. Alas! The times past are never regained. And I imagine that one should not mix the static image of the past with the dynamic image of the present, just as it would be unseemly to drink rice alcohol with whisky or champagne.

## PART TWO

### THE FOLKSONGS

#### GENERAL FEATURES

##### Prosody

Folk songs can use all forms of versification:

a/ The simplest is the *nói lời*, used in plays to recite a part without using musical song. The *nói lời* generally consists of four-word verses, in which the last word of the first verse rhymes with the second or the last word of the next verse. Here is an example:

*Lậy trời mưa xuống  
Lấy nước tôi uống  
Lấy ruộng tôi cấy  
Cho đầy nồi cơm.  
Pray Heaven it rains  
To give us water to drink  
To fertilize our ricefields  
To fill our ricepots.*

b/ The 6/8 or couplets of 6 and 8 word verses, in which the last word of the first verse rhymes with the sixth word of the second verse, and the last word of the second verse rhymes with the last word of the first verse in the next couplet. For instance:

*Trên trời có đám mây xanh  
Ở giữa mây trắng chung quanh mây vàng*

*Ước gì anh lấy được nàng  
Thì anh mua gạch Bát Tràng về xây.  
In the sky are floating blue clouds Surrounding white  
ones, and surrounded by yellow ones. I wish I could  
marry you, Miss  
I would buy Bát Tràng bricks to build.*

c/ The altered 6/8, having more than 6 or 8 words, but complying with the same rules of rhyme. In the following example, the words in excess are put between parentheses:

*Bắc thang (lên) thử hỏi trăng già  
Phải rằng phận (gái) mưa sa giữa trời.  
I wish to set up a ladder to ask the old moon lady  
If a girl's fate is like that of a rain drop falling from the sky.*

d/ The double 7 and 6/8 consisting of couplets of 6/8 verses alternate with couplets of 7 word verses. For instance:

*Bác mẹ già phơ phơ đầu bạc  
Con chàng còn trứng nước thơ ngây  
Có hay chàng ở đâu đây  
Thiếp xin mượn cánh chấp bay theo chàng.  
Your parents are hoary-headed  
And your child is like a barely hatched fledgling.  
If I knew where you live  
I would ask for wings to fly after you.*

e/ The altered double 7 and 6/8. For instance:

*Tròng trành như nón không quai  
Như thuyền không lái, như ai không chồng  
Gái không chồng (như) phản gỗ long đanh  
Phản long đanh anh còn chữa được  
Gái không chồng chạy ngược chạy xuôi  
Không chồng khôn lăm (chị) em ơi !  
Unsteady as a strapless hat  
Or a rudderless boat, is the unmarried girl.  
Of course, married girls carry a millstone around the necks  
But unmarried girls look like a bed whose nails are loose.  
A bed whose nails are unfastened may be repaired  
But an unmarried girl flings about without knowing  
how to escape.*

*Ah, sister, how unfortunate is an unmarried girl !*

### **Wording Technique**

In this point of view, folk songs may have the following forms:

a/ The phú, which directly expresses what it means. For example:

*Ba năm trấn thủ lưu đồn  
Ngày thì canh điểm, tối dồn việc quan.  
Chém tre đẵn gỗ trên ngàn,  
Hữu thân hữu khổ, phàn nàn cùng ai?  
Miệng ăn măng trúc măng mai, Những giang  
cùng nữa lấy ai bạn cùng ? During my three years  
in the garrison at the frontier, By day I stand sentry at  
my post*

*And by night I am engrossed in administrative tasks.*

*Cutting down bamboo and other trees in the forest*

*Is only my diversion.*

*Since everyone must suffer, what's the good of complaining?*

*Nothing but bamboo-shoots to eat,*

*And being alone amidst the bush*

*I have nobody to make friend with.*

b/ The tỉ, which expresses an idea indirectly through a comparison. For instance:

*Có quán tình phụ cây đa  
Ba năm quán đổ cây đa vẫn còn.  
Dwelling in an inn, you disdain the banyan-tree;  
After three years the inn will fall down,  
whereas the banyan-tree will remain.*

c/ The hứng, which expresses an idea suggested by an evocative image. For instance:

*Quả cau nho nhỏ  
Cái võ vân vân Nay  
anh học gần Mai  
anh học xa.  
Lấy em từ thửa mười ba  
Đến năm mười tám đã hòa năm con.  
Ra đường thiếp hãy còn son,*

***Về nhà thiếp đã năm con cùng chồng.***

*Very small is the areca-nut*

*Very veined is its peel.*

*One day you study near our house;*

*Another day your school is far away,*

*You married me when I was thirteen,*

*And now that I'm eighteen, we already have five children !*

*Outside, I look like a little girl,*

*But at home I am the mother of five children.*

The three techniques of phú, tỉ, hứng may also be used altogether in a song. For instance:

***Trong đầm gì đẹp bằng sen***

***Lá xanh bông trắng lại chen nhị vàng.***

***Nhị vàng, bông trắng, lá xanh***

***Gần bùn mà chẳng hôi tanh mùi bùn.***

*In the marsh, nothing is finer than the lotus*

*Whose leaves are green and the flowers are white*

*with yellow pistils*

*Yellow pistils, whites flowers, green leaves,*

*The lotus grows in the mud, yet doesn't take on its bad smell.*

This song, while describing the lotus (phú) compares it to the sage (tỉ) who maintains his integrity amidst the defiled world.

***Qua cầu ngả nón trông cầu,***

***Cầu bao nhiêu dịp dạ sầu bấy nhiêu.***

*While crossing the bridge , I take off my hat to look at it*

*And I have as much sorrow as it has spans.*

The author of this song, while crossing a bridge (phú) is prompted to express the extent of his lovesickness (hứng).

## **Musical Tune**

Folk songs may be sung according to many musical tunes, the principal ones of which are:

- the hát xẩm, or blind singers' tune, comprising two forms: the xẩm chợ used by the truly blind beggars, and the xẩm nhà trò used by the singing girls;

- the hát đò đưa and the hò mái đẫy which are the boatwoman's tune;

- the hát giao duyên, or duet in love songs;
- the hát quan họ, a special tune widespread in some North-Vietnamese provinces;
- the hát trống quân, originally sung by soldiers marching to the accompaniment of beating drums, then changed into a folk tune punctuated by the vibrations of a steel string stretched between two tin plate drums used as sound boxes;
- The hát ru em, or lullaby, and so on.

The analysis of those tunes is the musician's specialty and is not discussed here.

## **Classification**

The above characteristics may be used as a framework for a methodical classification of folk songs. Nevertheless, it seems more sensible to classify them according to their subjects, as has been done with the proverbs.

As these two divisions of the folk literature deal with the same subjects (as mentioned in the Foreword), the same classification used for proverbs should logically apply. However, here there is a difference: whereas the proverb aims at teaching, the song aims at stirring up emotions. Therefore, some topics are more fully developed by songs, and others by proverbs. To balance the different categories of songs, I am thus led to adopt the following classification:

- 1/ Moral songs;
- 2/ Romantic songs;
- 3/ Instructional songs.

To these three categories, will be added a fourth one comprising special songs, such as lullabies, children's songs, riddles and songs for contests.

## CHAPTER V

### MORAL SONGS

Moral precepts expressed in songs may be as dogmatic as those expressed in proverbs, from which such songs then differ only in their melodious rhymes. Also, in most cases, they have a touch of emotionalism which moves the listener's heart more easily. We will distinguish three categories of moral precepts:

- General morals;
- Family morals;
- Social morals.

#### 1. General Morals

a/ Of Confucianist Origin.

Obviously, priority is given to the commandments of the Confucianist doctrine: to be a good son, a good subject and a good husband.

##### *1. Tu thân rồi mới tề gia*

*Lòng ngay nói vậy gian tà mặc ai.*

*Improve yourself, then manage your home affairs well*

*Keep your heart upright and undefiled, no matter what people do or say.*

##### *2. Làm trai giữ trọn ba giềng*

*Thảo cha, ngay chúa, vợ hiền chớ vong.*

*Every man must adhere to the three moral foundations:*

*Filial piety, loyalty to the prince, and fidelity to one's wife.*

##### *3. Làm sao giữ trọn đạo ba*

*Sau dẫu có thác cũng là thơm danh.*

*Provided that you adhere to the three moral foundations,*

*Though you may die, your name will remain honored.*

**4. Công cha nghĩa mẹ chó quên Ôn vua  
lộc nước mong đền con ơi.** *Always  
remember your parents' benefactions,  
And think of fulfilling your duties to your king and country.*

**5. Phận gái tứ đức vẹn tuyền  
Dung, công, ngôn, hạnh, giữ gìn chó sai.**  
*Every woman must observe the four virtues:  
Gentle demeanor, cleverness in work, sweetness of speech,  
and good nature.*

Dung, the gentle demeanor:

**6. Bận đừng đòi lãnh đòi lương  
Vải bô bận mặc thường thường thì thôi.**  
*For clothing, don't ask for lustrous silk of gauze  
But rather, be content with cotton fabric.*

Công, cleverness in work:

**7. Nào nghề bánh trái những là,  
Đến khi kỳ lạp trong nhà càng hay.  
Bán buôn canh cửi kia thay,  
Sanh nhai phải giữ trong tay một nghề.  
Bây giờ chẳng liệu thì què,  
Mai sau cùng túng, không nghề làm ăn.**  
*Practice making cakes  
Suitable for anniversary days  
Also practice trading and weaving  
Or some profession that secures your living.  
If you don't prepare yourself for earning a living now,  
How will you manage when poverty strikes?*

Ngôn, sweetness of speech:

**8. Chim khôn kêu tiếng rảnh rang,  
Người khôn nói tiếng dịu dàng dễ nghe.**  
*As the good bird sings melodiously,*

*So is a wise woman listened to with pleasure.*

Hạnh, good nature:

**9. Tốt gỗ hơn tốt nước sơn**  
**Xấu người đẹp nét còn hơn đẹp người.**  
*A good wood is better than a fine coat of paint,*  
*A good nature is better than a nice face.*

In the other precepts of general morals, the following points are stressed:

a/ Maintain a good reputation:

**10. Trăm năm bia đá thì mòn**  
**Nghìn năm bia miệng hãy còn trơ trơ.**  
*After a hundred years, the stone stele will be worn out,*  
*After a thousand years, the verbal tradition will still be alive.*

**11. Chử rằng hổ tử lưu bì**  
**Làm người phải để danh gì hậu lai.**  
*A dead tiger leaves its skin,*  
*A person must leave a good reputation to future generations.*

**12. Trong đầm gì đẹp bằng sen**  
**Lá xanh bông trắng lại chen nhị vàng**  
**Nhị vàng, bông trắng, lá xanh**  
**Gần bùn mà chẳng hôi tanh mùi bùn.**  
*In the marsh, nothing is finer than the lotus*  
*With its green leaves, white flowers and yellow pistils.*  
*With yellow pistils, white flowers, and green leaves,*  
*The lotus grows in the mud, yet doesn't take on its bad smell.*

b/ Work well, be resolute and enduring:

**13. Có vất vả mới thanh nhàn**  
**Không dung ai dễ cầm tàn che cho ?**  
*It is by hard work that you get honorable leisure*  
*You can't expect to rise to high rank if you do nothing.*

**14. Có khó mới có cái ăn**

**Không dung ai bỗng mang phần tới cho ?**

*It is by hard work that you can afford to eat  
You can't expect to share others' earnings if you stay idle.*

**15. Người đời ai khỏi gian nan, Gian  
nan có thừa, thanh nhàn có khi. Who  
can avoid pain in this world?**

*You are in pain now, you will be happy some other time.*

**16. Tằm vương tơ, nhện cũng vương tơ,  
Mấy đời tơ nhện được như tơ tằm ?**

*As the silk worm weaves silk, the spider weaves its cobweb,  
But how can the cobweb be compared to the silk ?*

**17. Ai ời chẳng chóng thì chày Găng  
công mài sắt có ngày nên kim.**

*Sooner or later  
He who is sharpening steel will get a sliver.*

**18. Ai ời đã quyết thì hành  
Đã đốn thì vác cả cành lẫn cây.**

*If you are determined to do something, do it.  
After cutting down a tree, carry it away with its branches.  
(One must accept all consequences of one's acts,  
whatever they may be.)*

c/ Avoid such vices as gambling and drunkenness:

**19. Cờ bạc là bác thằng bần  
Cửa nhà bán hết tra chân vào cùm.**

*Gambling leads to poverty  
Deprives you of your properties, and takes you to jail.*

**20. Cờ bạc là bác thằng bần  
Áo quần bán hết ngồi trần tô hô.  
Gambling engenders poverty**

*You sell your clothes and will be as naked as a worm.*

**21. Rượu nào rượu lại say người  
Bớ người say rượu chớ cười rượu say.  
Alcohol doesn't intoxicate you,  
If you are intoxicated, blame only yourself.**

d/ Be modest and accept your lot in life:

**22. Ai nhất thì tôi thứ nhì  
Ai mà hơn nữa, tôi thì thứ ba.  
If someone wants to be the first, I will be the second.  
If two are competing against me, I agree to be the third.**

**23. Trăng khoe sáng tỏ hơn đèn  
Sao trăng lại phải chịu lờn đám mây?  
Đèn khoe đèn tỏ hơn trăng  
Đèn ra trước gió được chững hời đèn? The  
moon boasts of being brighter than the lamp,  
Why is she sometimes hidden behind the cloud?  
The lamp boasts of being brighter than the moon,  
But, o lamp, can you stay lighted before a strong wind?  
(It was an oil lamp, consisting of an oil plate with a cotton wick )**

**24. Trông lên mình chẳng bằng ai,  
Trông xuống dễ đã có ai bằng mình?  
If you look up at higher ranking people, you feel small.  
If you look down at lower ranking people,  
nobody can be compared to you.**

**25. Cây cao thì gió càng lay  
Càng cao danh vọng càng dày gian truân.  
The higher the tree, the more it is shaken by winds.  
The more honors a person receives,  
the more he will meet adversity.**

And follows is the advice from peasants to those who, dazzled by the luxury of towns, are tempted to venture there imprudently:

26. Ai đi đường ấy mặc ai  
Ta về cấy ruộng trông đòi ta ăn.  
Đỉnh trung là miếng nợ nần, Hay  
chi bó buộc mà lặn lưng vào? Mưa  
xuân phơi phới vườn hồng  
Ta về đắp đất ta trồng lấy cây.  
Trồng lấy cây mong ngày có quả  
Can chi mà vất vả như ai?  
Long đong nay ngược mai xuôi,  
Đỉnh chung là cạm trên đời hay chi?  
Ai giàu thì mặc ai giàu,  
Ta về ta ở hái dâu chẵn tầm.  
Ta chẵn tầm lấy tơ ta dệt,  
May áo quần khỏi rét, ai ơi.  
Tham chi tấm áo của người,  
Hộ cho ta mặc, lại đòi lấy ngay.  
*Never mind those who go away,  
Let's stay home to farm our fields and hills.  
Fortune is source of sorrows,  
Why impetuously throw oneself on it?  
Well, the spring drizzle is delicately drifting upon our rose gardens  
Let's come back to dig the soil and plant trees  
Which will give us fruits some day.  
What's the use of working hard like other people?  
They have a miserable life running up and down.  
Fortune is but a trap, o my friends.  
Never mind the wealthy ones,  
Let's come back to gather mulberry leaves and breed silkworms.  
By breeding silkworms, we will get silk to weave  
And clothes to keep us warm.  
Why lust after another's shirt?  
Were it given to us, it would be taken off again.*

b/ Of Revolutionary and Taoist Influence.

To these counsels of the orthodox Confucianist teaching which recommends observance of social discipline, are added others that proceed from two different trends:

1/. One that could be called the hero's theory, inciting people against social injustices and towards heroic adventure. As a matter of fact, Confucianism is not radically opposed to it, and its most illustrious representatives, such as Nguyễn Công Trứ, did magnificently praise the hero. But Confucianism, foundation and support of the absolute monarchy, understands the hero solely in the role of a scholar, or better of an aristocrat who strengthens the social structure by spreading peace. In contrast, folk songs originated from the lower social classes who, in the Confucianist teaching, have but one duty: to obey. And they did rebel against this oppressive teaching in innumerable songs:

**27. Ở đời muôn sự của chung,  
Hơn nhau một tiếng anh hùng mà thôi.  
The world's wealth is for everyone  
And one distinguishes oneself but by heroism.**

**28. Nên ra tay kiếm tay cờ Chẳng nên  
thì chớ, chẳng nhờ tay ai. Làm trai  
cho đáng nên trai  
Xuống Đông, Đông tĩnh, lên Đoài, Đoài yên.  
If the opportunity comes, brandish your sword and banner;  
Otherwise, do not beg for another's help.  
A man must be a valiant one  
Who pacifies the East and knocks down the rebelling West.**

**29. Đã sinh ra kiếp đàn ông  
Đèo cao, núi thẳm, sông cùng quản chi.  
Since we were born men,  
Neither lofty pass, steep mountain, nor deep river can stop our steps.**

**30. Đây ta như cây giữa rừng  
Ai lay chẳng chuyển, ai rung chẳng rời.  
I am like a forest tree  
Which stands firm, however shaken.**

**31. Làm trai chí quyết tang bồng  
Sao cho tỏ mặt anh hùng mới cam.**

*Every man must seek adventures with a bow and arrows: Unless  
he distinguishes himself as a hero, he won't fulfill his life.*

**32. Ru hời ru hời ru hời !  
Làm trai đứng ở trên đời  
Sao cho xứng đáng giống nòi nhà ta.  
Ghé vai gánh vác sơn hà  
Sao cho tỏ mặt mới là trượng phu.**  
*Sleep, my child.*

*If you want to find a place in the world,  
You must be worthy of your race.  
Carry on your shoulders the burden of your country  
So that you may be recognized as a hero.*

If it is not given to everyone the opportunity to prove himself a hero, at least he should try to travel everywhere rather than tie himself to his mother's apron strings:

**33. Đi cho biết đó biết đây  
Ở nhà với mẹ biết ngày nào khôn.**

*You have to travel everywhere;  
If you always stay by your mother, how can you acquire experience?*

**34. Làm trai cho đáng nên trai  
Phú Xuân cũng trải, Đồng Nai cũng từng.** *Since  
you are a man, prove that you are a worthy man By  
venturing everywhere, from Phú Xuân to Đồng Nai.*

**35. Rộng đồng mặc sức chim bay  
Biển hồ lai láng mặc tình cá đua.**  
*The bird freely flies above immense fields  
And the fish to its heart's content swims amidst lakes and seas.*

2/ The second trend proceeds from the Taoist influence that impregnates the common people as much as do the scholars. This trends favours

sensual and full enjoyment of life. This enjoyment is not limited as with the scholars to the delicate pleasures of music, chess, poetry and painting. In the next chapter, it will explode in the expression of love. Here, we merely glean some songs that express this eagerness for enjoyment among the common people:

**36. Ai ơi chơi lấy kẻ già**  
**Măng mọc có lúa, người ta có thì.**  
**Chơi xuân kẻ hết xuân đi,**  
**Cái già sông sộc nó thì theo sau.**  
*Have a good time before old age comes*  
*Because the growth of bamboo-shoots and the aging of people are*  
*swift.*  
*Enjoy spring before it ends,*  
*Before old age suddenly catches on you.*

**37. Anh ôi, uống rượu thì say, Bỏ**  
**ruộng ai cấy, bỏ giống ai gieo?**  
**Còn trời, còn nước, còn non,**  
**Còn cô bán rượu, anh còn say sưa. Darling,**  
*you'll be tipsy if you keep on drinking; Who would*  
*plough your fields and sow your seeds?*  
*- As long as there are the sky, rivers, mountains,*  
*And the wine-merchant, I will take pleasure in drinking.*

## **2. Family Morals**

a/ Parents' Duties. Their principal duty is to care for their children so that they become gallant men and good women. Our customs severely reprove parents who neglect that task due to miserliness, insensitivity or whatever motive.

**38. Để con chẳng dạy chẳng răn,**  
**Thà rằng nuôi lợn cho ăn lấy lòng.**  
*It's foolish to have children and not to educate them;*  
*Then you'd better breed pigs to feast on their viscera.*

But paternal or maternal affection may be blind and some parents only think of saving money for their children. The popular wisdom warns them against this practice:

**39. Có con gây dựng cho con,  
Gọi là nối đức tổ tiên đời truyền.**

*If you have children, you have to prepare them for life,  
So that they are able to perpetuate their ancestors' virtues.*

Indeed, the main point is to bequeath, not riches that would be dissipated by children accustomed to luxury and idleness, but rather wisdom and virtue. To this end, parents have to set good examples by being wise and virtuous themselves. The following song argues not after the force of example, but after the belief of the Vietnamese people in the law of causality: good comes from good and evil from evil:

**40. Cây xanh thì lá cũng xanh,  
Cha mẹ hiền lành để phúc cho con.  
Mừng cây rồi lại mừng cành,  
Cây đức lắm chồi, người đức lắm con.**

*As the green tree bears green leaves,  
So virtuous parents bequeath happiness to their children.  
Let's praise the tree and its branches;  
As the sound tree has many buds,  
So the virtuous man has many children.*

**b/ Children's Duties.** Filial piety is considered by peoples of Confucianist culture as one's first duty, the basis for all others. Mothers teach it to their children:

**41. Ru hoi, ru hoi, ru hoi,  
Công cha như núi ngất trời,  
Nghĩa mẹ như nước ở ngoài biển Đông.  
Núi cao biển rộng mênh mông,  
Cù lao chín chữ ghi lòng con ơi.**

*Sleep, my child,  
Your father's kind acts can make a lofty mountain reaching to the sky,  
Your mother's are like water filling up the Eastern Sea.  
As the mountain is lofty and the sea is immense,  
O child, be engraved in your heart your parents' kind acts.*

The elder brother or sister teaches it to his or her junior:

**42. Cau non khéo bổ cũng dày Trầu  
têm cánh phượng để thầy ăn đêm.**

*Be careful in cutting up the tender areca-nut  
And in rolling up like the phoenix wing the betel leaf that  
Daddy will chew at night.*

**43. Em thì đi cấy lấy công  
Để anh nhổ mạ tiền chung một lời  
Đem về cho bác mẹ soi,  
Làm con phải thế em ơi !**

*Little brother, go and plant young rice-plants  
While I am uprooting seedlings.  
To our parents we will bring back our wages;  
As a token of our filial piety.*

The aged teach it to youngsters:

**44. Con người có bố có ông,  
Như cây có cội, như sông có nguồn.  
Everyone has a father and a grandfather  
As trees have roots and rivers have sources.**

**45. Thờ cha mẹ ở hết lòng  
Ấy là chữ hiếu dạy trong luân thường.  
Chữ để nghĩa là nhường người trên.  
Ghi lòng tạc dạ chớ quên,  
Con em phải giữ lấy nền con em.  
Waiting on one's parents affectionately,  
Such is filial piety, the first moral duty.**

*Deference means yielding to your brothers, sisters and all elder people.*

*Engrave these concepts in your heart.*

*The child and the junior must behave as a child or a junior.*

Filial piety is all the more imperative as parents do not live on forever. How guilty children would feel if they could not care for their parents before their passing away.

**46. Cây khô chưa để mọc chồi**

**Bác mẹ chưa dễ ở đời với ta.**

**Non xanh bao tuổi mà già**

**Bởi vì sương tuyết hóa ra bạc đầu.**

*On the withered tree buds cannot shoot. Similarly,  
our parents cannot live eternally with us. In the  
long run, green mountains become old,  
Their ridges whitened with fog and snow.*

c/ Duties Among Brothers and Sisters. It is natural that filial piety stretches also to one's brothers and sisters, and a pious son is always a good brother.

**47. Anh em nào phải người xa**

**Cùng chung bác mẹ, một nhà cùng chung.**

**Yêu nhau như thể tay chân.**

**Anh em hòa thuận hai thân vui vầy.**

*Brothers and sisters are not strangers;*

*They have the same parents and live in the same house.*

*As they watch them love one another as limbs of the same body,*

*Their parents rejoice.*

Unfortunately, concern for personal interest may sometimes divide brothers, who should first have consideration for their parents:

**48. Khôn ngoan đá đáp người ngoài,**

**Gà cùng một mẹ chớ hoài đá nhau.**

*If you are clever, measure yourself against strangers*

*Let not a hen's chickens peck at one another.*

Moreover, the traditional morals taught that brotherly affection should take precedence over conjugal love:

**49. Anh em như thể chân tay**

**Vợ chồng như áo đổi thay nên lìa.**

*Brothers are like limbs*

*Whereas husband and wife are like clothes that can be parted.*

(Indeed, a widower or a widow may marry again, whereas a dead sister or brother is lost for ever. Nevertheless, this comparison of a spouse to an interchangeable garment somehow offends our modern ideas.)

**3/ Social Morals.** Like the proverbs, the folk songs teach courtesy, kindness, gratitude, solidarity, friendship and patriotism. About courtesy:

**50. Lời nói chẳng mất tiền mua,  
Lựa lời mà nói cho vừa lòng nhau  
Kim vàng ai nỡ uốn câu,  
Người khôn ai nỡ nói nhau nặng lời.**  
*You need no money to buy words  
So choose kind words to please those to whom you speak.  
Gold is not used to make a fish-hook  
Like wise, between wise people there is no need for harsh words.*

Kindness to the servants:

**51. Kẻ ăn người ở trong nhà  
Sớm khuya công việc giúp ta nhọc nhằn  
Thương người đầy đọa chút thân Chớ  
nên ngược đãi lòng nhân mới là.**  
*People in our service  
Must get up early and go to bed late. So  
let's be considerate for their hard life  
And not ill treat them, for humanitarian purpose.*

About gratitude:

**52. Ôn ai một chút chớ quên Phiền  
ai một chút để bên cạnh lòng. Never  
forget another's kind deeds,  
And put aside your grievances.**

About solidarity:

**53. Một cây làm chẳng nên non  
Ba cây chụm lại nên hòn núi cao.**  
*A lone tree cannot make a mountain  
But three trees gathered can make a high hill.*

About friendship:

**54. Thói thường gần mực thì đen  
Anh em bạn hữu phải nên chọn người.**

*Những người lêu lổng chơi bời Cũng là  
lười biếng, ta thời tránh xa. Because one  
blackens oneself working with ink Look only  
for good people to be your friends. From those  
who are leading a fast life  
And the idle, stay away.*

**55. Bạn bè là nghĩa tương tri  
Sao cho sau trước một bề mới cam.**  
*To be friends is to have a mutual understanding  
And to deal with each other in loyalty from start to end.*

**56. Ai sang đò ấy bây giờ  
Ta còn ở lại ta chờ bạn ta  
Mưa nguồn chớp bể xa xa  
Ấy ai là bạn của ta, ta chờ.**  
*Let others cross the ferry now  
I must stay and wait for my friend.  
Were it raining in the forest, or lightning on the sea,  
I will wait for my friend before crossing the ferry.  
(stay faithful to one's friend notwithstanding life's vicissitudes)*

About patriotism:

**57. Chim có tổ, cáo có hang,  
Người ta có nước, có làng, ai đi?  
Con người có tổ, có tông,  
Cái cây có cội, con sông có nguồn.**  
*As the bird has its nest, and the fox its hole, Everyone  
has his country and village he cannot leave. He has  
his ancestors  
As the tree has its roots and the river its source.*

**58. Ta về ta tắm ao ta,  
Dù trong dù đục ao nhà vẫn hơn.  
Trâu ta ăn cỏ đồng ta,  
Tuy rằng cỏ cứt nhưng mà cỏ quê.**  
*Let's come back and bathe in our village pool,*

*Whether its water be clear or turbid, the village pool is ours.  
Our buffaloes graze our fields' grass  
Though short, it is our village grass.*

**59. Nhiều điều phủ lấy giá gương**  
**Người trong một nước thì thương nhau cùng.**  
*As the rosy silk covers the mirror stand,  
Let's a country's people be united in the same affection.*

**60. Bầu ơi thương lấy bí cùng,**  
**Tuy là khác giống nhưng chung một dàn.**  
*Love one another, gourd and pumkin,  
Though of different species, you are in the same arbour.*

That song appeals to the different ethnic groups who make up the Vietnamese people (Mán, Mèo, Mường, Thái, Thổ. . .) and who must therefore unite against foreign invaders.

**61. Non non, nước nước, khơi chừng**  
**Ái ân hai chữ xin đừng có quên**  
**Tình sâu mong trả nghĩa đền**  
**Đừng vui chôn khác mà quên chôn này.**  
**Nước vơi rồi nước lại đầy**  
**Tình kia chưa trả, nghĩa này chớ quên.**  
*To these lofty mountains, to those immense seas,  
Let 's not forget to devote all our love,  
Fulfill our duties to our fatherland  
That we must not neglect for other countries' pleasures.  
Rivers can run dry at times, but they will be filled up again.  
Then let's always love our country and fulfill our duties as citizens.*

## CHAPTER VI

### ROMANTIC SONGS

In Vietnam as elsewhere, the great topics that stir up emotions are: love, family, fatherland and work. In this framework, we will examine the romantic songs that abound in the Vietnamese folk literature.

**1. Love and Marriage:** If I couple these two words, it is because in Vietnam love generally aims at marriage.

a/ About Feminine Beauty. First, let's fancy how feminine beauty was conceived. Of course, natural beauty was preferred to artificiality:

*62. Cô kia má phấn môi son*

*Nắng dầu mưa giã càng giòn càng ưa*

*Cô kia mặt trăn mày trơ*

*Vàng đeo bạc quần càng dơ đáng đời.*

*This maiden with naturally fair cheeks and ruby lips*

*Is the more beautiful the more she is exposed to sun and rain.*

*That one, afflicted with a flat and shameless face,*

*Vainly wears gold and silver jewels, and makes herself more unpleasant.*

One can understand this enduring preference for natural beauty, in spite of numerous beauty parlors, but what do we know about the ancient standards of feminine beauty? Let's listen to this string of similes a lover lavishes on his girl friend:

*63. Cổ tay em trắng như ngà*

*Con mắt em liếc như là dao cau*

*Miệng cười như thể hoa ngâu*

*Cái khăn đội đầu như thể hoa sen.*

*Your wrist is as fair as ivory*

*And your glance is as sharp as a knife used to cut areca-nuts.*

*Your smiling lips are similar to Ngâu flowers*

*(a beautiful and sweet smelling flower)*

*And the turban that surrounds your head is like a lotus.*

Another, either a better flatterer or endowed with a more analytical mind, enumerates in detail his girlfriend's seductiveness:

**64. Một thương tóc bõ đuôi gà  
Hai thương ăn nói mặn mà có duyên  
Ba thương má núm đồng tiền  
Bốn thương răng lánh hạt huyền kém thua  
Năm thương cổ yếm đeo bùa  
Sáu thương nón Thượng quai tua dịu dàng  
Bảy thương nét ở khôn ngoan  
Tám thương ăn nói lại càng thêm tươi  
Chín thương cô ở một mình  
Mười thương con mắt hữu tình với ai.**

*I love you, first for your hair plaited in the shape of a cock's tail  
Second, for your so cordial and graceful talk Third,  
for your dimpled cheeks hollowed as by coins  
Fourth, for your teeth brighter than grains of jet  
Fifth, for your breast-supporter adorned with an amulet  
Sixth, for your palm hat with its silk chin strap  
Seventh, for your wise behaviour  
Eighth, for your mouth so charming when you speak  
Ninth, because you live alone  
And tenth, because you look at me with such ardent eyes.*

It is clear that the ancient standards of feminine beauty differed markedly from those of our times. No indication or measurement of breast or hips. On the other hand, great importance was awarded to some puerile thrashes: a dainty breast-supporter from which an amulet coquettishly clung, a palm hat with a silk chin-strap, not to mention hair plaited in the shape of a cock's tail, or black-lacquered teeth. It was our grandmother's fashion, and even in a country so long and so fiercely conservative, fashion has made gigantic leaps. We should also notice that what eternally pleases the Vietnamese young man, today as well as in the past, is the wise behaviour of his lover, her sweet demeanour and the love flame shining in her dove eyes. Yet, eyes too bright and piercing frighten more than charm. A not very urbane young man praises them in the following song:

**65. Ước gì anh lấy được nàng  
Để anh mua gạch Bát Tràng về xây.  
Xây dọc rồi lại xây ngang  
Xây hồ bán nguyệt cho nàng rửa chân  
Có rửa thì rửa chân tay  
Chớ rửa chân mà chết cá ao anh.**

*I wish I could marry you  
Then buy Bát Tràng bricks to build  
In length and in width  
A half moon-faced pool.  
There you may wash your hands and feet.  
But please don't wash your eyebrows lest they kill my fish.  
(too piercing eyebrows)*

**b/** About Declarations of Love. In the scholar's families, talk was forbidden between boys and girls. It was different among the common people, where customs were more tolerant. But it was all the same necessary to find a pretext to start conversation with the girl you fell in love with. The needed pretext did exist: offering a quid of betel.

**66. Gặp nhau ăn một miếng trầu  
Gọi rằng nghĩa cũ về sau mà chào  
Miếng trầu đã nặng là bao  
Muốn cho Đông liễu Tây đào là hơn  
Miếng trầu kể hết nguồn cơn Muốn  
xem đây đây thiệt hơn thế nào Miếng  
trầu là nghĩa tương giao**

*Muốn cho đây đây duyên vào hợp duyên.  
Since we chance to meet here, please accept a quid of betel  
So that we might greet each other later on.  
It doesn't matter a bit  
But to bring the Eastern willow tree closer to the Western peach-tree.  
Thanks to it, we may talk in confidence  
And know each other better.  
A quid of betel is useful  
To introduce to each other two persons destined by Fate to live together.*

While asserting that receiving a quid of betel doesn't bind anyone, the boy is already clearly making known his love. Therefore, if the girl is prudent, she must not accept the little gift without due consideration:

*67. Sáng nay tôi đi hái dâu  
Gặp hai anh ấy ngồi câu thạch bàn.  
Hai anh đứng dậy hỏi han,  
Hỏi rằng: "Cô ấy vội vàng đi đâu?"  
Thưa rằng: tôi đi hái dâu.  
Hai anh mở túi đưa trầu mời ăn.  
Thưa rằng: Bác mẹ tôi răn  
Làm thân con gái chớ ăn trầu người.*

*This morning I went to gather some mulberry leaves  
And I met two young gentlemen fishing on a stone bench.  
They stood up to ask me: Where are you going so hastily, Miss?  
- Gathering mulberry leaves, I answered.  
Then, opening a pouch, they offered me a quid of betel.  
- No, I replied, my parents advise me  
That girls must not accept betel from strangers.*

Now, let's suppose the quid of betel has been accepted, and the girl is ready to listen to her admirer's flowery speech. What is the latter going to say? He would propose marriage, but indirectly:

*68. Hôm qua tát nước đầu đình Bỏ  
quên cái áo trên cành hoa sen. Em  
được cho chúng anh xin  
Hay là em để làm tin trong nhà.  
Áo anh sút chỉ đường tà  
Muốn mượn cô ấy vào khâu cho cùng.  
Khâu rồi anh sẽ trả công,  
Ít nữa lấy chồng, anh lại giúp cho.  
Giúp em một chút xôi vò,  
Một con lợn béo, một vò rượu tăm.  
Giúp em đôi chiếu em nằm,  
Đôi chăn em đắp, đôi chàm em đeo.  
Giúp em qua tám tiền cheo  
Quan năm tiền cưới, lại đèo buồng cau.*

*Yesterday I went to drain off water near the village hall*

*And I left a shirt there on a lotus leaf,  
If you chance to find it, please give it back to me,  
Unless you want to keep it as a souvenir.  
Its flap has been rent  
I have no wife, and my mother is too old to mend it.  
My shirt has been rent for so long,  
Would you mind mending it for me ?  
In return, I will offer you  
When we marry  
A full basket of sticky rice,  
A fat pig, a jar full of the finest alcohol,  
A pair of mats on which you'll lie  
Two blankets to keep you warm, two earrings you'll wear,  
The village tax to be paid on marriage  
A wedding gift and a bunch of areca-nuts.*

The boy who made this indirect declaration of love is far from being silly. He meets the girl he fell in love with in an isolated place. To approach her, he uses a strategy. Impudently he says he has lost a shirt and asks if by chance she has found it. Of course, he has not lost anything, but this harmless lie offers three advantages: first, to enter into conversation with the girl; then, to let it be known that he is still unmarried; and last, to indirectly declare his love. Indeed, the gifts he promises to offer on her wedding day are but the very ones required of the fiancé. By taking them over as his own duty, he asserts himself as her potential fiancé. What a smart fellow!

Nevertheless, this subterfuge, even motivated by love, does not look very honest. It is the language of the mind, not that of the heart. I prefer the following song, more outspoken and passionate:

*69. Cái quạt mười tám cái nan,  
Ở giữa phát giấy, hai nan hai đầu.  
Quạt này anh để che đầu  
Đêm đêm đi ngủ, chung nhau quạt này.  
Ước gì chung mẹ chung thầy,  
Để em giữ cái quạt này làm thân.  
Rồi ta chung gối chung chăn,*

*Chung quần chung áo, chung khăn đội đầu.*

*Nằm thời chung cái giường tàu, Dậy  
thời chung cả hộp tràu ống vôi. Com  
chung ăn cả một nôi,*

*Gội đầu chung cả dầu hôi nước hoa.*

*Chải đầu chung cả lược ngà,*

*Soi gương chung cả cành hoa giắt đầu.*

*This fan of eighteen bamboo leaves*

*Covered with paper,*

*I use it as a sun-shield,*

*Ah, if in bed every night we could have used it together,*

*We also have in common a mother and a father.*

*You may keep this as a love token.*

*We would have in common pillow and blanket,*

*Trousers, shirts and turbans,*

*We would rest on the same bed*

*And share with each other the betel box and the lime case.*

*We would eat rice in the same pot,*

*Wash our hair with the same perfumed shampoo,*

*Comb it with the same ivory comb*

*And look in the same mirror at our heads adorned with flowers.*

c/ Declaration of love by the girl. Usually the girl shows caution and does not take the first steps. It happens, however that, consumed with passion for a boy indifferent to her charms, she does declare her love, not impudently, of course, but clearly enough to be understood:

*70. Vào vườn hái quả cau xanh*

*Bổ ra làm sáu mời anh soi trầu*

*Trầu này tằm những vôi tàu*

*Giữa đềm cát cánh, hai đầu quế cay.*

*Trầu này ăn thật là say,*

*Dù mặn, dù nhạt, dù cay, dù nồng,*

*Dù chẳng nên đạo vợ chồng,*

*Soi năm ba miếng kẹo lòng nhớ thương.*

*I go in the garden to pick up a tender areca-nut,*

*I cut it up into six to offer you a quid of betel*

*Spiced with Chinese lime,*

*Campanula in the midst and peppery cinnamon at both ends.  
It will be savoury, I hope,  
But whether it does or does not lead to marriage,  
Please take some to calm my love sickness.*

Here is more pressing declaration of love:

**71. Thiên duyên kỳ ngộ gặp chàng Khác gì  
như thể phượng hoàng gặp nhau. Tiện đây  
ăn một miếng trầu  
Hỏi thăm quê quán ở đâu chẳng là.  
Xin chàng quá bước về nhà  
Trước là trò chuyện, sau là nghỉ chân.  
Fate has allowed me to meet you  
As the female phoenix meets its male partner.  
Would you mind accepting this quid of betel  
And telling me where you live?  
By the way, please come to my house  
So that we may talk and you may rest.**

If the boy demurs in answering her invitation, she becomes more enterprising:

**72. Anh kia có vợ hay chưa?  
Mà anh ăn nói gió đưa ngọt ngào.  
Mẹ già anh để nơi nao?  
Để em tìm về hầu hạ thay anh  
Chẳng tham nhà ngói rung rinh, Tham  
vì một nõi anh xinh miệng cười. Miệng  
cười anh đáng mấy mươi,  
Chân đi đáng nén, miệng cười đáng trăm.  
Are you married or single  
With your words as sweet as the zephyr?  
Where did you leave your mother?  
May I go there to wait on her in your place?  
I don't care whether you are rich or poor  
I'm only avid for your so gracefully smiling mouth.  
How precious are your graceful smiles!**

But in most cases, the girl's declarations of love are mere jokes to have a good time and make fun of the fools who are easily taken in. Here are two scenes illustrating that game:

First scene: A young man is seen going along the main road while some girls are working in the ricefields. At once, one of them sets out to sing:

**73. Hỡi người đi đường cái quan  
Dừng chân đứng lại em than vài lời.  
You who are walking on the main road  
Please stop so that I may tell you some words in confidence.**

At this provocation, the passer-by dares not stop and hurries away. He is pursued by bursts of laughter and a second song:

**74. Đi đâu vội mấy ai ơi !  
Công việc đã có chị tôi ở nhà.  
Where are you going in such a haste? Isn't my  
sister taking care of your household?**

But if the passer-by is a bold fellow who dares tease her in turn, the girl suddenly affects her haughtiness and answers disdainfully:

**75. Thân chị như cánh hoa sen  
Em như bèo bọt chẳng chen được vào.  
Your elder sister is like a lotus flower  
Little brother, how the marsh-lentil that you are could ever touch her?**

His pride wounded, the passer-by makes a lightning retort:

**76. Lậy trời cho cả mưa rào,  
Cho sấm, cho chớp, cho bão to gió lớn,  
Cho sen chìm xuống, cho bèo lên trên.  
Pray Heaven it rains  
With thunder, lightning, and a raging storm  
So that the lotus be immersed and the marsh-lentil override it.**

How imprudent he is! Cutting as a sword, the following song will make him run away at full speed:

**77. Nhất cao là núi Ba Vì**

**Chị còn vượt được sá gì cỏ may  
Nhất đẹp là núi Sơn Tây  
Chị còn chẳng tiếc nữa giây bìm bìm.**

*Tallest is the Ba Vì mount  
That your elder sister yet can climb up;  
What a mere weed could be to her?  
Finest is the mount of Sơn Tây  
That your elder sister yet disdains; what a bit of bindweed could be  
to her?*

Second scene: The hero, or rather the victim of girls' maliciousness, is in this case a peasant. On seeing a beautiful girl busied with cutting grass near a pond, he hastens to court her:

**78. Mặt trời đã xế về tây Hỡi  
cô cắt cỏ bên đầy bên voi Cô  
còn cắt nữa hay thôi  
Để tôi cắt với làm đôi vợ chồng? The  
sun is already setting down in the West O  
Miss, you who are cutting grass,  
Your two baskets, one is filled and the other still empty.  
Are you going to work on, or stop?  
Do you want me to help you, as a husband helps his wife?**

As her work is not to be finished soon when already the day is ending, the girl cannot help getting impatient:

**79. Trầu vàng còn để trong cối Anh  
kia dũa mốc chớ chòi mâm son. The  
golden betel is in its box  
O you who are like mouldy chopsticks, don't try to climb upon  
the fine vermilion tray.**

The peasant smiles: what's the use of getting angry at an arrogant girl who does not appreciate a joke? So he contends himself with an ironical answer:

**80. Trầu vàng đâu ở mãi trong cối,  
Sợ mai trầu héo, trầu ơi là trầu !  
The golden betel will not always remain in its box**

*I'm afraid it will wilt, poor betel !*

This time, the girl gets really angry. Who in the world is this ill-bred fellow who dares tease her? She will show him of what material she is made of:

**81. Bao giờ trạch đẻ ngọn đa,  
Sáo đẻ dưới nước thì ta lấy mình.  
Bao giờ rau diếp làm đình,  
Gỗ lim thái ghém thì mình lấy ta.**

*When eels are born on the top of trees  
And blackbirds under water, I will marry you.  
When vegetables are used to build the temple  
And ironwood to make salad, you will be able to marry me.*

Now at last our banterer prudently beats a retreat. What's the use of fighting against this poisonous tongue?

**d/** An idyll that ends after it hardly begins.

It's a fine winter afternoon brightened by the sun. Meanwhile, on the River of Perfumes lazily meandering between its two verdant banks, a cool wind is blowing hard, inducing people to stay cozy in their well sheltered thatched huts. On the deserted sheet of water only two junks glide at full sail, rapidly moving forward one close behind the other. Most likely, they have just discharged their cargo of fish at the Đông Ba market, and now unloaded, they hurry towards their distant hamlets. All of a sudden, a crystalline voice rings from the first junk:

**82. Bớ chiếc ghe sau !**

**Chèo mau em đợi.**

**Kẻo khởi khúc sông này bờ bụi tối tăm.**

*Hi, you who are in the junk behind,*

*Row quickly, I am waiting for you*

*For fear that after this meander the buses on the banks become too dark.*

The young man drowsing in the second junk wakes up with a start. That crystalline voice, what a heavenly one! To whom may it belong, if not to an adorable girl? He hastens to reply:

**83. Bớ chiếc thuyền lan.**

*Khoan khoan bớt mái,  
Đặng đó đây tỏ một hai lời phải trái nghe chơi.*

*Hi, you who are in the orchid junk,  
Please slow down your rowing*

*So that I may tell you some words by way of passing the time.*

In throwing her crystalline notes over the water mirror, the rower girl only intended to tease her travelling companion. Maybe he is a married person, or even an old man or a woman? No matter, her partner has answered, and it's undoubtedly a well-educated boy's voice. Enchanted, she continues to tease:

*84. Trời một vùng đêm dày không hạn,  
Mượn gió chiều hỏi bạn ngàn sông.*

*Thân em là gái chưa chồng,  
Tơ duyên có chắc như giòng nước không?*

*Under the immense sky, in the deep night,  
I send some questions through the wind to my companion on the river.*

*I am still a single girl  
Will your love be as safe as this running water?*

Aware that it is only a joke, the boy takes care not to consider this bewitching invitation in earnest. As a proof, if he tries to accelerate by taking in his sails, at once the girl gains more speed to keep a decent distance between the two junks. Not willing to admit his vexation, he plays the game:

*85. Thuyền ai trôi trước,  
Cho tôi lướt đến cùng.  
Chiều đã về trời đất mông lung,  
Phải duyên thì xích lại  
Cho đỡ não nùng tiếng sương.*

*Hi, you who are on the junk ahead,  
Please let me come closer.*

*At nightfall, the sky and the earth are united in a blurred bulk.*

*Were we united by Fate, come  
So that the dewdrops sound less sorrowful.*

So, mile after mile, the two junks follow one another exchanging songs back and forth. And what in the beginning was merely joking imperceptibly ends in a genuine idyll. Beyond the tipsiness of words, the two young hearts set to beat in unison. And all is forgotten: in the immensity of the sky and the river, nothing remains but these two hearts stammering their first love oath.

Meanwhile, time has gone by, and the sky takes in the mauve tints of twilight. Both junks come to a confluence: on the right, an arm of the sea leads to Đại Lược village; on the left, the river proceeds up to Kim Long village. The first junk rushes on to the right. Unexpectedly awakened from his love dream, the young man tries for a little while to pursue his beloved. But night has fallen on the roaming arm of sea. His own village is still a long way, and his mother is anxiously awaiting him. What is to be done? By violently pushing the rudder, he edges towards the right. Anh he voices to his unknown lover a last song to end their ephemeral idyll.

**86. Tình về Đại Lược**  
**Duyên ngược Kim Long**  
**Đến đây là chỗ rẽ của lòng !**  
**Gặp nhau còn biết trên sông bến nào?**  
*Love goes towards Đại Lược Whereas*  
*Fate's way proceeds up Kim Long.*  
*Here is where our two hearts part;*  
*Will we have another meeting somewhere on this river?*

e/ Hindrances to marriage. All idylls do not end in marriage. Among the stumbling blocks, one which now seems negligible but was once very important, is the great distance between the villages of the lovers. Indeed, long ago, means of communications were rare and difficult, and many parents were reluctant to give their daughter in marriage far away, for this means mostly likely to lose her.

**87. Có con mà gả chồng gần**  
**Nửa đêm đốt đước mang phân cho cha.**  
**Có con mà gả chồng xa**  
**Ba sào ruộng tréo chẳng ma nào cây.**  
*If you give your daughter in marriage in the neighbourhood,*

*She will offer you gifts even if she were to come at midnight with a lighted torch.*

*But if you give her in marriage far away,  
You will have nobody to farm your three acres of ricefield.*

**88. Có con mà gả chồng gần  
Có bát canh cần nó cũng đem cho  
Hoài con mà gả chồng xa  
Trước là mất giỗ, sau là mất con.**

*If you give your daughter in marriage in the neighbourhood,  
She will come to offer you even a bowl of celery soup.  
But if you give her in marriage far away,  
You will lose your anniversaries as well as your daughter.*

The girl herself shared this reluctance:

**89. Gà khôn gà chẳng đẻ lang,  
Gái khôn gái chẳng bỏ làng gái đi.  
A wise hen doesn't lay eggs out of its nest,  
A wise girl doesn't marry out of her village.**

**90. Ăn chanh ngồi gốc cây chanh  
Lấy anh thì lấy về Thanh chẳng về.**

*When one wants to eat lemons, one sits under the lemon tree.  
I agree to marry you, but as to follow you to Thanh Hóa, no thank you.*

The girl who expresses such an opinion must be a native of North-Vietnam from which it is a long way to Thanh Hóa, her lover's province. That home-bird is not very courageous, or rather not amorous enough to defy her home-sickness. Very different is this fiery boy who promises to his sweetheart:

**91. Thương em tam tứ núi anh cũng trèo  
Thất bát giang anh cũng lội, cửu thập đèo anh cũng qua .  
For you I shall climb up three or four mountains,  
Seven or eight rivers I'll traverse, nine or ten passes I'll cross over.**

Another hindrance, more serious than distance, is the opposing will of the parents who are often influenced by concerns not related to love,

such as the suitor's family, his properties, an unfavourable horoscope, or promise made previously to another suitor. Here is a young man, rejected by his sweetheart's parents, who complains to her:

**92. Đôi ta làm bạn thông dong,  
Như đôi đũa ngọc nằm trong mâm vàng.  
Bởi chung cha mẹ nói ngang  
Để cho đũa ngọc mâm vàng cách xa.  
You and I, we would make a perfect couple  
Like jade chopsticks put on a gold tray  
Because our parents oppose it,  
The jade chopsticks are kept away from the gold tray.**

f/ Often the woman is fickle. Nevertheless, the worst rival of love, at all times, is undoubtedly money. Here is a young man who reproaches his lover for breaking her word:

**93. Đồng tiền Vạn Lịch thích bốn chữ vàng  
Tiếc công gắn bó với nàng bấy lâu.  
Bây giờ nàng lấy chồng đâu?  
Để anh đem phúng trăm cau nghìn vàng.  
Trăm cau anh để phúng nàng Nghìn  
vàng anh đốt giải oan lời thề. Xưa  
kia nói nói thề thề  
Bây giờ bẻ khóa trao chìa cho ai ?  
While looking at the gold coin engraved with four words  
I am sorry for the bonds of love that united us. When are  
you getting married ?  
I will come to express my condolences with a hundred areca-nuts and a  
thousand votive gold bars.  
The hundred areca-nuts are to be chewed by you,  
And the thousand votive gold bars are to be burnt to release you from  
your promise.  
Once you made me promises and oaths,  
And now, you are breaking their padlock and giving the key to another.**

The rejected lover shows a lack of generosity in delivering the funeral oration of his love. I prefer this one expressing his sorrow. He lives near Hanoi, in Ngọc Hà village which lies between the Great Lake

and the Red River. The inhabitants of this village devote all their time and energy to horticulture.

In the Spring, the yellow, red, purple and blue dahlias glisten with the morning dew, while roses, as soft as girls' lips, gently smile at the fine drizzle. In the Summer, the jasmine flowers give out their strong fragrance under the blazing sun, while the lotus flowers floating in small ponds spread a touch of delicious freshness through the hot scenery. When Fall comes with its retinue of typhoons and moonlit nights, it is the frangipani and magnolias' turn to show their colours and spread their fragrance. Finally, as Winter comes, all flowers vie with one another for gracefulness: the rose peaches, the white apricots, the yellow chrysanthemums, and chiefly the queen of fashion: the gladioluses, at the time pink, white, yellow and purple.

In this paradise setting, beside those natural flowers, there are human flowers who make the delight and torment of the dandies of Hanoi. For the Ngọc Hà girls, exempted from the hard agricultural labor, have a smooth skin and limbs as fine as those of aristocratic young ladies. Their apparel, half urban, half rural, adds a bewitching charm that makes the boorish village boys squirm. Coquettish but prudent, most of them agree to marry in their village. Some, enticed by the city lights, yield to the honeyed speech of Hanoi seducers, which causes their peasant lovers to sing bitterly when they come back to the village in a sumptuous style of living.

*94. Dấu rằng đá nát vàng phai  
Ba sinh phải giữ lấy lời ba sinh.  
Duyên kia có phụ chi tình  
Mà toan sẽ gánh chung tình làm hai ?  
Bây giờ người đã nghe ai  
Thả trôi đường nghĩa, rắc gai lối tình.  
Nhớ lời hẹn ước đình ninh,  
Xa xôi ai có thấu tình chăng ai ?  
Even though the stone or the gold be worn out,  
You should hold on to your promise of three loves  
or the gold lose its sheen.  
In what could I have failed to please you*

*That you cut our love in two ? You  
might have listened to someone  
Spreading stakes and thorns in the path of our love.  
While I keep intact the memory of our eternal vow  
Do you understand what I'm feeling, you who are already so far from  
me?*

Alas. It happens that the city lights are sometimes but a mirage, and our ingenuous woman gardener must return home after having endured the rough handling of an unscrupulous seducer who preferred the wealth of some rich city woman to her beauty. It's time for the scorned lover to take his revenge:

**95. *Tham vàng bỏ nghĩa ai ơi !  
Vàng thì đã hết, nghĩa tôi vẫn còn.***  
*Poor darling ! You have deserted the right way for gold.  
No more gold there is, but my love remains.*

For the unfortunate lover would be well pleased if his beloved comes back to him. He will forgive, she will repent . . . and they will have many children.

**g/** Belated regrets. Let's imagine two neighboring houses divided by an adjoining wall. In one lives a young man, and in the other a young lady. From time to time they see each other; maybe they give each other some furtive glances, or even exchange bashful smiles when they chance to meet at the village market, but that is all, for they are well educated and dare not transgress the bounds of decency. To be sure, the young man thinks of proposing marriage to his pretty neighbour some day, but there is no hurry: both are still so young. As to the young lady, she is patiently waiting for a go-between to come with a tray of betel and ask her parents for her hand for this smart fellow.

But fate decides differently. Another village lad (or maybe a man rather mature but wealthy) has gone ahead and has asked the young lady first (in marriage). Her parents, without asking her opinion, have agreed. As an obedient daughter, she did not in the least protest. On the wedding

day, she followed her husband to his home, with a sorrowful but pure heart.

The marriage turns out to be unhappy. Her husband is too rough a man to waste time leading her into the Love kingdom. And today, her husband's family has allowed her to visit her parents' house. She goes to the garden which nobody has taken care of since her marriage. Her lover, perched on the adjoining wall, sees her. Heaving a sigh, he goes down so as not to yield to the guilty temptation of seducing a married woman. But now on the ground, and hidden by the adjoining wall, he cannot help uttering a doleful sigh, more for himself than to be heard by his pretty neighbour:

**96. Trèo lên cây bưởi hái hoa**

*I climb up the grapefruit-tree to pick a blossom*

Why does he think of a grapefruit blossom? It's because his idol, whose image obsesses him day and night, irresistibly evokes in his mind, with her dazzling fair complexion and her suavely graceful manners, the grapefruit blossom whose white and delicate petals exhale a subtle scent.

**Bước xuống vườn cà hái nụ tầm xuân**

*I went down to the aubergine garden to pick a bud of wild rose.*

Our honest young man does not forget that his neighbour is a married woman, and in order not to yield to temptation, he hastened to go down the connecting wall. He ran away from the fine grapefruit flower, delicate symbol of a virgin. But at the foot of the wall, his eyes catch a wild rose bud just blooming, image of a young woman sensitive to love. Grieved, he let slip out the secret of his love:

**Nụ tầm xuân nở ra xanh biếc**

**Em đã có chồng anh tiếc lắm thay.**

*Alas! The wild rose bud is full blown in its emerald green*

*And you are married, leaving me in eternal sorrow.*

The young girl, now a young woman, hears the painful lament. What will be her reaction? To keep silent and run away so as not to fail in her conjugal duty, even in thought? Yes, that is what she should do. But that is beyond her endurance. She has silently loved this young man

she could not marry. Because fate compelled her to part from him forever, why not seize this providential opportunity when there are only two of them to relieve her fretted sorrow by a loyal interview?

*Ba đồng một mớ trâu cay  
Sao anh chẳng hỏi những ngày còn không?  
Bây giờ em đã có chồng  
Như chim vào lồng, như cá cắn câu.  
Cá cắn câu biết đâu mà gỡ?  
Chim vào lồng biết thua nào ra ?  
With three pennies you could buy a lot of tart betel  
Why didn't you ask me in marriage when I was free?  
Now, I am a married woman  
Bound as a bird in its cage or a fish caught in a hook.  
How can the hooked fish free itself from the hook?  
How can the captive bird free itself from the case?*

Yes, she tells him: "It was easy for you to ask me in marriage. You knew that my parents, who are poor themselves, would not spurn your poverty, and that a few quids of betel costing only three pennies would make a suitable marriage present. But you did not go through that obligatory ritual. And now, I am tied in matrimony by your fault. By your fault, we are both suffering. I have to silently endure my sorrow forever." And she runs away after this heart-rending speech. Let's hope she will succeed in overcoming her sorrow, for anyhow she is married and bound in duty, if not to love her husband, at least to honour him with her conjugal fidelity, and to think no more of her bygone lover.

**h/** Love sickness. There are other women still more unhappy who fail to drive away love sickness, for they are not sustained by any moral strength. Here for example is one who loves without being loved in return:

*97. Đêm qua trời sáng trăng rằm  
Anh đi qua cửa em nằm không yên.  
Mê anh không phải mê tiền  
Thấy anh lịch sự có duyên dịu dàng.  
Thấy anh em cũng mơ màng*

*Tưởng rằng đây đây phụng hoàng kết đôi.  
Thấy anh chưa kịp ngỏ lời  
Ai ngờ anh đã vội dời gót loan.  
Thiếp tôi mê mẩn canh tàn  
Chiêm bao như thấy anh chàng ngồi bên  
Tỉnh ra vắng lặng yên nhiên Tương tư  
bệnh phải liên miên cả ngày. Ngỡ rằng  
duyên nợ đó đây  
Xin chàng hãy lại chơi đây chút nào  
Cho thiếp tỏ thiệt mới nao.*

*Last night, when the sky was lit up by the full moon,  
You went past my door, and made me dream of you  
I love you not for your money,  
Only for your elegant demeanour and your sweet grace.  
As soon as I saw you, I began to dream of you.,  
Dreaming that we could make a couple as pretty as a pair of phoenix  
On our meeting, before I had time to speak,  
Already you went away gracefully.  
All night I was languishly dreaming  
That you were sitting close by me. Great  
was my disappointment on waking up  
And since then love sickness tortures me incessantly.  
If fate predestines us to be united in marriage,  
Please call on me for a little time  
So that I may tell you of my secret love.*

The following girl has probably been apart from her lover for some reason, a business journey of his, for instance:

*98. Có đêm ra đứng hàng tây,  
Nom lên lại thấy bóng mây tà tà.  
Có đêm ra đứng vườn hoa, Nom  
lên lại thấy sao tà xanh xanh Có  
đêm thơ thẩn một mình,  
Ở đây thức trắng năm canh rõ ràng.  
Có đêm tạc đá ghi vàng  
Ngày nào em chẳng nhớ chàng, chàng ơi.  
Thương chàng lắm lắm chàng ơi,*

*Nhớ miệng chàng nói, nhớ lời chàng than.  
Nhớ chàng như nhớ lạng vàng, Khát  
khao về nét, mơ màng về duyên. Nhớ  
chàng như bút nhớ nghiên,  
Như mực nhớ giấy, như thuyền nhớ sông.  
Nhớ chàng như vợ nhớ chồng, Như  
chim nhớ tổ, như rồng nhớ mây. Some  
nights, I go to the West  
To look at the floating clouds.  
Some otherss, I go to the garden  
To look at the stars growing dim.  
Sometimes I wander about alone  
And keep awake through all the five night watches  
To remember the day when we exchanged our first vow of love.  
Not a single day do I spend without thinking of you.  
How much I love you,  
You uttering mouth and your spoken words.  
I miss you as I would miss a lost ounce of gold.  
Unceasingly I long for your virtues and your grace  
As penbrush longs for the inkpot,  
As ink for paper, as the boat for the river,  
As a wife for her husband,  
As a bird for its nest and a dragon for clouds.*

Of course, love sickness does not spare the stronger sex. Here is a young man lamenting:

*99. Đêm qua ra đứng bờ ao  
Trông cá cá lặn trông sao sao mờ.  
Buồn trông chênh chéch sao Mai,  
Sao ơi sao hỡi, nhớ ai sao mờ?  
Buồn trông con nhện chằng tơ  
Nhện ơi nhện hỡi, nhện chờ mối ai?  
Đêm đêm tưởng giải Ngân Hà Chuôi  
sao tinh đầu đã ba năm tròn. Đá  
mòn nhưng dạ chẳng mòn,  
Tào Khê nước chảy hã còn trơ trơ.  
Last night, standing on the side of the pond,*

*I looked at fishes diving and stars growing dim.  
Sadly I looked at the setting Evening Star.  
O Star, whom were you thinking of to be so pale?  
Sadly I looked at a spider weaving a web.  
O spider, whom were you waiting for?  
Night after night, I have been gazing at the Milky Way  
And the Great Bear for three years. Stone  
may be worn away, but not my heart  
Like the brook whose water is continuously flowing.*

**100. Nhớ ai nhớ mãi thế này  
Nhớ đêm quên ngủ, nhớ ngày quên ăn.  
Nhớ ai con mắt lim dim  
Chân đi thất thểu như chim tha mồi.  
Nhớ ai ngờ ngẩn, ngẩn ngờ,  
Nhớ ai ai nhớ, bây giờ nhớ ai.  
Nhớ ai bồi hồi bồi hồi  
Như đứng đống lửa, như ngồi đống than.  
Nhớ ai như nhớ thuốc Lào,  
Đã chôn điếu xuống lại đào điếu lên.  
Do you know I am unceasingly thinking of you  
So that I lose sleep at night and appetite at day?  
While thinking of you, my eyes become haggard  
And my steps staggering as those of a bird looking for prey.  
I am thinking of you so much that I become stupid  
Without knowing whether you deign to grant me a little thought.  
I think of you so much that I am eaten up with despair  
As if I were standing on a furnace, or sitting on a heap of live coal.  
I miss you like a smoker misses tobacco  
Who, after burying his pipe, unearths it again.**

**i/ About Marriage. Girls think of marriage when they reach puberty. That is an obsession immersing them in ceaseless and delicious meditations, but not devoid of anxiety:**

**101. Thân em như tấm lụa đào  
Phất phơ giữa chợ biết vào tay ai?  
Em ngồi càn trúc, em tựa càn mai,**

**Đông đào, Tây liễu, biết ai bạn cùng.**

*I am like a piece of rose silk*

*Floating in the market without knowing to whom it will be delivered.*

*I sit on a bamboo branch, then I lean on an apricot branch*

*Between the eastern peach-tree and the western willow-tree,*

*who will be my travelling companion?*

Not only the girl finds her life's goal in marriage, her friends give her the same advice:

**102. Tròng trành như nón không quai Như  
thuyền không bến, như ai không chồng. Gái**

**có chồng như gông đeo cổ,**

**Gái không chồng như phản gỗ long danh.**

**Phản long danh anh còn chữa được,**

**Gái không chồng chạy ngược chạy xuôi,**

**Không chồng khôn lắm chị em ơi !**

*Unsteady as a strapless hat*

*Or a rudderless boat, is the unmarried girl.*

*Of course married girls carry a millstone around their necks.*

*But unmarried girls look like a bed whose nails are loose.*

*A bed whose nails are loose may be repaired,*

*But an unmarried girl flings about without knowing how to escape.*

*Ah ! Dear maid, how unfortunate is an unmarried girl !*

**103. Ai ơi trẻ mãi đâu mà**

**Càng so sánh lắm càng già mất duyên.**

**Còn duyên như tượng tô vàng**

**Hết duyên như tổ ong tàn ngày mưa.**

**Còn duyên đóng cửa kén chồng**

**Hết duyên ngồi gốc cây hồng lượm hoa.**

**Còn duyên kén cá chọn canh**

**Hết duyên củ ráy dưa hành cũng chôi.**

**Còn duyên kén những trai tơ**

**Hết duyên ông lão cũng vợ làm chồng.**

*One cannot stay young forever*

*And the more carefully you choose a mate, the more you are losing your  
grace.*

*As long as you are graceful, you are like a gilded statue  
But were your grace lost, you would be but a bee-hive spoiled by rain.*

*As long as you are graceful, you may close your door  
to choose your husband*

*But were your grace lost, you would have  
to pick flowers under the rose-bush.*

*As long as you are graceful, you may choose the best fish  
and the best soup.*

*But were your grace lost, a bulb of navet or onion would stave  
your hunger.*

*As long as you are graceful, you may choose  
a husband among young men.*

*But were your grace lost, you would welcome even an old man.*

This sword of Damocles hung over the girls' heads who were thus pushed into sometimes unhappy marriages. A suitor tries to seduce his beloved with flattering words:

**104. Đào liễu em ơi một mình**

**Đôi vai gánh chữ chung tình đường xa**

**Tâm áo nâu xếp nếp để trong nhà**

**Ba vuông khăn tím phất phơ em đội đầu**

**Tâm yếm đào sao khéo giữ màu**

**Răng đen rụng rúc, mái đầu em hãy còn xanh.**

**Ấy thế mà sao em ở vậy cho nó đành**

**Sao em chẳng kiếm chút chồng lành kéo miệng thế mả mai?**

**Sách có chữ rằng: xuân bất tái lai.**

*You live alone like the peach-tree or the willow-tree,*

*Will you let love bend your shoulders all along your life's journey?*

*Your brown dress is kept folded at home*

*And your purple turban flutters on your head.*

*Your breast-supporter is always rose,*

*Your teeth always shining and your hair glistening.*

*With such treasures, could you remain single forever?*

*Why don't you look for a husband to avoid mockeries?*

*For once gone, Spring never comes again, said the Sage.*

The girl persists in her refusal. The suitor gets more pressing and threatens her with the prospect of becoming a spinster if she turns down his proposal:

**105. Cô kia má đỏ hồng hồng  
Cô chưa lấy chồng, cô đợi chờ ai?  
Buồng không làn lụa hôm mai, Đầu  
xanh mấy lúc da môi tóc sương.**

*You whose cheeks are like roses,  
Who are you waiting for to get married?  
Day and night, living in a solitary room,  
Aren't you afraid your hair will soon turn grey  
and your tender skin scaly?*

**106. Dấu ngòi cửa sổ chạm rồng  
Trăm khôn nghìn khéo không chồng cũng hư.**

**Con trai chưa vợ đã xong,  
Con gái chưa chồng buồn lắm em ôi.**  
*Even if you sit by a window engraved with dragon,  
Even if you be greatly wise and talented, you will be worth nothing  
without a husband.*

*An old single man, all right !  
But an old maid, what a sad situation !*

Finally, before the girl's obtinate refusal, the rejected suitor gets angry, and basely takes revenge by fancying this play:

**107. Đi đâu mà chẳng lấy chồng  
Người ta lấy hết chồng mông mà gào.  
Gào rằng: Đất hỡi, Trời ơi,  
Sao không thí bỏ cho tôi chút chồng?  
Ông Trời ngoài cổ xuống trông,  
Mày hay kén chọn, ông không cho mày.**

*Do you see this old maid who,  
While all her friends are married, lifts up her buttocks to cry:  
O Earth, O Heaven !*

*Why don't you give me a husband out of charity?  
Heaven, looking down, answers:*

*Because you were a difficult character, I won't give you any husband.*

**j/** Entering married life. Suppose a love affair ends in marriage: the girl cheerfully leaves her parents to follow her husband. When the husband lives in a far-off village, how miserable is the mother who is forced to part with her daughter. But the young lady, entirely immersed in her love, is quite insensitive:

*108. Tay mang khăn gói sang sông  
Mẹ gọi mặc mẹ, theo chồng cứ theo.*

*Thuyền bồng giở lái về Đông,*

*- Con đi theo chồng, để mẹ cho ai?*

*- Mẹ già đã có con trai,*

*Con là phận gái dám sai chữ tòng?*

*Chỉ thề nước biếc non xanh*

*Theo nhau cho trọn, tử sanh cũng đành.*

*Trời cao bể rộng mông mênh,*

*Ở sao cho trọn tấm tình phu thê.*

*Her arm laden with packages, she crosses the river*

*To follow her husband, in spite of her mother's tears*

*While the boat veers towards the East.*

*- You are following your husband, and who will take care of me?*

*- Mother, isn't that your son's duty?*

*Your daughter is to follow her husband.*

*Before purple waters and blue mountains, we swore to each other*

*An eternal love defying both life and death.*

*Equally with the high sky and the wide sea,*

*I am bent on holding fast to our conjugal love.*

In those happy times, feminism did not exist, and the husband loftily let his wife provide by herself for the household expenses. If he was a scholar, of course he had to study in order to get a doctorate degree. But this good luck befalls only one out of hundreds, and very few realize the dream of coming back triumphantly to the village as pictured below:

*Võng anh đi trước võng nàng theo sau.*

*Himself on horse ahead, and his wife following him in a hammock<sup>1</sup>*

No matter, all scholars' wives fostered this hope till old age:

*109. Đôi bên bác mẹ cùng già Lầy  
anh hay chữ để mà cậy trông Mùa  
hè cho chí mùa đông  
Mùa nào thức ấy cho chồng ra đi.  
Hết gạo thiếp lại gánh đi  
Hỏi thăm chàng học ở thì nơi nao  
Hỏi thăm đến ngõ thì vào  
Tay đặt gánh xuống miệng chào: Thưa anh  
Xin chàng kinh sử học hành  
Để em cấy cấy cửi canh kịp người.  
Mai sau xiêm áo thành thời*

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<sup>1</sup> In the old Vietnam before the French occupation, the doctoral examinations were not purely academic. They were the principal means used by the kings or emperors of Vietnam for selecting mandarins to serve them. The examination was usually proclaimed by a royal decree every three years, except when the king or emperor was in mourning for his parents or his first wife. Out of thousands of candidates who already had to pass successfully examinations at the provincial and regional levels, only four would be selected by the king or emperor in the final examinations held in the Imperial Capital and Imperial Palace. The final examinations were not only a test of intelligence, good memorization of literature and history, but also a test of leadership and moral character. Not many candidates passed the examinations the first time. Therefore, it was a great honor for any village and province that had a successful candidate or laureate as its native son. By royal decree, the whole village and province formed a procession to greet the laureate when returned from the Imperial Capital. The laureate would lead the procession on a horse, followed by his wife and his parents in hammocks, with soldiers forming sentinels on both sides. There would be celebrations held in his honor both at the province and his native village for many days. The laureate's wife was thus honored and recognized for her constant support of her husband during his long years of preparation for the examinations. Many young girls when choosing a husband always dreamed of one day being in such procession as the wife of the laureate.

***Ơn trời lộc nước đời đời hiển vinh.***

*My parents and yours are getting old  
And I entrust my life to you who are a scholar.*

*Summer or winter,*

*I bring you each season's fruits,  
Rice whenever you are short of it*

*To wherever you are studying.*

*I go in, put down my load and politely inquire: How are you?*

*Think but of your books*

*And let me farm the land and weave your clothes.*

*The day will come when you'll put on the laureate's gown Thanks  
to Heaven, the country's honours will heap kindness on us forever.*

Here are some counsels a woman gave her husband to encourage him in his studies:

***110. Canh một dọn dẹp cửa nhà,  
Canh hai dệt cử, canh ba đi nằm,  
Canh tư bước sang canh năm,  
Trình anh dậy học chớ nằm làm chi.***

***Nữa mai Chúa mở khoa thi Bảng  
vàng chói lợi kia đề tên anh. Bõ***

***công cha mẹ sắm sanh,***

***Sắm nghiên, sắm bút cho anh học hành.***

*In the first night watch I do the housekeeping, In  
the second I weave and go to bed at the third. The*

*fourth passes by and as soon as the fifth comes*

*Please wake up, say I to my husband, don't sleep any longer.*

*The Prince will order an examination*

*May your name be shining on the gilded board of laureates.*

*To make worthwhile the trouble your parents have to go through*

*In school fees so that you can afford to study.*

Even if he was not a scholar, the husband did not care much about working to earn his family's living. This prosaic worry was completely left to his wife, save the agricultural works he had to take part in. In the remaining time, he bred fighting cocks, nightingales, looked after his

garden flowers, or simply went to have drinks with his friends. All the household expenses were his wife's duty to deal with. She had to weave cotton, breed silk worms, fatten pigs, gather tea leaves, trade in handicrafts such as mirrors, make-up, thread, needles, paper, brushpens, inkbars, etc. . which she went to buy at far-off villages and resold in her village market. That is why she woke up before sunrise and came home only at nightfall. Were she willing to give all her time to her husband's love, she could not:

**111. *Nửa đêm ân ái cùng chồng  
Nửa đêm về sáng gánh gồng ra đi.***  
*Before midnight she enjoys love with her husband,  
From midnight till morning she gets ready to go to the market.*

This notwithstanding, we may be sure she loves her husband passionately:

**112. *Yêu anh cốt rũ xương mòn,  
Yêu anh đến thác vẫn còn yêu anh.***  
*I will love you until my bones fall apart and disintegrate  
Beyond my death I will still love you, darling !*

There are nowhere as moving accents of conjugal love. Under her shy outward appearance, the Vietnamese woman loves her husband - if she loves him at all - as passionately, as eagerly as any other Eve's daughter. But she always controls herself. Sometimes, her husband is not happy with her too brief caresses and wants to keep her in bed a little longer. Firmly she frees herself:

**113. *Xin chàng bỏ áo em ra ĐỂ  
em đi chợ kẻo mà lỡ phiên. Chợ  
lỡ phiên tổn công thiệt của  
Miệng tiếng người cười rỡn sao đang?  
Lấy chồng gánh vác giang sơn, Chợ  
phiên đã lỡ, giang sơn còn gì ?***  
*Please release my dress  
So that I can go on time to the market.  
If I failed to make it, my pains and money would be in vain,*

*Not to mention everybody's mockeries.  
A wife has to keep her household;  
How could I carry it out if I fails to meet the market day?*

Because she loves her husband, not only is the woman courageous at work, but also she denies herself everything:

**114. Vì chàng thiếp phải bắt cua, Những  
như thân thiếp, thiếp mua ba đồng. Vì  
chàng nên phải mua mâm,  
Những như thân thiếp, bóc ngâm cũng xong.  
Vì chàng thiếp phải long đong, Những  
như thân thiếp, cũng xong một bề. Vì  
chàng nên phải găng công,  
Nào ai xương sắt da đồng chi đây.  
For you I have to go catching crabs  
Which I would buy for three pennies, were I single.  
For you I have to buy a tray;  
Were I single, I would eat with my fingers.  
For you I have to take pains;  
Were I single, I would be satisfied with anything.  
For you I have to do my best  
Although I have neither iron bones nor bronze skin.**

Madame Butterfly's gentleness is often praised, but one forgets that the Vietnamese woman is in no way inferior to any woman in the world. In my previous work, I have sketched the ideal portrait of Mrs. Tú Xương who worked to death to give her rascal of a husband all the luxury he wanted. The following song emphasizes the angelic kindness of the Vietnamese woman:

**115. Chồng giận thì vợ làm lành,  
Miệng cười hớn hở rằng anh giận gì?  
Thưa anh, anh giận em chi,  
Muốn lấy vợ bé em thì lấy cho.  
When the husband gets angry, his wife quiets him  
By merrily smiling and asking: what's the matter?  
Darling, what's the use of losing your temper?  
If you want a second wife, I'll give her to you.**

**k/** Remnants of the Matriarchal Regime. In a Confucianist society, marriages were made under the patriarchal regime, as prescribed by the adage:

*Tại gia tòng phụ, xuất gia tòng phu, phu tử tòng tử.  
She must obey her father as a daughter, her husband as a wife,  
and her son as a widowed mother.*

We have reason to suppose, though, that before Confucianism was introduced into Vietnam, the matriarchal regime had prevailed. Among its traces, we can quote the custom of gửi rể which, in some villages and some cases, compels the husband to come and live with his in-laws. This custom could only be explained for economical reasons: when a wealthy girl marries a poor boy, it's more advantageous for the young couple to live under the protection of the wife's family than on their private means. At least, one thing is certain in this custom so very rarely observed nowadays: the husband is more a part of his wife's family than the wife a part of her husband's family. The young man's situation with his in-laws is far from enviable. Not only is he looked at ironically and rather contemptuously, but he is also compelled to work hard for his in-laws without any remuneration. Here he bitterly complains to his wife:

*116. Trời mưa cho ướt lá khoai,  
Công anh làm rể đã hai năm ròng.  
Nhà em lắm ruộng nhiều đồng,  
Bắt anh tát nước cực lòng anh thay !  
Tháng chín mưa bụi gió may,  
Cát lầy gầu nước chân tay rụng rời.*

*While the rain is wetting the potato leaves  
I think of the work I have done in the two years I have lived with you.  
Your parents own a lot of ricefields and grass-land  
which I have to irrigate.*

*On this windy and rainy day of the ninth month  
My arms and legs are tired out from lifting up the buckets of water.*

**l/** Purchasing a Wife. The custom of gửi rể is but an exception, and a very rare one. The prevailing rule is indeed the patriarchal regime, in

which the wife is subordinate to her husband. Many consequences can be observed, among which:

- purchasing a wife;
- bullying of the wife by her in-laws;
- the precocious marriage;
- polygamy and concubinage.

Here is an unhappily married woman complaining of having been given away in marriage by her mother against her wishes:

*117. Mẹ tôi tham thúng sôi dền, Tham con  
lợn béo, tham tiền Cảnh Hưng. Tôi đã bảo  
mẹ rằng đừng,*

*Mẹ hám, mẹ hứ, mẹ bưng ngay vào.*

*Bây giờ kẻ thấp người cao,*

*Như đôi đũa lệch, so sao cho đều?*

*My mother lusted after the basket full of sticky rice,*

*The fat pig and a large sum of money.*

*I told her to decline them,*

*But she grumbled at me and carried them off at once.*

*Now, we are ill-matched, my husband and I Just  
as two unequal chopsticks unable to pair off.*

**m/** Bullying the Wife. Under the patriarchal regime, the woman is but a perpetual child having no legal protection against the rough treatment of her in-laws. This is why, on the wedding day, her mother often gives her advice such as:

*118. Con đi mẹ bảo con này  
Học buôn học bán cho tây người ta.*

*Con đừng học thói chua ngoa,*

*Họ hàng ghét bỏ người ta chê cười.*

*Dù no dù đói cho tươi,*

*Khoan ăn bớt ngủ liệu bài cho toan.*

*Phòng khi đóng góp việc làng,*

*Đồng tiền bát gạo, sửa sang cho chồng.*

*Trước là đắc nghĩa cùng chồng, Sau  
là họ mạc cũng không chê cười. Con*

*oi, nhớ bấy nhiêu lời.*

*My daughter, listen to me carefully,  
Be as diligent in trade as other girls,  
But don't adopt their sharp-tongued language  
Lest you should be disliked and mocked at by everyone.  
Whether you are or not hungry, be always smiling,  
Don't eat and sleep much, and be alert  
When your husband has to share in the village expenses  
That he may bring his part of money and rice. You  
will have fulfilled your duties to your husband  
And your family won't have anything to blame you with.  
O my daughter ! Carefully remember my words.*

The husband himself, not much at ease about possible bad relations between his mother and his young wife, recommends prudence to the latter:

*119. Từ khi em về làm dâu  
Anh thì dặn trước bảo em mọi nhời.  
Mẹ già dữ lắm, em ôi,  
Nhịn ăn, nhịn mặc, nhịn nhời mẹ cha.  
Nhịn cho nên cửa nên nhà,  
Nên kèo nên cột, nên xà tầm vông.  
Nhịn cho nên vợ nên chồng, Thời  
em sẵn sóc lấy trong cửa nhà. Đi  
chợ thì chớ ăn quà,  
Đi chợ thì chớ rề rà ở trưa.  
Dù ai bảo đợi bảo chờ,  
Thì em nói dối con thơ em về.  
Now that we are married,  
I have to give you some advice.  
My old mother is very hard to please, alas.  
So be careful to eat little, dress modestly,  
and not answer her reproaches.  
In all ways, be submissive  
So that there be peace at home.  
If you want us to be husband and wife,  
Take care of all the housekeeping.  
At the market, don't eat anything*

*And return home early,  
If someone tries to keep you there,  
Don't hesitate to lie, that you must come home  
to take care of your young child.*

n/ About the Precocious Marriage. Vietnamese people married very young for economic reasons. Indeed, the woman was of considerable value as unpaid labor.

*120. Quả cau nho nhỏ  
Cái vỏ vân vân.  
Nay anh học gần  
Mai anh học xa.  
Lấy em từ thừa mười ba  
Đến năm mười tám đã hòa năm con.  
Ra đường thiếp hãy còn son,  
Về nhà thiếp đã năm con cùng chồng !  
Very small is the areca-nut  
Very veined is its peel.  
One day you study near our house;  
Another day your school is far away.  
You married me when I was thirteen,  
And now that I'm eighteen, we already have five children.  
Outside, I look like a little girl,  
But at home I am the mother of five children.*

Very surprising, this precocious and prolific marriage. Generally, the precocious marriage is but a blank one, at least for some time.

*121. Lấy chồng từ thừa mười ba, Chồng  
chê tôi nhỏ chẳng năm cùng tôi. Đến  
năm mười tám đôi mươi,  
Tôi nằm dưới đất chồng lòi lên giường.  
Một rằng thương, hai rằng thương, Có  
bốn chân giường, gầy một còn ba. Ai  
về nhắn nhủ mẹ cha,  
Chồng tôi nay đã giao hòa cùng tôi.  
Married when I was barely thirteen,  
I was ignored by my husband who refused to sleep at my side.*

*But now that I am eighteen,  
From the floor where I am sleeping he draws me up to his bed.  
He tells me that he loves me, once, twice,  
So much that out of four legs of the bed, one is broken.  
Please go and tell my parents  
That my husband has made me his beloved wife.*

Sometimes, we face the opposite situation: a full-grown girl marries a very young boy. This strange situation is told in the following song:

*122. Tham giàu em lấy thằng bé tí tí ti,  
Làng trên xóm dưới thiếu gì trai tơ,  
Em đem thân cho thằng bé nó giầy vò,  
Mùa đông tháng giá nó nằm co trong lòng.  
Cũng đa mang là gái có chồng, Chín  
đêm trực tiết nằm không cả mười. Nói  
ra sợ chị em cười,*

*Má hồng bỏ quá một đời xuân xanh. Em  
cũng liều mình vì thằng bé trẻ ranh, Đêm  
nằm sờ mó quần quanh cho đỡ buồn. Buồn  
mình em lại bế thằng bé lên,  
Nó còn bé mọn, đã nên cơm cháo gì?  
Nó ngủ nó ngáy khi khi,  
Một giấc đến sáng còn gì là xuân?  
Chị em ơi, hoa nở mấy lần ?*

*For his riches I have married a tiny boy,  
When there are so many young men in the village.  
I'm bound to sleep by this inoffensive puppet of husband  
Who coils himself up into my arms during the cold winter nights.*

*Theoretically I am a married woman,  
But out of nine nights, ten are blank ones.  
At the risk of being mocked at by my friends,  
I must say that my rosy cheeks are doomed to wither.  
Sometimes I try my luck with this little wortless boy  
And caress him haphazardly to relieve my senses.  
I take him in my arms, I rouse him from sleep,  
But what could he do, being still so young?  
He keeps on sleeping and snoring*

*The whole night till morning, without thinking of my fleeting springtime.  
O my sisters. How many times may a flower bloom?*

o/ About Ill-matched Marriages. As one may have seen, the precocious marriage is not always happy, but may turn out all right with time. The truly ill-matched marriages are those uniting a young girl to an old or profligate man. Here is a woman complaining of having married an old man:

**123. Vô duyên vô phúc  
Mức phải anh chồng già.  
Ra đường người hỏi rằng: Cha hay chồng?  
- Nói ra đau đớn trong lòng,  
Ấy cái nợ truyền kiếp, có phải chồng em đâu?  
By bad luck or misfortune,  
I fell into an old man's hands.  
When going out with him,  
I am asked whether he is my father or husband?  
Alas! It's painful to say,  
He is not a husband but a penalty from a previous existence.**

This other woman, on the contrary, impudently swaggers:

**124. Có duyên lấy được chồng già  
Ăn xôi bỏ chấy, ăn gà bỏ xương.  
Very lucky it is to marry an old man,**

*Who leaves aside the crisp rice and the chicken bones .*

(Because he is toothless and cannot chew them. Actually, gourmets prefer crisp rice to the well-boiled rice, and the chicken's bony parts-neck, wings, and even feet - to its evenly fleshy parts. When the husband and wife are both young, they share these delectable pieces between them. But if the husband is old and his wife young, she will have them all to herself.)

More than age, it is vileness in the husband that brings his wife to despair. How greatly is pitied this courageous woman who unfortunately has married a wastrel, probably a rich man's son, who does nothing but squander his paternal fortune:

**125. Chồng em nó chẳng ra gì**

*Tổ tôm sóc đĩa nó thì chơi hoang.  
Nói ra xấu thiếp hổ chàng  
Nó giận nó phá tan hoang cửa nhà.  
Nói đây có chị em nhà,  
Còn năm ba thúng thóc với một vài cân bông.  
Em bán đi trả nợ cho chồng,  
Còn ăn hết nhịn cho hả lòng chồng con  
Đặng cay ngậm quả bồ hòn,  
Cửa nhà gia thế chồng con kém người.  
Nói ra sợ chị em cười,  
Con nhà gia giáo lấy phải người dân ngu.  
Rồng vàng tắm nước ao tù,  
Người khôn ở với người ngu bực mình.  
My husband is a wastrel  
Who gives himself to gambling.  
If I tell him that he is covering us both with shame,  
He gets angry and demolishes everything in the house.  
To tell you in confidence, my sisters,  
I have only three baskets of rice and some pounds of cotton left.  
I'll sell them to honour my husband's debts  
Even if after that we have nothing to eat.  
I silently suffer as if a soapberry were in my mouth  
Because in every way my husband is inferior to anyone.  
At the risk of being mocked by you,  
I must tell you that being a well-educated girl,  
I fell into an ignorant boy's arms  
Like a dragon swimming in a stagnant pool,  
How pitiable is a wise girl who is united to an ignorant boy.*

Too distressed, the ill-matched woman casts the blame upon the Genie of marriage who is the Old Moon Man. And she relieves her sorrow by fancying that she beats him black and blue:

*126. Bắc thang lên đến tận trời  
Bắc ông Nguyệt Lão đánh mười cẳng tay.  
Đánh thôi, lại trói vào cây,  
Hỏi ông Nguyệt Lão: Nào giây tơ hồng ?  
I set up a ladder up to the sky*

*To seize the Old Moon Man and give him ten blows with my forearm.*

*Then, I bind him to a tree*

*And ask him: where are your red strings?*

**p/** About Polygamy. It would be well to distinguish two varieties of polygamy: In the first one, the husband has many wives not equal in rank, but equally legitimate. In the second one, on the contrary, the concubines are but disguised servants, poor girls bought and not married according to the wedding rituals. This legal distinction being made, the situation of a legitimate wife of lower rank depends in fact on her beauty, gentleness, kind nature, and in one word, on her influence upon her husband. It is not common for a wife of second rank, or even a concubine, to take precedence over the wife of the first rank.

Men were of course supporters of that custom which, incidentally, is disappearing, if not already extinct nowadays.

*127. Sông bao nhiêu nước cho vừa*

*Trai bao nhiêu vợ cũng chưa bằng lòng.*

*Like the river that never has enough water to fill it up,*

*A man never has enough wives to satisfy him.*

The polygamist is generally a wealthy man. Taking advantage of his riches, he carries off many pretty girls of his village; this stirs up the jealousy of young bachelors too poor to marry even one girl. Therefrom this bantering song:

*128. Đêm năm canh, năm vợ ngồi hầu,*

*Vợ cả pha nước, tằm trầu chày soi.*

*Vợ hai trải chiếu, chia bài,*

*Vợ ba coi sóc nhà ngoài, nhà trong.*

*Vợ tư giải chiều, quạt mùng,*

*Vợ năm thức dậy trong lòng xót xa.*

*Chè thang, cháo đậu bưng ra, Chày*

*soi một bát kẹo mà công lênh.*

*During the five watches of the night, his five wives wait on him.*

*The first makes tea and quids of betel,*

*The second rolls out the mat and deals the cards.*

*The third watches over the household, its front and rear doors,*

*The fourth makes the bed and fans the mosquito-net.  
The fifth wakes up with a heavy heart  
To bring her husband a bowl of bean soup:  
- Please drink this bowl that gave me much trouble.*

But polygamy does not only pleasure. Often the unfortunate husband, torn between many wives, is at his wit's end, as related in this funny song:

**129. Sớm mai đi chợ Gò Vấp**  
*Mua một xấp vải  
Đem về con hai nó cắt,  
Con ba nó may,  
Con tư nó đót,  
Con năm nó viền,  
Con sáu nó nút,  
Con bảy vật khuy,  
Anh bước căng ra đi  
Con tám núu, con chín trì.  
Ở mười ơi, sao em để vậy còn gì áo anh?  
This morning I went to Gò Vấp market  
To buy a piece of fabric  
My second wife cut it up,  
My third made a robe of it,  
My fourth added some stitches,  
My fifth hemmed it,  
My sixth made the button holes, And  
my seventh sewed on the buttons.  
Expecting to be freed, I go for a walk  
When my eighth stops me, and my ninth clings to me.  
O my tenth, what will be left of my robe?*

Now, let's cross the fence to the side of the wives sharing a common husband. First, there is jealousy, often quite intense:

**130. Cái cò trắng bạch như vôi**  
*Cô kia có lấy bố tôi thì về.  
Mẹ tôi chẳng mắng chẳng chê,  
Mẹ tôi móc mắt, mổ mề xem gan.*

*The stork is as white as lime  
Miss, will you marry my father?  
My mother will neither scold nor criticize you,  
She'll only claw out your eyes, and open your belly to see your liver.*

**131. Ớt nào là ớt chẳng cay,  
Gái nào là gái chẳng hay ghen chồng?  
Vôi nào là vôi chẳng nồng,  
Gái nào là gái có chồng chẳng ghen?**

*Which pimento is not hot?  
Which girl is not jealous?  
Which lime is not acrid?  
And which wife doesn't want to keep her husband's love  
for herself alone?*

This ferocious jealousy brings about, as an inevitable consequence, the concubine's miserable condition:

**132. Lấy chồng làm lẽ khó thay  
Đi cấy đi cấy chị chẳng kể công.  
Đến tối chị giữ lấy chồng,  
Chị cho manh chiếu nằm không nhà ngoài.  
Đêm đêm gọi những: Bớ Hai!  
Chờ dậy nấu cám, thái khoai, băm bèo.**

*What a sad life is that of a concubine!  
I get sick from farming work, but my sister ignores it.  
At night, she keeps her husband for herself  
And give me a mat where I am go to lie by myself outside their room.  
At night, she calls to me: O second,  
Wake up quickly to boil bran, chop potatoes and grind marsh-lentil.*

**133. Thân em làm lẽ chẳng hề  
Có như chánh thất mà lê giữa giường.  
Tối tối chị giữ mất buồng  
Cho em manh chiếu nằm xông chuồng bò.  
Mong chồng, chồng chẳng xuống cho,  
Đến cơn chồng xuống, gà o o gáy dồn.**

*Cha mẹ con gà kia, sao mày vôi gáy dòn?  
Mày làm cho ta mất vía kinh hồn về nỗi chồng con.  
Being a concubine, never was I allowed to sleep  
On the conjugal bed like the principal wife.  
Night after night, she keeps our husband's room for herself,  
Leaving me alone on a mat in the cow-shed.  
There I wait for my husband, who always delays his coming.  
If by chance he comes at all, the cock is not long to crow hastily.  
Curse it. Why are you crowing so early?  
You made me faint from fear over my concubine's condition.*

It is why the young girls give each other this advice:

**134. Đói lòng ăn nắm lá sung  
Chồng một thì lấy, chồng chung thì đừng.**  
*If you are hungry, it's better to eat sycamore leaves  
With a husband for yourself, than to share him with other wives.*

We can also find some concubines boasting about their lot in life, perhaps for not having to cry over it:

**135. Lấy chồng làm lẽ khỏi lo cơm  
ngươi đầy rá, cá kho đầy nồi. Thà  
rằng làm lẽ thứ mười  
Còn hơn chính thất những người đàn ngu.**  
*A concubine has nothing to worry about  
For the cooked rice left cold and the boiled salted fish are  
at her disposal.  
It is better to be a concubine, even of the tenth rank,  
Than to be an ignorant man's principal wife.*

q/ About Adultery. As a rule, the Vietnamese people have an instinctive repulsion for adultery, as is shown in the following songs:

**136. Trai tơ gái góa thì chơi,  
Chớ nơi có vợ, chớ nơi có chồng.**  
*Have a love affair with bachelors or widows, if it pleases you,  
But never with married men or women.*

**137. Chơi trăng từ thửa trăng tròn,**

*Chơi hoa từ thửa hoa còn trên cây.  
Hoa thơm mất nhụy đi rồi,  
Còn thơm đâu nữa mà người ước mơ.  
Enjoy the moon when it is full,  
And enjoy the flower when it is still a bud on the plant.  
But the flower whose pistil has been stripped  
Has no more scent and has nothing to be desired.*

It would be too fine a thing if adultery were totally absent in Vietnam. It happened, but very rarely, so to speak. It was a shocking scandal which fortunately was rare. Besides, the culprits were harshly punished: the adulteress had her head shaven, and was dragged along the village streets, following the town crier who loudly shouted her crime to the accompaniment of strokes of the hand rattle. The furious betrayed husband was even authorized to bind together his wife and her accomplice caught in the act on a raft that would be left to drift along the river.

I must say that those inhuman punishments were rather rare. Generally, our people merely mock at the adulteress by ironical songs (not at the adulterer, because though the woman's lapse may admit a stranger's blood to her husband's family, the man's lapse has not such a disadvantage):

*138. Gái chính chuyên lấy được chín chồng  
Vê viên bỏ lọ gánh gông đi chơi  
Không may quang đứt lọ rơi  
Bò ra lổm ngổm chín nơi chín chồng.  
The virtuous woman has married nine husbands;  
She kneads them into balls put in a jar, that she brings with her when  
she strolls along the streets.  
Unfortunately her strap breaks up, and down falls her jar From  
which crawl in turmoil her nine husbands in nine different  
directions.*

*139. Hỏi cô mặc yếm hoa tâm,  
Chồng cô đi lính cô nằm với ai?  
Cô để thằng bé con trai,*

**Chồng cô về hỏi: Con ai thế này ?**

**- Con tôi đi kiếm về đây,**

**Có cho nó gọi bằng thầy thì cho.**

*O you who are wearing a flower-embroidered breast-supporter,  
While your husband is garrisoned afar off, with whom did you sleep  
To give birth to this boy?*

*What would you tell your husband if he asked you: Whose child is this?  
- I found him somewhere, darling,  
Would you mind his calling you daddy?*

Indeed, some women are sensual to such an extent that they lose all modesty. Here, for instance, an adulteress who ingenuously confesses it to her husband:

**140. Anh đánh thì tôi chịu đòn,**

**Tánh tôi hoa nguyệt mười con chẳng chừa.**

**Đánh tôi thì tôi chịu đau,**

**Tánh tôi hoa nguyệt chẳng chừa được đâu.**

*Beat me, I don't mind your beating me*

*But eager for love as I am,*

*I cannot abstain from it even after having ten children.*

*Beat me, I'll endure your painful blows,*

*But eager for love as I am,*

*I cannot abstain from it because of them.*

This adulteress is still more shameless:

**141. Hai tay cầm hai trái hồng,**

**Trái chát phần chồng, trái ngọt phần trai.**

**Lẳng lơ chết cũng ra ma,**

**Chính chuyên chết cũng không ra ngoài đồng.**

**Lẳng lơ cũng chẳng có mồn,**

**Chính chuyên cũng chẳng sơn son để thờ.**

*In my two hands I hold two persimmons:*

*The sour one is for my husband, and the sweet one for my lover.*

*Once dead, the licentious woman becomes a ghost But*

*the virtuous one is nonetheless buried in the fields. My*

*sexuality is not more worn because I am licentious*

*And were I virtuous, it would't be lacquered to be worshipped.*

And that one:

**142. Có chồng càng dễ chơi ngang,  
Để ra con thiếp, con chàng, con ai?**

*I am married, you say? But it's easier for me to have lovers.  
For if I give birth to a child, who would be his father if not my husband?*

Now, let's discuss adultery perpetrated by a married man. We know that the customs are more tolerant with him, and provided that he does not deal with a married woman, his love affairs are not criticized very severely, except by his own wife. Widows and prostitutes are usually his hunting ground. But if he ventures to court an unmarried girl, he will receive a cruel lesson, as is shown in the following song:

**143. Anh về rẫy vợ anh ra, Công  
nợ em trả, mẹ già em nuôi. Anh  
đã rẫy vợ anh rồi,  
Công nợ anh trả, anh nuôi mẹ già.**

*Go ahead and repudiate your wife,  
I promise to pay your debts and take care of your old mother.  
Once you have repudiated your wife,  
You pay your debts and take care of your old mother.*

Or this other song:

**144. Anh về rẫy vợ anh ra,  
Con anh thơ dại thì đà có tôi.  
Anh đà rẫy vợ anh rồi,  
Con anh thơ dại, mặc trời với anh.**

*Go ahead and reject your wife,  
I promise to take care of your young child.  
But once you have rejected your wife,  
You must ask for Heaven's help to take care of your young child.*

r/ About Widowhood. As a rule, the widow must stay faithful to her husband's memory. Customs and laws heartened her in this way. When she got old, the faithful widow received from the king a diploma with the following inscription "Her virtues are praiseworthy" which would be engraved on a fine gold and cinnabar lacquered board, hanging in the best room of her house.

But there was also, alas, the question of sexuality which some widows could not withstand. Here is a widow bidding her children goodbye before marrying for the second time:

**145. Hỡi thằng cu lớn, hỡi thằng cu bé,  
Cu tí, cu tị, cu tử, cu từ ời !  
Con dậy con ăn con ở với bà  
Để mẹ đi kiếm một vài con thêm.  
Cha con chết đi trong bụng mẹ nó hầy còn thềm,  
Mẹ xem quả bói, vẫn còn đàn em trong bụng này.  
Con ra gọi chú vào đây  
Để mẹ giao trả cái cơ nghiệp này mẹ bước đi.  
Hello. My eldest son, my second,  
My third, my fourth, my fifth, my sixth darling,  
Wake up, and henceforth go live with your grandmother.  
Let me go and fetch some more children.  
Your father is dead, but my belly is not tired of bearing them.  
A fortune-teller told me that many of your brothers  
and sisters are waiting in my belly  
Go and call in your uncle  
With whom I'll entrust your heritage before I leave.**

## **2. The Family**

a/ Paternal and Maternal Affections. These feelings have prompted some fine songs:

**146. Miệng ru mắt nhỏ hai hàng  
Nuôi con càng lớn mẹ càng lo thêm.  
While lulling you, my child, my eyes fill up with tears, For  
the more you grow, the more intense are my sorrows.**

**147. Chim trời ai dễ đếm lông, Nuôi  
con ai dễ kể công tháng ngày?  
Who can count the number of feathers of a bird flying in the sky? Who  
can measure the pain endured by parents raising their children?**

**148. Bốn con ngồi bốn chân giường**

*- Mẹ ơi, mẹ hỡi, mẹ thương con nào?*

*- Mẹ thương con bé mẹ thay.*

*Thương thì thương vậy, chẳng tầy trưởng nam.*

*Trưởng nam nào có gì đâu?*

*Một trăm cái giỗ đổ đầu trưởng nam.*

*The four sons are sitting at the four corners of their mother's bed.*

*- Mother, which of us do you love best?*

*- I love best my youngest son,*

*But it's the eldest I ought to love best.*

*He has no advantage, poor eldest,*

*But his duty to celebrate all anniversaries.*

It's not entirely true that the eldest son has no benefit. In wealthy families, he is granted a good part of the paternal heritage to secure the cult of the ancestors. But in cases where there is nothing left by the parents, the eldest son must do it all the same, at his own expense.

If sometimes the parents have to be strict with their children, to whip them when they are naughty, there is no grandmother who does not pamper her grandchildren with the tales she tells during the long winter nights, or with delicacies she's brought home from the market.

*149. Bà ơi cháu quý bà thay,*

*Quý bà vì nôi bà hay cho quà.*

*Grandmother, how much I love you*

*For the delicacies you often gave me.*

This child is a cynic, he loves his grandmother only out of greediness. But his very cynicism reveals clearly the grandmother's great affection for her grandchildren.

**b/ Filial Piety.** Along with conjugal love, filial piety is the strongest feeling of our people. Many whose parents were old, used to pray for their longevity:

*150. Đêm đêm ra thắp đèn trời Cầu*

*cho cha mẹ sống đời với con.*

*Every night I go and light the celestial lamp*

*To pray that my parents may live eternally with me.*

Even the youngsters exercise their wits in order to make their parents laugh when they have behaved badly, less to avoid a just punishment than to spare their parents painful anger:

**151. Má ơi đừng đánh con đau,  
Để con hát bội làm đào má xem.**

*Mummy, don't beat me severely  
And let me play comedy for you.*

Often people understand the greatness of maternal love only when it's their turn to have children.

**152. Lên non mới biết non cao  
Nuôi con mới biết công lao mẫu từ.**

*By climbing up a mountain, one knows how high it is,  
By raising your own children, you can realize the value of  
your mother's love.*

Especially anxious about their parents are those who go far off on business and, most of all the girls married a long way from their village:

**153. Vẳng nghe chim vịt kêu chiều Bâng  
khuâng nhớ mẹ chín chiu ruột đau.**

*Thương thay chín chữ cù lao  
Tam niên nhũ bộ biết bao nhiêu tình.  
When I hear wild ducks crying in the dusk,  
My heart is heavy as I think of my mother.  
Of the endless pains she suffered to raise me  
And of the three years she breast fed me with her divine love.*

**154. Chiều chiều ra đứng ngõ sau  
Ngó về quê mẹ ruột đau như dằm.**

*Evening after evening, I go to the rear door  
To look in the direction of my mother's village my heart tortured  
as if it were broken.*

**155 Chiều chiều ra đứng ngõ xuôi  
Ngó không thấy mẹ ngùi ngùi nhớ thương.**

*Evening after evening, I go to the door that looks out towards*

*my mother's house.*

*But I don't see my mother, and my heart fills up with sadness.*

And last, how moving is this song of an orphan:

**156. Chiều chiều xách giỏ hái rau  
Ngó lên mả mẹ, ruột đau như dằm.**

*Evening after evening, going to gather some vegetables in a basket  
I look at my mother's tomb, my heart tortured as if it were broken.*

### **3. The Fatherland**

a/ Patriotism. Patriotism is naturally intensified when there is threat to national security. Tradition reports that the following song originated from the Trung sisters' insurrection against the Chinese domination:

**157. Nhiễm điều phủ lấy giá gương,  
Người trong một nước thì thương nhau cùng.**  
*As the rosy silk covers the mirror-stand  
People of the same country have to love one another.*

After we lost our independence under the French domination, the following songs arose from the banks of the Perfume River (which waters Huế):

**158. Chiều chiều trước bến Vân Lâu  
Ai ngồi, ai câu,  
Ai sầu, ai thảm,  
Ai thương, ai cảm,  
Ai nhớ, ai mong,  
Thuyền ai thấp thoáng bên sông,  
Đưa câu mái đẩy, động lòng nước non !**  
*Evening after evening, in front of the Vân Lâu wharf,  
Who is there sitting and angling?  
Who's sad? Who's sorrowful? Who's  
complaining? Who's troubled? Who's  
remembering? Who's hoping? On the  
river appears indistinctly a boat*

*From which are heard some boat-woman's song, moving the heart of  
waters and of mountains.*

**159. Đất Thừa Thiên**  
**Trai hiền gái lịch**  
**Non xanh nước bích**  
**Điện ngọc sông trong,**  
**Tháp bảy tầng**  
**Thánh miếu chùa Ông**  
**Trách thay ai một dạ hai lòng**  
**Tham đồng bạc trắng, nữ phụ lòng dân đen !**  
*Boys are wise and girls pretty,*  
*Mountains are blue and waters purple,*  
*Palaces seem to be of jade and rivers of crystal.*  
*There one can see a seven-storey tower,*  
*The imperial temple and the pagoda dedicated to His Royal Highness.*  
*How shameful are those who acted with duplicity*  
*And for a few white piasters, betrayed the black people. (the common  
people)*

b/ Xenophobia. Patriotism may sometimes go to the extremes of xenophobia. In former times, women who married Chinamen for their money were criticized and held in contempt:

**160. Cô kia đội nón chờ ai?**  
**Chớ lấy chú chiệc mà hoài mất thân.**  
*O you there, with a hat on your head, who are you waiting for?*  
*Don't marry a Chinaman, your life will be ruined.*

**161. Bên Tàu hay ở ngược xuôi**  
**Cho nên chú chiệc mọc đuôi trên đầu.**  
*In China all is topsy-turvy*  
*Witness the Chinamen who have tails on their heads.*

Indeed, under the Manchurian dynasty, Chinamen wore their hair in a single plait. With an obvious unfairness, the mocking Vietnamese sees it as an abnormal tail that instead of growing on the beast's posterior, burgeons on Chinamen's heads. And it is a sufficient proof that

Chinamen have no moral sense, particularly no conjugal faith. Thus, how foolish are the girls who trust them:

*162. Ba mươi Tết, Tết lại ba mươi,  
Vợ thằng Ngô đốt vàng cho chú Khách.*

*Một tay cầm cái dù rách,  
Một tay xách cái chăn bông.*

*Em đứng bờ sông*

*Em trông sang nước người, Hỏi  
chú chiếc ơì là chú chiếc ơì. Một*

*tay em cầm quan tiền*

*Một tay em xách thằng bồ nhìn, em ném xuống sông.*

*Quan tiền nặng thì quan tiền chìm,*

*Bồ nhìn nhẹ thì bồ nhìn nổi.*

*Ơì ai ơì của nặng hơn người.*

*In this last day of the year,*

*A Chinaman's widow is burning votive paper for her husband.*

*In one hand she holds a ragged umbrella*

*And in the other a cotton blanket.*

*On the bank of the river she is standing*

*And looks in the direction of China. "O  
my Chinese husband", she cries out, "In*

*one hand I hold a string of coins*

*In the other a dummy; both of them I throw into the river "*

*The string of coins, being heavy, falls to the bottom;*

*The dummy, being light, floats on the surface.*

*Everybody can see that money is heavier than man.*

In this satire, its author imagines a little drama: a Chinaman is dead and his Vietnamese widow, in the last day of the year, is burning votive paper as an offering to the husband's manes. But this pious deed is transformed into a scathing reproach. The widow throws in the water a string of coins symbolizing money's influence on her marriage, and a dummy representing the conjugal love between the couple. Of course, the heavy coins fall to the bottom, whereas the light dummy floats on the surface. And the author brings the play to its victorious conclusion:

*Money is heavier than man.*

i. e. I married you only for your money, and not for yourself.

c/ Historical Hints. Most often, patriotism reveals itself discreetly in historical hints, or in the evocation of regional peculiarities.

- Prehistoric era:

**163. Trúng rồng lại nở ra rồng  
Liu diu lại nở ra dòng liu diu.**  
*From the dragon eggs will hatch dragons,  
From the lizard eggs will hatch lizards.*

This song refers to the legend according to which the Vietnamese people would go back to dragons and immortals (see this legend in Part III: Ancient tales).

**164. Sông sâu nước chảy làm vầy  
Ai xui em đến chốn này gặp anh?  
Đào tơ sen nõng xanh xanh  
Ngọc lành phải giá, gái lành phải duyên.  
Cho hay tiên lại gặp tiên  
Phụng hoàng há để đứng chen đàn gà ?**  
*To this fast running river  
Who has led me to meet you? Like  
a delicate peach, a lotus bud,  
Or a fine pearl to be sold only to an expert,  
I've long waited for a worthy husband.  
Fortunately I am an immortal, and so are you.  
Phoenix cannot mate with vulgar fowl.*

It's the legend of Chử Đồng Tử and princess Tiên Dung (see Part III)

- Chinese domination:

**165. Thương thay thân phận con rùa  
Trên đình hạc cuội, dưới chùa đội bia.**  
*Pitiable is the turtle  
Carrying on its back a crane in temple, or a stele in pagoda.*

This turtle carrying heavy loads represents the Vietnamese people moaning under the Chinese oppression.

**166. Vì chồng nên phải gồng công,  
Nào ai xương sắt da đồng chi đây ?**

*To revenge her husband, she bravely took up arms  
Yet having neither iron bones nor a bronze skin.*

This song praises Trưng Trắc who, in the year 40 A.D., rose in rebellion against China to revenge her husband Thi Sách who had been put to death by the Chinese governor Tô Định. But in fact, she had plotted this popular revolt long before her husband fell in a trap treacherously set by the Chinese authorities, and this crime only precipitated the insurrection. Thus, it would be unjust to say that Trưng Trắc did her heroic deed only to revenge her husband.

**167. Con ơi con ngủ cho lành  
Mẹ đi gánh nước rửa bành ông voi.  
Muốn coi lên núi mà coi  
Coi bà quân tượng cưỡi voi bành vàng.**

*Sleep peacefully, my child,  
And let your mother go and wash the pack-saddle of  
His Grace the Elephant. Hallo.  
Everybody, go up the hill  
And look at Her highness caracoling  
on her golden pack-saddled elephant.*

This song is about Triệu Thị Trinh who in 248 A.D. started the revolt against China. Riding on an elephant, she always charged the enemy in front of her troops.

- Lý dynasty:

**168. Dầu ai sang cả mặc ai Thân  
này nước chảy hoa trôi sá gì?  
What are honours and riches to me?**

*This body of mine, I leave it to the stream as a flower.*

In 1044, Emperor Lý Thái Tông took hold of the Champa capital, and made captive Queen My Ê, Champa king Xạ Đẩu's wife. He brought her back to Vietnam. When the retinue arrived at the Sông Đáy, the emperor ordered the captive queen to come before him. But she

wrapped herself in her blankets and threw herself into the river. Rendering homage to her conjugal faithfulness, the Vietnamese people composed this song.

**169. Tay cầm bán nguyệt xêng xang,  
Muôn nghìn cây cỏ lai hàng tay ta.**

*Holding majestically in my hands a sickle shaped like a moon's crescent  
I make all plants and herbs line up under my orders.*

This song refers to a true fairy tale. Emperor Lý Thái Tông (1054-1072) had not yet any male child. Going for a walk in the country, he happened to meet an angelically pretty peasant girl standing by an orchid bush, who was scything grass while declaiming these two verses. Fascinated by her golden voice, the allegorical meaning of the song, and her truly majestic deportment, he took her as his second wife and conferred on her the title of Lady Orchid. She soon gave him a son who would become emperor Lý Nhân Tông (1072-1127).

- Trần dynasty:

**170. Trách người quân tử phụ tình  
Chơi hoa rồi lại bẻ cành bán rao !**

*How reprehensible is the unfaithful noble man  
Who, after enjoying a flower, breaks its branch to sell in auction !*

In 1225, empress Lý Chiêu Hoàng, then only seven years old, was married by order to Trần Cảnh who thus gained her throne and founded the Trần dynasty. After twelve years of childless marriage with Lý Chiêu Hoàng, prime minister Trần Thủ Độ, who wanted to secure the dynasty's posterity, compelled emperor Trần Thái Tông to repudiate her and marry her sister princess Chiêu Thánh, already pregnant. This song is a satire against Trần Thái Tông (For more details, see my previous work: The Masterpieces of Vietnamese Literature).

**171. Trời Đông A soi đến bậc hè  
Ba con đóm nọ lập lòe làm chi ?**

*The rising sun of the East has shone on the temple's veranda  
And the three glow-worms glimmer uselessly.*

The written characters Đông and A, when united, form the character Trần. The temple is the emperor Lý's temple. And the three glow-worms are the three last supporters of the fallen dynasty: Đoàn Thượng, Nguyễn Nộn, and Nguyễn Quang Bật. This song, composed by Trần Thủ Độ, the principal perpetrator of the Trần's accession to the throne, and spread out among the people as a prophecy, was used to discourage the resistance endeavours of the Lý's followers.

**172. Tiếc thay cây quế giữa rừng  
Để cho thằng Mán, thằng Mường nó leo.**  
*It is a pity that the cinnamon tree in the forest  
Allowed itself to be climbed by a barbarian.*

This song concerns princess Huyền Trân, married by order of her brother Emperor Trần Anh Tông to Chăm King Chế Mân in 1306, to receive in exchange the two Chăm districts Ô and Lý. Not grasping this clever policy of the emperor, who had thus gotten a large area of land without any fight, the people criticized him for having delivered his sister to a barbarian king.

**173. Đòn kêu tích tịch tình tang  
Ai đem công chúa lên thang mà ngòi?**  
*Dolefully the guitar is moaning  
Who has forced the princess to sit on a funeral pyre?*

After a year of marriage, King Chế Mân died, and according to his country's customs, the widowed queen was to be burnt on the funeral pyre. When this news was brought to their knowledge, the Vietnamese people painfully bemoaned their graceful princess's fate.

**174. Tiếc thay hạt gạo trắng ngần  
Đã vo nước đục lại vẫn than rơm.**  
*It's a pity that the fine white rice  
After being washed in dirty water, is to be cooked with straw coal.*

However, informed in time, emperor Trần Anh Tông sent an envoy to Champa, supposedly to attend the royal funeral. Trần Khắc Chung

succeeded in kidnapping and bringing the queen back to Vietnam, after a long journey during which she did not adhere to faithfulness to her dead husband. And the people, who had adored her, sternly criticized her in that satire.

- Hồ dynasty:

*175. Kiến leo cột sắt sao mòn  
Tò vò xây ổ sao tròn mà xây?*

*How could an ant wear out the iron pillar by climbing it?*

*How could a wasp build a firm nest?*

Before usurping the Trần throne, Hồ Quý Ly ordered a western capital to be built at great cost to provide a refuge in the event of a Chinese invasion. His fears proved correct but not his hopes, for the Western capital was also captured by the Chinese, as was foreseen in that song.

*176. Chàng về Hồ, thiếp cũng về hồ,  
Chàng về Hồ Hán, thiếp về hồ Tây.*

*You come back to Hồ, so do I,*

*You come back to Hồ Hán, and I come back to the Western Lake.*

First, there is a pun in this song. Hồ, which means lake, is also the name of the dynasty that usurped the Trần throne. Hồ Hán Thương was the second king of the Hồ dynasty. Secondly, the song recalls a tragic event in a family when the Chinese, under the pretext of punishing the usurping Hồ, invaded Vietnam in 1407. The husband in the story was a prince of the Trần dynasty, who had a hand in several plots against Hồ Quý Ly. When this one dethroned the last emperor Trần in 1400, our conspirator went in hiding to plan his revenge. But in 1407, the Chinese invasion made him change his plan. Repressing his personal hatred of the Hồ who were his family's enemy, he entered the service of Hồ Hán Thương to fight against the Chinese invaders, his country's enemy. But his wife did not understand this enlarged conception of duty. She considered him a traitor, and went to drown herself in the Western Lake (later called the Great Lake of Hanoi) to expiate her husband's crime.

Alas. The husband, in the bloody battle of Đa Bang, also died before the crushing superiority of the Chinese army.

So perished this heroic couple, the husband to save the country, and the wife to save the family's honour.

- Lê dynasty:

**177. Con cò lặn lội bờ sông  
Gánh gạo đưa chồng tiếng khóc nỉ non.  
Nàng về nuôi cái cùng con  
Để anh đi chầy nước non Cao Bằng.**

*The stork, becoming exhausted on the river bank,  
Dolefully bewails from bringing rice to her husband who said:  
- Go back to raise our children,  
And let me do my duty in Cao Bằng mountains and rivers.*

This song would originate from the struggle between princes Trịnh and Mạc; the latter, after being expelled from the capital Thăng Long, have clung to Cao Bằng for a century more.

**178. Chớ khinh chùa Tích không thờ  
Mà đem xôi oản cúng nhờ gốc cây.  
Don't neglect the cult in the pagoda  
And bring your offerings to the foot of the tree.**

The pagoda stands for Emperor Lê and the tree is prince Trịnh who has taken over all powers. (In the Buddhist temple courtyard, there are usually big trees, and superstitious people worship them). This song advised people to remain faithful to the imperial dynasty.

**179. Đường vô xứ Huế quanh quanh  
Non xanh nước biếc như tranh họa đồ.  
Yêu anh em cũng muốn vô,  
Sợ truông nhà Hồ, sợ phá Tam Giang.  
- Phá Tam giang ngày nay đã cạn,  
Truông nhà Hồ nội tán cầm nghiêm.  
The way to Huế is endlessly winding and twisting**

*Through blue mountains and purple waters as in a picture.  
I love you and would like to go there  
But I'm afraid of the Hồ scrub and of the Three Rivers' lagoon.  
The Three Rivers' lagoon is now filled up,  
And the Hồ scrub has been pacified by the Home Secretary*

The Three Rivers' lagoon, on the sea-way to Huế, caused quite a number of ship wrecks. The Hồ scrub, on the land route and gang-ridden, has been pacified by Nguyễn Khoa Đăng, Home Secretary under the reign of Prince Nguyễn Hiền Tông (1691-1725).

**180. Đục cùn thì giữ lấy tông**

**Đục long cán gậy còn mong nổi gì?**

*Even if the chisel is blunt, one must take care of the handle, Because  
the chisel would be useless if its handle is broken or loosened.*

Prince Trịnh Sâm had two sons from two different wives: Tông (who would later take the name of Khải) and Cán. This song, playing upon the words Tông (family, and the part of the chisel entering the handle) and Cán (the handle of the chisel, and Trịnh Cán), was popularized by the followers of prince Trịnh Tông to criticize Prince Trịnh Sâm who intended to bequeath his title to his younger son Trịnh Cán.

**181. Ai đem con sếu qua sông**

**Sếu ăn hết tép, sếu vùng bay đi.**

*Who brought the crane to this side of the river?  
It will devour all the shrimps, then fly away.*

This song refers to Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, originally a subject of the Trịnh princes, who defected to the Tây Sơn. He advised them to lay hands on the Northern kingdom. In a crushing campaign in 1786, the Tây Sơn destroyed the shogunate of the Trịnh princes, ransacked the Treasure of Thăng Long (Hanoi nowadays), then returned to the South. They were to come again in 1788 to crush the Chinese called in for help by Chiêu Thống, the last Lê emperor.

- Nguyễn dynasty:

**182. *Lạy trời cho chóng gió nồm***  
***Cho thuyền chúa Nguyễn thẳng buồm chạy ra.***  
*Pray Heaven quickly come the Southern monsoon*  
*So that Prince Nguyễn's boats may move forward at full sail.*

During the war between the Tây Sơn and prince Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, the latter sent his fleet to the North every year during the South monsoon season.

**183. *Ngó lên trên tháp Cánh Tiên***  
***Cảm thương quan Hậu thủ thiềng ba năm.***  
*Look at the Cánh Tiên tower*  
*We think with emotion of the Field-Marshal who held the Citadel*  
*for three years.*

This song praises Võ Tánh, a follower of Prince Nguyễn Phúc Ánh (the future emperor Gia Long) who for three years held the Bình Định citadel against the Tây Sơn charge after charge. Finally, in 1801, the citadel being driven to the most atrocious starvation, Võ Tánh burned himself in a tower, after writing to the Tây Sơn general Trần Quang Diệu asking that his soldiers' lives be spared. Magnanimously, Trần Quang Diệu consented and gave his valiant opponent an impressive funeral.

**184. *Bao giờ bắt được giặc Khôi***  
***Cho yên việc nước chồng tôi được về?***  
*When will the rebel Khôi be caught*  
*So that peace may come and my husband return home?*

During the revolt of Lê Văn Khôi in Cochinchina (1833-35), the Huế Government had to call up several corps to repress it.

**185. *Nơi bến Trường Tiền có cây đa bóng mát***  
***Gần bến Bò Đề có bãi cát phẳng lì.***  
***Trời ơi, sanh giặc làm chi***  
***Để quân Trần Vũ phải ra đi cơ hàn.***  
*At the Trường Tiền wharf there is a banyan-tree that gives a cool shade*  
*And near the Bò Đề wharf there is a most smooth sand bank .*

*O Heaven, why did you create those rebels  
So that even the Trần Vũ guards are sent hungry and lightly clad to  
war?*

This song informs us that to fight Lê Văn Khôi, the Court had to send to war even the Trần Vũ guards whose only duty was to do police work in the Huế capital.

*186. Một nhà sinh được ba vua: Vua  
còn, vua mất, vua thua chạy dài. In a  
family were born three emperors:  
One alive, one dead, and one who ran away.*

The concerned family was Prince Kiền Thái's, a brother of Emperor Tự Đức. This emperor having died childless, the three sons of Prince Kiền Thái successively ascended the throne: Kiến Phúc, dead after only one year of reign (1883-84); Hàm Nghi, who ran away from the Capital after an abortive bold strike in 1885; and Đồng Khánh, who took his brother's place (1885-88).

**d/ Regional Peculiarities.**

- The North: North Vietnam consists of three very distinct areas: a Delta uniformly flat, a midland of wooded hills, and a mountainous Highland. The Delta is often ravaged by flood in the rainy season (see in Part III legend No. 2). This explains why its inhabitants are primarily concerned about building dikes strong enough to slow the rising waters.

*187. Cây cao chẳng quản gió lung  
Đê cao chẳng quản nước sông tràn vào.  
Big trees don't fear furious winds,  
High dikes aren't afraid of being submerged by flood.*

On the sea shore, alternately rocky and sandy, the fragile boats were often wrecked. One area was considered most dangerous: the Thần Phù estuary, nowadays filled in, situated in Ninh Bình province. It was supposed to have a supernatural power:

**188. Lênh đênh qua cửa Thần Phù**

***Khéo tu thì nổi, vụng tu thì chìm.***

*Of those who happen to toss on the waves of Thần Phù estuary,*

*Only the virtuous survive, whereas the wicked are drowned.*

The Midland, less populated than the Delta because of its insufficient transportation network, casts a bewitching spell on its visitors by its romantic scenery of wooded hills and singing brooks, and also by the open manners of its young girls.

**189. Ở này hò ơ**

***Sông Thao nước đỏ người đen***

***Ai lên Phố Hiến thì quên đường về.***

*Hello ! Let's sing a sailor's song:*

*By the Thao river, the water is red and women have dark complexion.*

*But anyone who comes to Phố Hiến forgets his way back.*

Why this loss of memory? Simply because Phố Hiến's women are lovely despite their tanned skin.

**190. Sông Thương nước chảy đôi dòng**

***Đèn khêu đôi ngọn, anh trông ngọn nào?***

***Muốn tắm mát anh lên ngọn sông Đào,***

***Muốn ăn sim chín thì vào rừng xanh.***

*From the Thương river diverge two streams:*

*Of two lamps equally lighted, which one do you choose?*

*If you want a cool bath, go to the Red river;*

*If it's ripe figs you want to taste, go into the green forest.*

Falling in love with two girls at the same time, a boy has difficulty deciding. The scenery of sông Thương, whose water is clear along one bank and muddy along the other, gives him an opportunity to express his perplexity: the two streams, the two lamps probably lighted in two fishing boats, and the twofold desire of taking a cool bath in the river and eating ripe figs in the forest on the banks of the river.

**191. Mông bốn tháng ba**

*Trở về hội Láng, trở ra hội Thầy.*

*Hội chùa Thầy có hang các cố*

*Trai chưa vợ nhớ hội chùa Thầy.*

*On the fourth day of the third month*

*There are festivals in Láng village and the Master's pagoda.*

*Festivals in the Master's pagoda take place in a wayward grotto*

*And bachelors never miss going there.*

The Master was the monk Từ Đạo Hạnh who, under the Lý dynasty, lived and died in the Sài Sơn grotto which became, after his death, a famous place of pilgrimage because of the many miracles that took place there. The grotto, open on two sides of a mountain, is continually ventilated, and young boys and girls enjoy visiting it, for a rest or a joke in its many recesses.

The Highland, on the Sino-Vietnamese frontier, is well-known for its unhealthy climate. It does have its charms, though, with its impenetrable forests and its high mountains always immersed in mist. Here and there, on the river's banks, are scattered some villages busied with trade. On the North-East frontier, there is the important city of Lạng Sơn.

*192. Đông Đăng có phố Kỳ Lừa*

*Có nàng Tô Thị, có chùa Tam Thanh*

*Ai lên xứ Lạng cùng anh*

*Bõ công bác mẹ sinh thành ra em.*

*Tay cầm bầu rượu nắm nem,*

*Mãi vui quên hết lời em dặn dò.*

*In Đông Đăng are to be seen Kỳ Lừa Street,*

*Tô Thị mountain and Tam Thanh pagoda.*

*Your life would be barren of feelings if you failed to journey there.*

*As you are holding in your hands a bottle of alcohol and a piece of hash,*

*You could perfectly forget all your wife's recommendations.*

There is a rock silhouetting a woman (Tô Thị) turned into stone after a long wait for her husband's return, in Lạng Sơn as well as in Central VietNam (see this legend in Part 3).

On the North-West frontier, Lào Cai city squats on the Red River banks, in a valley surrounded by mountains.

**193. Ai mang tôi đến xứ này,  
Bên kia Cốc Lếu, bên này Lào Cai.**

*Who brought me to this place,  
Where I see Lào Cai on one side and Cốc Lếu on the other?*

Cốc Lếu is a Chinese urban center facing Lào Cai. Our singer complains of being exiled in this remote and barbarian region; it is not devoid of charm, though. The area is famous for its pork soup, the cháo lòng, made of rice stewed in pork bowels:

**194. Đi thời nhớ vợ cùng con,  
Về thời nhớ bát cháo ngon bên đường.**

*In going there, I missed my wife and children;  
Now back home, I remember the delicious soup sold in the wayside inns.*

- The Central Region:

Except for its northern plain made up of the Mã river's delta, Central Vietnam is a poor region squeezed between the sea and the Long Range of mountains and divided into separate parts by some counterforts. Here are some songs describing its uneven landscape:

**195. Khôn ngoan qua cửa sông La  
Đẽ ai cất cánh bay qua lũy Thầy?**

*Very clever are those who succeed in crossing the La River's estuary,  
Who can spread out his wings to fly over the Master's fortress.*

The Master concerned was Đào Duy Từ who, at the start of the 17th century, helped Prince Nguyễn Phúc Nguyên to build the two Trường Dục and Đồng Hới fortresses in Quảng Bình province, to resist the Trịnh princes. The Đồng Hới fortress has been given the Master's name in honour of Đào Duy Từ.

**196. Chiều chiều mây phủ Hải Vân  
Chim kêu gành đá, gấm thân lại buồn.**  
*Every evening, clouds cap the Hải Vân pass*

*And birds cry in the hollows of rocks, casting a gloom over the  
traveller's mind.*

The Hải Vân pass (sea and clouds) is located between Huế and Đà Nẵng. More awe-inspiring is the Cù Mông pass stretched between Qui Nhơn and Sông Cầu:

**197. *Tiếng ai than khóc nữ non  
Là vợ chú lính trèo hòn Cù Mông.***

*Whose is this sad complaint?  
It's of a soldier's wife who is climbing the Cù Mông pass.*

**198. *Ở nhà thì sợ cái nghèo  
Ra đi thì sợ cái đèo Cù Mông.***

*By remaining at home, one is doomed to poverty,  
But in trading one has to cross the Cù Mông pass.*

The mountainous landscape naturally influences its inhabitants' frame of mind. Central Vietnam has been known as the cradle of revolutions. In fact, most of the best Vietnamese warriors, the founders of dynasties, came from this unproductive yet heroic region. Even its women are to be reckoned with:

**199. *Ai vô Bình Định mà coi Đàn  
bà cũng biết cầm roi đi quờn.***

*Come and see Bình Định's women  
Who know boxing and fencing with sticks.*

Fortunately, Central Vietnam does not offer only this warlike image. Who does not know the languid charm of Huế, the imperial city, listlessly lying on the banks of the Perfume River? Here are some songs describing its irresistible charm:

**200. *Gió đưa cành trúc la đà  
Tiếng chuông Thiên Mụ, canh gà Thọ Xương.***

*The murmuring wind that causes the bamboo branches to sway gently  
Blends with the clang of the Thiên Mụ pagoda's bells and the cock-crow  
of the Thọ Xương's village.*

**201. *Đông Ba, Gia Hội hai cầu,***

***Có chùa Diệu Đế, bốn lầu hai chuông .***  
*Đông Ba and Gia Hội bridges cross over the river,*  
*On whose bank Diệu Đế pagoda stands with its four storeys*  
*and two bells.*

If the imperial city is famous for its entrancing scenery, it is also most famous for its women's bewitching beauty. Huế's young ladies are very romantic and ever willing to entrust their hearts to whoever knows how to capture them:

***202. Núi Ngự Bình trước tròn sau méo***  
***Sông An Cựu nắng đục mưa trong. Em***  
***đây vốn thiệt chưa chồng***  
***Núi cao sông rộng biết gửi lòng cùng ai?***  
*The Imperial Screen is round in front but not so at the back*  
*An Cựu's water looks muddy when it's sunny and clear when it rains.*  
*Single I am truly,*  
*Between that lofty mountain and this large river,*  
*To whom shall I entrust my heart?*

Of course, lovers do not run scarce. This traveler, for instance, captivated by Huế's lovely ladies, has difficulty choosing one for himself:

***203. Chiều chiều ra chợ Đông Ba Ngó***  
***về hàng bột, trông ra hàng đường. Nhìn***  
***mai, ngắm liễu, xem hường,***  
***Cô nào đẹp nhất xin nhường cho tôi.***  
*Evening after evening, I go to Đông Ba market*  
*And successively look at the flour and sugar shops*  
*I gaze at the willow, the apricot and the rose trees.*  
*Be mine the most beautiful lady.*

or the scholars from other provinces who come to Huế to take examination. Dazzled by the aristocratic charm of the young ladies in the imperial city, they forget their wives who stay behind in their remote provinces:

***204. Học trò trong Quảng ra thi***  
***Thấy cô gái Huế chân đi không đành.***

*Quảng's students coming for an examination*

*After seeing the girls of Huế have no more courage to leave.*  
(the candidates from Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị, Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi provinces had to go to Huế to take their examination).

- The South:

Colonized by the Vietnamese only three centuries ago, the South still keeps in many areas the rough features of new lands. Here is the famous Đồng Tháp Mười (the plain having a ten-storey tower):

**205. Trời xanh, kinh đỏ, đất xanh,  
Đũa bu, muỗi cắn làm anh nhớ nàng.**  
*The blue sky, the red canal, and the green land,  
The gripping leeches and the pricking mosquitoes incite me  
to think of you.*

Here is a courageous but strange lover. He keeps thinking of his beloved while leeches are biting him and mosquitoes are pricking all over his body, unless he can see some morbid similarity between the ferocious beasts and his lover.

The Rừng U Minh (dark forest) on the Western coast is also awe-inspiring:

**206. Chèo ghe sợ sấu cắn chân,  
Xuống bưng sợ đĩa, lên rừng sợ ma.**  
*On canals, we are afraid of crocodiles,  
Of leeches in the shrubs, and of ghosts in the forests.*

Not far from the coast, the Poulo Condore penitentiary island serves as grave for exiled patriots:

**207. Ngó ra Phú Quốc, ngó lại Côn Nôn,  
Gió rào rào, sóng bửa hết hồn  
Bền gan sắt đá trừ phồn tà gian.**  
*Either on Phú Quốc or on Poulo Condore isle,  
Winds blow furiously, creating havoc in the sea.  
But hearts therein, as firm as iron and stone are swearing to get rid of  
tyrants and traitors.*

Fortunately, except for those few areas that stayed wild, the settlers has been able to work the land and change the place into a paradise. Here is Cần Thơ, the prosperous capital of the West:

**208. Xứ Cần Thơ nam thanh nữ tú  
Xứ Rạch Giá vợn hú chim kêu.**

*While in Cần Thơ there are handsome young men and pretty young girls  
In Rạch Giá one only hears gibbons's and birds' cries.*

Tân Châu and Cao Lãnh, two river-ports on the fore-Mekong, also enjoy great prosperity:

**209. Gà nào hay cho bằng gà Cao Lãnh,  
Gái nào bảnh cho bằng gái Tân Châu?  
Anh thương em chẳng ngại sang giàu,  
Mứt hồng đôi lạng, trà tàu đôi cân.**

*Where could be found more splendid cocks than those of Cao Lãnh?  
And prettier girls than those of Tân Châu?  
There love is, regardless of riches or poverty.  
Two ounces of persimmon jam and two pounds of tea are enough  
to arrange for a marriage.*

But the most opulent city is undeniably Saigon, the pearl of the Far East:

**210. Chợ Saigon đèn xanh đèn đỏ  
Anh coi không rõ anh ngỡ đèn tàu.**

*Saigon market is so bright with numerous blue and red lights  
That I mistook for navigation signals.*

**211. Đường Saigòn cây cao bóng mát  
Đường Chợ Lớn hột cát nhỏ để đi.**

*Saigon avenues are shaded with big cool trees,  
And Cholon's streets are smooth on the walkers' feet with their fine sand*

Those splendours, which amuse us today, obviously dated from the French occupation.

The South, a gigantic rice warehouse, had at all times attracted the poor people from the North and the Center. It is comforting to know that our Southern compatriots' hospitality has always come up to our expectations, as mentioned in the following song:

**212. Nhà Bè nước chảy chia hai  
Ai về Gia Định Đồng Nai thì về.**

*At Nhà Bè the waters run in two directions*

*Welcome to those who go to Gia Định as well as to those  
who go to Đồng Nai.*

Visitors of Cochinchina 30 or 40 years ago knew how comfortable life there was, and how easily immigrants from the North or Center could make their fortune. All the same, the memories of their native country were so haunting that, while rolling in wealth, they could not help being homesick, especially if their families were left behind in their village:

**213. Đèn nào cao bằng đèn Châu Đốc Ngọn  
gió nào độc bằng ngọn gió Gò Công? Thổi  
ngọn đông phong lạc vợ xa chồng,  
Đêm nằm nghĩ lại, nước mắt hồng tuôn rơi.**

*What light could be higher than the Châu Đốc lighthouse?  
What wind could be more murderous than the gusts of Gò Công?  
The East wind has blown to separate the husband from his wife  
And at night, thinking of her, he sheds tears tainted with blood.*

**4. Work.** Since the ancient society was divided into four classes, the scholars, the farmers, the craftsmen and the tradespeople (sĩ, nông, công, thương), let's examine how each class perceived work.

a/ Among the Scholars. Literature was not the exclusive privilege of aristocrats. On the contrary, any farmer, craftsman, or tradesman with a little income, could find for his children access to the highest social rank. So, we find in most lullabies the advice to study:

**214. Con ơi muốn nên thân người  
Lắng tai nghe lấy những lời mẹ cha.  
Gái thì giữ việc trong nhà  
Khi vào canh củi, khi ra thêu thùa.  
Trai thì đọc sách ngâm thơ  
Dùi mài kinh sử để chờ kịp khoa.  
Nửa mai nói được nghiệp nhà  
Trước là đẹp mặt sau là hiển thân.**

*My children, to become worthy people,  
Listen carefully to your parents. Girls  
have to do the housework  
Weaving and sewing, morning and evening.  
Boys must devote themselves to study;  
Study thoroughly the books and prepare for examination  
So that they may maintain the family's wealth,  
Acquire public esteem and do honour to their parents.*

In the village festivals, especially on the New Year's day, the most cordial compliments were offered to the scholars:

**215. Mừng nay nho sĩ có tài**  
**Bút nghiên dống dả giùi mài nghiệp nho.**  
**Rõ ràng nên đứng học trò**  
**Công danh hai chữ trời cho dần dần.**  
**Tình cờ chiếm được bảng Xuân**  
**Ấy là phú quý đầy sân quế hòe.**  
**Một mai chân bước Cống Nghè**  
**Vinh quy bái tổ, ngựa xe đưa mình.**  
**Bốn phương nức tiếng vang lừng Ngao**  
**du bể Thánh, vẫy vùng rừng Nho. Quyền**  
**cao chức trọng trời cho**  
**Bõ công học tập bốn mùa chúc mình,**  
**Vui đâu bằng hội đề danh**  
**Nghề đâu bằng nghiệp học hành là hơn.**  
*Be praised, talented scholars  
Who work unceasingly with brushpens and inkstands.  
Now they are only students  
But some day Heaven will give them fame and a high rank.  
When their names will be on the list of laureates,  
Honours and riches will fill up their gardens planted with cinnamon  
and yellow-flowered trees  
Once they have acquired the degree of Master or Doctorate of Arts,  
They will return home pompously with carriages and horses.  
To the four winds their names will sound  
On the sea of knowledge and in the forest of letters.  
The great authority and high functions given by Heaven will compensate*

*the efforts they exert throughout the year.  
Peerless is the joy of becoming a laureate,  
Unequaled indeed is the scholar's status.*

**b/** Among the Farmers. If literature had a good name, agriculture was the principal occupation of the Vietnamese people. Thus, in village festivals, it never failed to be praised with the most flattering compliments:

*216. Nay mừng những kẻ nông phu  
Cầu cho hòa cốc phong thu bình thời  
Vốn xưa nông ở bậc hai  
Thuận hoà mưa gió nông thời lên trên.  
Quý hồ nhiều lúa là tiên  
Rõ ràng phú túc bình yên cả nhà.  
Bốn mùa Xuân, Hạ, Thu qua Muốn cho  
tiền lúa đầy nhà hán sương. Bước sang  
Hạ giá Thu tàng  
Thu thu tiến hoạch giàu ngang Thạch Sùng.  
Quý nhân cùng kẻ anh hùng Rắp  
toan muốn hỏi nhà nông ê dề.  
Thật thà chân chỉ thú quê  
Chuyên nghề nông nghiệp là nghề vinh quang.  
Gặp thời là được thọ Khang  
Tam đa ngũ phúc rõ ràng trời cho.  
Be praised the farmers  
Let's wish that your harvests be plentiful.  
You are the second social class*

*But if the weather is propitious, thanks to your riches, you will rise up to  
the first class.*

*He who possesses plenty of rice is happy as an immortal  
Because rice gives good life and security for one's family.  
In the four season of the year  
Be your granaries always filled with paddy and money.  
Whether in Summer or in Autumn,  
Never will you cease to grow richer as much as Thạch Sùng.  
Noble men and heroes,*

*Are proud to make your acquaintance.  
True and sound are the pleasures of the peasant's life.  
And reputable is the farmer's occupation.  
To you, longevity and good health,  
The three abundances and the five good lucks are given by Heaven.*

In reality, agricultural work is very hard:

**217. Cây đồng đương buổi đang trưa  
Mồ hôi thánh thót như mưa ruộng cấy.**  
*While we till the fields at midday  
Sweat runs down our bodies as if it were raining.*

but it is not without any pleasure:

**218. Rủ nhau đi cấy đi cấy  
Bây giờ khó nhọc có ngày phong lưu.  
Trên đồng cạn, dưới đồng sâu,  
Chồng cấy vợ cấy, con trâu đi bừa.**  
*Let's go ploughing and transplanting;  
The hard work now will bring us riches some day.  
Everywhere, in dry or flooded ricefields,  
The husband is tilling, the wife is transplanting,  
while the buffalo is ploughing.*

and is full of hope:

**218. Người ta đi cấy lấy công,  
Tôi nay đi cấy còn trông nhiều bề.  
Trông trời trông đất trông mây  
Trông mưa trông gió trông ngày trông đêm  
Trông cho chân cứng đá mềm Trời êm  
bể lặng mới yên tấm lòng.**  
*Others do transplanting to get some wages  
But I do it consciously, taking into account many conjectures.  
I look at the sky, the earth and the clouds,  
Day and night, to foresee rains and winds.  
May my feet grow tough and the stones soft,  
The sky and the sea be still to set my mind at ease.*

**220. Bao giờ cho đến tháng năm  
Thối nôi cơm nếp vừa nằm vừa ăn  
Bao giờ cho đến tháng mười  
Thối nôi cơm nếp vừa cười vừa ăn.  
Bao giờ đồng ruộng thành thoi  
Năm trâu thổi sáo vui đời Thuần Nghiêu.**

*When comes the fifth month,  
We will cook the sticky rice that we will eat,  
nonchalantly lying on the bed  
When comes the tenth month,  
We will cook sticky rice that we will eat while laughing.  
When labour in the fields is done,  
Then lying on the buffalo, we will play the flute,  
to enjoy happy moments as in the times of Emperors Thuần and Nghiêu.*

**221. Ôn trời mưa nắng phải thì  
Nơi thì bừa cạn nơi thì cấy sâu.  
Công lành chẳng quản lâu lâu  
Ngày nay nước bạc, ngày sau cơm vàng.  
Xin ai đừng bỏ ruộng hoang  
Bao nhiêu tấc đất, tấc vàng bấy nhiêu.**

*Thanks to Heaven, rainy and sunny days take their turns regularly,  
Here we break up dry fields, there we till flooded ones.  
What are pains to us?  
The silver expanse of water will give us gold rice later.  
Let anybody have any field lain fallow.  
As many square inches of land you have,  
so as many ounces of gold you will get.*

To those who are tempted to pursue the glory of literature, this practical advice is often given:

**222. Công danh đeo đuổi mà chi  
Sao bằng chăm chỉ giữ nghề canh nông?  
What's the good of going after honours?  
You would do better to go on as a farmer.**

The works of agriculture are seasonal as relates this song:

*223. Tháng chạp là tháng trồng khoai  
Tháng giêng trồng đậu, tháng hai trồng cà  
Tháng ba cấy vãi ruộng ra  
Tháng tư làm mạ, mưa sa đầy đồng.  
Ai ai cũng vợ cũng chồng  
Chồng cấy vợ cấy trong lòng vui thay.  
Tháng năm gặt hái đã xong  
Nhờ trời một mẫu năm nong thóc đầy.  
Năm nong đầy em xay, em giã,  
Trấu ủ phân, cám bã nuôi heo.  
Sang năm lúa tốt tiền nhiều  
Em đem đóng thuế đóng sưu cho chồng.  
Đói no có thiếp có chàng  
Còn hơn chung đỉnh giàu sang một mình.*

*In the twelfth month we plant potatoes,  
Beans in the first month, and aubergines in the second.*

*In the third month we till the land*

*And we transplant the young rice-plants in the fourth, while the rain is  
flooding everywhere.*

*In all families, husbands and wives work together  
To till and transplant joyfully.*

*In the fifth month, the harvest is done,*

*Thanks to Heaven, every acre gives five winnowing-baskets full of paddy  
To be ground and husked.*

*I pile up husk to make manure, and with bran I feed the pigs.*

*Next year, I expect to have a good harvest and much money*

*That I will use to pay my husband's taxes.*

*With him, whether I have or have not something to eat,*

*I'll always be happier than to be wealthy alone.*

c/ Among the Craftsmen. In ancient Vietnam, there were few specialized craftsmen: carpenters, blacksmiths, potters, masons, etc... Those professions were most often practised by the farmers themselves during the inactive months when no farming work was needed. Therefore, there were not many songs on those lesser professions, except for silkworm breeding because of its poetic aspect. It is a luxury business that only

some privileged areas of North VietNam, mainly the Middle region, could afford. There, along the Đuống, Cầu, Nhuệ, Thương rivers, spread out verdant banks planted with mulberry trees whose leaves serve as food for silkworms.

The young girls who devote themselves to this lucrative profession are generally well-to-do, sometimes wealthy, and need not face sun, rain and mud as do the other peasant girls. Often they are pretty. Let's watch them sing like finches on their way to work:

**224. Em đi hái dâu**  
**Lá dâu xanh xanh**  
**Nuôi tằm dệt áo dăng anh chờ ngày**  
**Trúc mai có đó có đây**  
**Có tay nguyệt lão buộc giây tơ hồng.**  
*I am going to gather mulberry leaves*  
*All resplendently green*  
*To breed silkworms, wease silk, and offer you a robe*  
*when comes our wedding day.*  
*You and I, we are like the bamboo and apricot trees*  
*Bound by the red threads of the Old Moon Man.*

Even though the silkworms are not yet hatched, our Perrette is already thinking of her bridegroom's robe. She may run the risk of cruel disappointment, because silkworm breeding is a tricky occupation and depends largely on the weather.

**225. Lạy trời đừng chuyển gió Tây**  
**Lửa tằm em đã đến ngày nhả tơ. Pray**  
**Heaven not to blow the Western wind**  
*That could damage my brood of silkworms, which is soon to give cocoon*

Moreover, will her fancy man remain always faithful? Could he not take his love elsewhere? Anxiously she asks herself those questions while breeding the silkworms:

**226. Một nông tằm là năm nông kén**  
**Một nông kén là chín nén tơ**  
**Công em trăm đời nghìn chờ**

***Mà anh dứt chỉ guồng tơ cho đành?***

*A fan of silkworms gives five fans of cocoons,  
And a fan of cocoons gives nine pounds of silk.*

*What trouble this work has cost me.*

*Would you be heartless as to tear away this silk from my spinning  
wheel?*

Let's hope that this misfortune will not come to pass. Our pretty working woman will have the joy of wearing silk by her scholar husband during the moonlight nights:

***227. Sáng trăng giải chiếu hai hàng***

***Bên anh đọc sách, bên nàng quay tơ.***

*In the moonlight, two mats are spread facing each other,  
On the one, he reads his books; on the other, she spins her silk.*

d/ Among the Tradesmen. They were the lowest social class, the least respected because their profits were considered illicit, resulting more from cleverness than from work. In reality, the small trades, practised from village to village, were entirely in the hands of women. The only ones to be considered real tradesmen were the big speculators who bought goods at a low price in one province to sell them at a higher price in others. Of course, the big tradesmen were quite satisfied with their work:

***228. Đạo nào bằng đạo đi buôn***

***Xuống biển lên nguồn, gạo chợ nước sông.***

*No other occupation is better than that of trade  
Which allows us to venture from the sea to the forest,  
to eat rice in every market and to drink water at every river.*

But in general, people attribute little value to this profession:

***229. Bìm bịp kêu nước lớn anh ơi***

***Buôn bán không lời, chèo chống mỗi mê.***

*O my friend, the birds are telling us that the tide is rising  
Alas ! Trade brings in nothing, and we get tired of rowing uselessly.*

## CHAPTER VII

### INSTRUCTIONAL SONGS

While psychological, sociological and other such observations are usually given in proverb form, the song also serves the purpose.

**1. Psychological Observations.** Peasants are basically more candid than the soft-spoken town dwellers. They are not simple-minded, though, and can be on their guard against an undue faith in their fellow-men:

*230. Thức đêm mới biết đêm dài  
Sống lâu mới biết lòng người bạc đên.  
It's by keeping awake that one knows how long the night is  
It's by living a long time with a friend that one knows  
whether he is loyal or not.*

*231. Sông sâu còn có kẻ dò Lòng  
người ai dễ mà đo cho cùng?  
We can probe the bottom of a deep river  
But a man's mind, who can measure its complexities?*

*232. Đố ai lặn xuống vực sâu  
Mà đo miệng cá uốn câu cho vừa?  
Dò sông dò biển dễ dò  
Nào ai bẻ thước mà đo lòng người?  
Who can dive into a deep abyss  
To measure the fish's mouth and bend the hook to fit it?  
To explore the bottoms of rivers and seas is quite feasible  
But to explore the minds of people is far more difficult.*

Our peasants are also aware that when a person is impassioned, it is useless to ask him for impartiality:

**233. Yêu nhau yêu cả đường đi  
Ghét nhau ghét cả tông chi họ hàng.**

*When someone is loved, so is even the very road he passes by,  
When someone is hated, so are even his distant relatives.*

**234. Thương nhau cau sáu bở ba  
Ghét nhau cau sáu bở ra làm mười.**

*When someone is loved, he is offered a third of an arec-nut that could be  
cut into six portions,  
But if he is hated, he is offered a tenth of the same areca-nut.*

Nor for perspicacity:

**235. Lỗ mũi em thì tám gánh lông  
Chồng yêu chồng bảo tơ hồng trời cho  
Đêm nằm thì ngáy pho pho  
Chồng yêu chồng bảo ngáy cho vui nhà  
Đi chợ thì hay ăn quà  
Chồng yêu chồng bảo về nhà đỡ cơm.**

*Her nostrils are full of hair enough to fill eight baskets,  
But her husband who loves her says that it's gossamer.*

*At night she snores noisily  
But her husband who loves her says that it enlivens the house.  
Going to the market, she gorges on delicacies,  
But her husband who loves her says that she does  
so to save rice at home.*

Our peasants also know that people tend to see others' shortcomings but to be blind to their own:

**236. Chân mình còn lấm mê mê  
Lại đem bó đuốc mà rê chân người.**

*His own feet are caked with mud.  
Yet, he goes to inspect the others' feet with a torch.*

a/ About Family Relations. While maternal and paternal affection is freely given, it is sad to observe that all too often the children

impatiently keep count of the attentions they are obliged to give their parents when they are old:

**237. Mẹ nuôi con biển hồ lai láng  
Con nuôi mẹ tính tháng tính ngày.**

*The cares a mother gives her children are as immense as lakes and seas,  
But those her children give her are counted up from day to day.*

Only when their parents happen to die, do the children realize belatedly how much they lose with their disappearance, especially when their father was the bread-winner:

**238. Có cha có mẹ thì hơn  
Không cha không mẹ như đàn đứt giây.**

*Happy is the child whose parents are alive  
Because an orphan is like a guitar with broken strings.*

**239. Còn cha gót đỏ như son  
Đến khi cha chết gót son đen sì.  
Còn cha nhiều kẻ yêu vì  
Một khi cha thác ai thì yêu con.**

*As long his father is alive, the child has heels as rosy as cinnabar  
As soon as his father dies, the child's heels darken.  
As long as his father is alive, everybody cheers the child,  
As soon as his father dies, nobody looks after the child.*

When a widowed father re-marries, conflicts almost always arise between children from the first marriage and their stepmother:

**240. Mẹ gà con vịt chặt chiu  
Mấy đời mẹ ghẻ nâng niu con chồng.  
Mấy đời bánh đúc có xương  
Mấy đời dì ghẻ mà thương con chồng.**

*A mother hen may carefully brood ducklings,  
But one never sees a stepmother cherish her step-children.  
Never does a rice cake have fish bones,  
Never does a stepmother love her husband's children.*

**241. Gió đưa bụi trúc ngã quì  
Thương cha phải chịu lụy dì, dì ơi !**

*As the bamboo- bush must bend before the wind,  
So must I stoop before you, o stepmother, because of my father !*

Relations between a mother and her daughter-in-law are not better. It is probably due to the old custom that required the groom's family to give a lot of money to the bride's family. Often the mother treated her daughter-in-law badly to try getting back the financial sacrifice she had to make before. Let's listen to this young woman gently complaining to her husband:

**242. Trách cha trách mẹ nhà chàng  
Cầm cân chẳng biết là vàng hay thau.  
Thật vàng chẳng phải thau đâu,  
Đừng đem thử lửa mà đau lòng vàng.  
I am vexed at your father and your mother  
Who, scales in hand, are unable to tell gold from copper,  
Gold I am really, and not copper,  
Let them not use the test of fire that could hurt the golden heart.**

At her mother-in-law's death, a woman ventured to say coarse words to vent the hatred which she had harboured since her marriage:

**243. Chồng thương chẳng nệ chi ai  
Đũa bép cho dài, gắp cổ mẹ già,  
Thương chồng phải khóc mẹ già,  
Gẫm tôi với mẹ có bà con chi?  
Confident of my husband's love, I don't care for anybody  
And I would take two long sticks to seize my mother-in-law by the neck  
and throw her out.  
For my husband's sake, I must mourn my mother-in-law  
But really, what kinship is there between she and I?**

b/ About Social Relations. Of course, everyone strives to get a good reputation within the society. If only public opinion were right. But often, it is far from being so:

**244. Ở sao cho vừa lòng người  
Ở rộng người cười, ở hẹp người chê  
Cao chê ngông, thấp chê lùn  
Béo chê: béo trực béo tròn**

**Gầy chề: Xương sống xương sườn phơi ra.**

*It avails nothing to try to please everyone  
For you'll always be mocked at, whether you are lavish or miserly.  
Are you tall? They would take you for a post.  
If you are short, they would say: Here's a dwarf.  
Are you big? They would say: But it's a barrel.  
Are you thin? You are showing, my poor friend, all your ribs.*

On the other hand, public opinion is fickle. He who is praised today may tomorrow be the target of universal reprobation. It is wise not to attach any importance to it:

**245. Mai mưa, trưa nắng, chiều nồm,  
Trời còn luân chuyển hướng mồm thế gian.**

*It is rainy in the morning, sunny at midday and windy in the evening.  
Since even Nature is changeable, all the more so is the world's opinion.*

Jealousy often distorts public opinion:

**246. Trâu cật thì ghét trâu ăn,  
Quan võ thì ghét quan văn dài quần.**

*As the yoked buffalo hates the free-grazing one,  
So does the military mandarin hate the long-robed civil servant.*

The kind of society described above is not particularly encouraging. It is first of all a race after honours and riches:

**247. Cái vòng danh lợi cong cong  
Kẻ hòng ra khỏi, người mong bước vào.  
Sự đời nghĩ cũng nực cười  
Một con cá lội, mấy người buông câu.**

*Honours and riches form a circle  
From which some people run away, and towards which others run.  
How funny life is.  
For a wading fish, how many people throw their lines.*

Another picture shows the lowly people bowing to the mighty ones, their cowardice yielding to brute force:

**248. Mèo tha miếng thịt thì vồ  
Kẻ tha mất lợn mất coi chừng chừng.**

*If a cat steals a piece of meat, it's at once pursued,  
But when a tiger grabs a pig, everybody stares at it motionlessly.*

But most disturbing is the contemptible attitude of society before the power of money:

**249. Trong lưng chẳng có một đồng  
Lời nói như rồng chúng chẳng thèm nghe.  
Vai mang túi bạc kè kè  
Nói bậy nói bạ chúng nghe râm râm.**

*If you are penniless*

*Nobody listens to you, though your speech be as lofty as a dragon's  
But if you are carrying a bag full of money on your shoulders,  
Even if you say foolish words, you will be profusely applauded.*

**250. Có tiền chán vạn người hầu  
Có bác có dầu chán vạn người khêu.**

*Innumerable people will wait on you if you are wealthy,  
And a lamp full of oil will never lack for people to kindle its wick.*

**251. Cha đòi cái áo rách này  
Mất chúng mất bạn vì may áo ời.**

*Damn you, o my torn robe,*

*Do you know I am losing all my friends because of you.*

**252. Giàu sang nhiều kẻ tới nhà Khó  
khăn nên nổi ruột già xa nhau.**

*Many call on you when you are rich*

*But if you are poor, even your close relatives will avoid you.*

Cupid himself will not be welcomed if he does not have a well-lined purse:

**253. Tôi yêu anh vạn, tôi mến anh nghìn  
Anh muốn ăn thuốc, đưa tiền tôi mua.**

*I love you, a thousand and ten thousand times,*

*But if you want tobacco, please give me money to buy it.*

**254. Còn tiền còn bạc, còn vợ còn chồng**

***Hết tiền hết bạc, tơ hồng hết se.***

*As long as there is money, they are husband and wife,  
When money runs out, the red threads are undone.*

(the threads of Old Moon Man that bind two people in marriage)

Such is life, before, now and always. Your company is sought after if you can be of some use. When you serve no purpose, friends turn their back on you.

**255. *Khi vui thì vỗ tay vào***

***Đến khi tẻ ngắt thì nào thấy ai?***

*When you are happy, there is always a crowd to applaud you,  
If you are in distress, nobody is around to comfort you.*

**256. *Khó khăn thì chẳng ai nhìn***

***Đến khi đỗ trạng chín nghìn anh em.***

*When you are poor, nobody consorts with you,  
If you happen to be a doctorate laureate,  
suddenly you will have nine thousand friends.*

**2. Sociological Observations.** Folk songs provide a wealth of information on the ancient way of living, customs and general mentality of the common people. Here is an idyllic picture of the fair past:

**257. *Làng ta phong cảnh hữu tình***

***Dân cư giang khúc như hình con long.***

***Nhờ trời hạ kế sang đông,***

***Làm nghề cấy cấy vun trồng tốt tươi.***

***Vụ năm cho đến vụ mười,***

***Trong làng kẻ gái người trai đua nghề.***

***Trời ra, gắng; trời lặn, về;***

***Ngày ngày, tháng tháng, nghiệp nghề truân chuyên.***

***Dưới dân họ, trên quan viên,***

***Công bình giữ mực cầm quyền cho thay.***

*How charming is the landscape of our village Watered by  
a river that surrounds it as in a dragon's coil. Thanks to  
Heaven, summer happily follows winter, Promoting  
farming works that do marvelously well.*

*At the fifth month harvest as at the tenth month harvest,*

*Girls and boys vie with one another in their work.  
They go to the fields at sunrise and return home at sunset,  
Day after day, month after month, without breaking off from work  
In the lower social classes as in the higher ones,  
Everybody abides by the law and enjoys a good administration.*

Nowadays, the benefits of civilization are widely praised: cars, airplanes, electricity, telephone, television, and so on. Are we happier for that? There is no definite conclusion as we compare today's fast-paced living with the life of old, not as comfortable yet so merry with its numerous festivals:

**258. Tháng giêng ăn Tết ở nhà  
Tháng hai cờ bạc, tháng ba hội hè.  
Tháng tư đông đậu nấu chè,  
Ăn tết Đoan Ngọ trở về tháng năm.  
Tháng sáu buôn nhãn bán trăm,  
Tháng bảy ngày rằm xá tội vong nhân.  
Tháng tám chơi đèn kéo quân,  
Giở về tháng chín chung chân buôn hồng.  
Tháng mười buôn thóc buôn bông,  
Tháng một tháng chạp nên công hoàn thành.**

*In the first month I enjoy the New Year celebration at home,  
Gambling in the second month, and festivities in the third.  
When the fourth month comes I buy beans and prepare bean-soup  
To be ready for the festival of the fifth month.  
In the sixth month I trade in lychee nuts  
And do not fail to celebrate All Soul's Day in the seventh month  
In the eighth month I enjoy the show of moving picture-lanterns  
Before setting off to trade in persimmon in the ninth month.  
In the tenth month I sell paddy and cotton,  
And that's that. In the eleventh and twelfth months  
I am busy only with counting up my earnings for the year.*

In those good old days, everything was a good excuse for feasting: New Year, Mid-Autumn, good harvest, anniversaries of the village's patron deity and of historic or legendary heroes...

**259. Làng ta mở hội vui mừng**

*Chuông kêu trống dóng vang lừng đôi bên.*

*Long ngai thánh ngự ở trên*

*Tả văn hữu vũ bốn bên rồng châu.*

*Sinh ra nam tử công hầu*

*Sinh ra con gái vào hầu thánh quân.*

*There is a great festival in our village.*

*The tolling of bells and the beating of drums are resounding everywhere.*

*On his throne, the Patron Deity is sitting*

*With civil mandarins on the left, military mandarins on the right, and all  
around the dragons.*

*I wish our villagers would give birth to future dukes and marquises.*

*And to daughters suitable to wait on the august Emperor.*

At every festival, there were songs, music, plays. The passion for singing is in the blood of all our peasants, especially among the women, as is shown in the following song:

*260. Trống quân em lập nên dây*

*Áo giải làm chiếu, khăn quây làm mùng.*

*Mua vui dưới ánh trăng trong,*

*Có con cũng hát, có chồng cũng chơi.*

*Con thì em mượn vú nuôi, Chồng*

*thì em để hát nơi xóm nhà.*

*Here I set up a singing contest*

*With a dress used for a mat and a towel for a screen.*

*Let's have a good time, my sisters, under the moonlight,*

*Even those who are married and already mothers.*

*My children, I place them under the care of a baby-sitter;*

*As my husband, I let him sing with other women in our hamlet.*

So far, only the idyllic aspects of the ancient mode of living have been depicted. All is not rosy, though. Here is the dark side of the picture. First, the bad weather destroyed the crops and forewarned famine:

*261. Bây giờ gặp phải hội này*

*Khi thời hạn hán, khi hay mưa dầm*

*Khi thời gió bão ầm ầm*

*Đồng điền lúa thóc mười phần được ba.*

*Lấy gì đặng nợ nữa mà  
Lấy gì công việc nước nhà cho đang.  
Lấy gì sưu thuế phép thường, Lấy  
gì bổ chợ đông lương làm ăn?*

*This year we have been stricken by bad luck:  
After a severe drought came torrential rains  
And a dreadful typhoon*

*Which cut down our crops to three-tenths of their normal output.  
How will we pay back our debts, Share  
our part in the country expenses, Pay  
all regular taxes  
And provide for the needs of our family?*

The second threat is the military service, not dear to the heart of the Vietnamese who are basically peace-loving people. The soldier's life is always depicted in dark tones:

*262. Ba năm trấn thủ lưu đồn  
Ngày thì canh điểm, tối dồn việc quan.  
Chém tre đẵn gỗ trên ngàn  
Hữu thân hữu khổ, phàn nàn cùng ai?  
Miệng ăn măng trúc măng mai,  
Những giang cùng nữa lấy ai bạn cùng?  
During my three years of garrison at the frontier  
By day I stand sentry in my post, and by night  
I am engrossed in administrative tasks.*

*Cutting down bamboo and other trees in the forest is my only diversion.  
Since everyone must suffer, what's the good of complaining?  
Nothing but bamboo-shoots to eat,  
And being alone amidst the bush, I have nobody to befriend.*

The following is the portrait of a rather unimpressive soldier:

*263. Ngang lưng thì thắt bao vàng  
Đầu đội nón dẫu, vai mang súng dài.  
Một tay thì cắp hỏa mai,  
Một tay cắp giáo, quan sai xuống thuyền.  
Thùng thùng trống đánh ngũ liên,  
Bước chân xuống thuyền nước mắt như mưa.*

*At my waist a yellow belt,  
On my head a conical hat, and across my shoulders a carabine,  
In addition I have to hold in my hands an arquebus  
And a spear. So equipped, I am ordered to embark.  
While drums roll imperatively,  
I get into the junk, my eyes filled with tears.*

To express aversion for military service, even women protested:

**264. *Lính vua, lính chúa, lính làng,  
Nhà vua bắt lính cho chàng phải ra.  
Giá vua bắt lính đàn bà  
Để em đi đỡ anh vài bốn năm.  
For the king, for the prince, for the village,  
The drafting rounds up everybody, including yourself,  
O my husband.  
If women were admitted into the army,  
I would willingly take your place for some years.***

**265. *Kìa ai tiếng khóc nỉ non,  
Ấy vợ lính mới trèo hòn đèo Ngang.  
Chém cha cái giặc chết hoang,  
Làm cho thiếp phải gánh lương theo chồng.  
Gánh từ xứ Bắc, xứ Đông,  
Đã gánh theo chồng, lại gánh theo con.  
Whose are those doleful cries?  
It's a soldier's wife who crosses the Đèo Ngang pass.  
Be damned all those pirates  
Who compel me to carry rice to my husband.  
Now to the North, and then to the East.  
Alas! Everywhere I must follow my husband,  
and carry both rice and my son.***

a/ About Customs. Marriage rites will be discussed first. Earlier, it has been noted that customs were more tolerant in the countryside than in the towns, and that young women and ladies might meet and talk more freely. Nevertheless, to settle marriage, it was necessary to call

upon a go-between, who was usually a neighbour or an aunt of the young man.

**266. Cũng nhờ cô bác đôi bên  
Mỗi người một tiếng mới nên cang thường.  
To the aunts of yours and mine  
Who gave their approval, we owe our marriage.**

Sometimes, the young man is eager and wants to get from his beloved an immediate promise of marriage. Wisely, the girl replies:

**267. Nay em còn cha, còn mẹ  
Còn cô, còn bác,  
Nên em không dám tự tung tự tác một mình.  
Anh có thương, cậy mai đến nói, cha mẹ đành em sẽ ưng.  
Still being under the protection of father and mother,  
Of aunts and uncles,  
I have no right to take a decision upon myself.  
If you love me, send a go-between, and if my parents agree, I will.**

The young man has no choice but yield to these words. Yet, determined to make a love marriage, he wants to make sure of his future's wife free consent:

**268. Đợi lệnh song thân em phải vậy,  
Song em quyết một lời rồi, anh hãy cậy mai dong.  
You are right to wait for your parents' agreement  
But please give me your consent before I send a go-between.**

There are clear differences between the Vietnamese marriage and the more religious Chinese marriage. The main reason is the cheo that might be roughly translated into "banns". The "cheo" is actually a certain amount of money which the husband-to-be must pay to the village for legal recognition of his marriage.

**269. Có cưới mà chẳng có cheo  
Nhân duyên trác trở như kèo không đinh.  
Marriage without banns  
Is as unsteady as a framework without nails.**

Thus, while the principal formality of the Chinese marriage is the ceremony of the red threads, when the divinities and ancestors of the husband are asked to admit his wife into the new family, the main formality of the Vietnamese marriage is a civil one, denoting a contract between all those concerned and the village (in the proverbs, we have seen a similar ritual in connection with the feasts given to officialize the mandarin's royal warrants ):

***Vô vọng bất thành quan.***

*Without the consecration banquet, you are not recognized  
as a mandarin.*

On the wedding day, the married couple must kneel before their parents, the bride's as well as the groom's:

***270. Lục bình chưng trước tam sơn***

***Đôi ta quỳ xuống đền ơn mẫu từ.***

*Before the flower vases put on the altar table,*

*Together we kneel to pay homage to our parents who gave us birth.*

Then the young bride pours alcohol in cups that she respectfully offers to her own parents. It is the moving ceremony of farewell, after which she is allowed to leave her family and follow her husband:

***271. Rượu lưu ly chân quỳ tay rót***

***Cha mẹ uống rồi đời gót theo anh.***

*Kneeling down I pour alcohol into a cup of crystal,*

*After my parents have drunk, I will follow you.*

Thereafter she will become her parents-in-law's daughter more than her own parents' daughter:

***272. Con gái là con người ta,***

***Con dâu mới thật mẹ cha mua về.***

*Our daughter is the other people's daughter,*

*And our real daughter is the daughter-in-law we have bought  
and brought home.*

How is the Vietnamese family structured? Some songs provide that information:

**273. Con cô con cậu thì xa**

**Con chú con bác thực là anh em.**

*Paternal aunt's and maternal uncle's children are distant cousins  
But paternal uncle's children are like brothers.*

**274. Chồng cô, vợ cậu, chồng dì**

**Trong ba người ấy chết thì không tang.**

*For the paternal aunt's husband, the maternal uncle's wife,  
and the maternal aunt's husband,  
One need not go into mourning.*

Paternal ties have obvious preeminence over matriarchal ties. Yet, the matriarchal system remains more deeply ingrained in Vietnam than in China, for the Vietnamese customs forbid the incestuous marriage between the children of a brother and sister, whereas the Chinese allow it.

Most Europeans might expect fabulous legacies from an American uncle. In Vietnam when a man has no son, instead of leaving his fortune to some distant cousin, he would rather adopt an orphan, maybe a nephew, who thus becomes his son and will celebrate the cult of his manes. Taking a second or third wife who will produce a most wanted son would be an alternative.

**275. Giàu cha giàu mẹ thì mừng**

**Giàu cô giàu bác thì đừng có trông.**

*Be happy for having wealthy parents,  
But expect nothing from your wealthy aunts and uncles.*

For the same reason, no inheritances from brother to brother are to be expected. The folk wisdom warns against having false hopes in that direction:

**276. Giàu cha giàu mẹ thì ham,**

**Giàu anh giàu chị ai làm nấy ăn.**

*You may expect from your wealthy parents  
But nothing from your wealthy brothers and sisters,  
because each one is for himself.*

Of all festivals, the most important is the New Year's that last officially three days. In the old times, it could extend through the whole first month. To show gratitude to those he is most indebted to, i.e., his parents, his parents-in-law and his teacher, every young man would spend these three days as follows:

**277. *Mông một thì ở nhà cha, Mông  
hai nhà vợ, mông ba nhà thầy.***  
*Stay at your father's home on the first day,  
At your family-in-law's on the second,  
and at your teacher's on the third.*

We have seen a number of proverbs referring to festivals. The following song concerns the yearly bull-fight in Đồ Sơn, a famous seaside resort in North Vietnam.

**278. *Dù ai buôn dâu bán dâu  
Mông mười tháng tám chơi trâu thì về.  
Dù ai buôn bán trăm nghề,  
Mông mười tháng tám trở về chơi trâu.***  
*Wherever you go trading,  
Come back on the tenth day of the eighth month to attend the bull-fight.  
Whatever your business,  
Come back on the tenth day of the eighth month to attend the bull-fight.*

Folk songs also provide precious information about the food Vietnamese people ate:

**279. *Chồng chê thì mặc chồng chê,  
Dưa khú nấu với cá trê càng bùi.***  
*Never mind if my husband dislikes it,  
I find delicious the salted vegetables cooked with silurids.*

**280. *Rủ nhau đi dạo vườn cà,  
Cà non chấm mắm, cà già làm dưa  
Làm dưa ba bữa thì chua,  
Chị kia sách giỏ lại mua ba tiền.***  
*Let's go into the garden and gather some aubergines*

*We'll eat the soft ones with sauce, and put the old ones in salt.  
In three days, they will ferment  
And lots of housewives will come with their baskets to buy them.*

Finally, we can also dig out of folk songs a fair amount of the prejudices and superstitions of old:

- Prejudices of the civil being superior to the military:

**281. Quan văn thất phẩm đã sang  
Quan võ tứ phẩm còn mang gươm hầu.**  
*Even the civil mandarins of the seventh grade are well honoured,  
But the fourth grade military mandarins are but servant officers.*

- Prejudice about the lowly conditions of comedians:

**282. Trồng trầu trồng lộn với tiêu,  
Con theo hát bội mẹ liều con hư.**  
*Like the betel inadvertently planted next to the pepper plant,  
If you mingle with comedians, you will come to a bad end.*

- Superstition on lucky and unlucky days:

**283. Mồng năm, mười bốn, hăm ba,  
Cũ ba ngày ấy đừng ra đi đường.**  
*On the fifth, the fourteenth and the twenty-third days,  
Never go out of your home.*

- Superstition on horoscopes:

**284. Sao Thai mà ngộ Đào Hoa  
Tiền dâm hậu thú mới ra vợ chồng.**  
*Whoever is born under the influence of star Thai conjoined with  
star Đào Hoa,  
Will have sexual relationship with a woman before he marries her.*

b/ People's Reaction to the Confucianist Morals. Most remarkable in the folk songs is the evidence of the common people's reaction to the Confucianist morals forced on them by China through the scholars. The Vietnamese people, though peaceful, have an innate bantering tendency. We have seen earlier that the hero doctrine was greatly appreciated. But

it was rather suitable for the aristocracy, for men like Nguyễn Công Trứ or Cao Bá Quát. What the common people ask for is equality and freedom:

- equality between women and men;
- equality of the social classes;
- freedom from the too rigorous familial and social codes.

Many instances of the bantering tendency have been exposed. Let's add some more before trying a synthetical survey at the end of the book.

- Assertion of equality:

**285. Đáy vàng đây cũng đồng đen,  
Đáy hoa thiên lý, đây sen nhị hồ.**

*If you are gold, I am bronze,  
If you are a plum blossom, then I am the lotus blossom.*

**286. Màn treo, chiếu rách cũng treo,  
Hương xông nghi ngút, củi rêu cũng xông.**

*You have mosquito nets, my torn mats serve the same purpose;  
You make fumigation with incense, I do so with wet wood.*

- Opposition to unworthy chiefs:

**287 Làm trên ở chẳng chính ngôi  
Khiến nên kẻ dưới chúng tôi hỗn hào.**

*If you, our chiefs, behave badly,  
Don't be surprised to see your subordinates being impolite with you.*

- Reaction against the pre-eminence of man over woman:

**288. Ba đồng một mớ đàn ông,  
Đem về mà bỏ vào lồng cho kiến nó tha.**

**Ba trăm một mụ đàn bà,  
Đem về mà trải chiếu hoa cho ngồi .**  
*Three pennies are enough to buy a lot of men,  
Who are left in a cage where ants will carry them away.  
But three hundred pennies are needed to buy a woman,  
Who is invited to sit down on a flower mat.*

- Indignation at social injustices:

**289. Người thì mớ bầy mớ ba,  
Người thì áo rách như là tả tơi.  
While some people are overdressed  
Others have only rags to hide their nakedness.**

**290. Trời sao trời ở chẳng cân Người ăn  
chẳng hết người lần chẳng ra.**

*Why is Heaven so unjust  
To allow some people to have more than they can eat, while others are  
short of everything?*

c/ Satires Aimed at the Powerful.

- The Mandarin:

**291. Em là con gái đồng trinh  
Em đi bán rượu qua dinh ông Nghè.  
Ông Nghè cho lính ra ve  
Trăm lạy ông Nghè, tôi đã có con.**

*- Có con thì mặc có con,  
Thắt lưng cho dòn, theo võng cho mau.  
I am a young girl, still a virgin  
On selling alcohol I walked before Mr. Doctorate's palace.  
Mr. Doctorate sent a soldier out to court me.*

*- For pity's sake, I implored, I already have children.  
- It does not matter, I was told.*

*Tighten your belt, and hurry up to Mr. Doctorate's hammock.*

- The General:

**292. Đồn rằng quan tướng có danh  
Cuỡi ngựa một mình chẳng phải vịn ai.  
Ban khen rằng: Ấy mới tài, Ban  
cho cái áo với hai đồng tiền.**

*Đánh giặc thì chạy vào tiên  
Xông vào trận tiền cỡi khó giặc ra.  
Giặc sợ, giặc chạy về nhà*

*Trở về gọi mẹ mổ gà khao quân .  
Great is the reputation of Mr. General  
Who can sit on horseback without anyone's help.  
The king congratulated him on his cleverness  
And gave him in reward a gown and two coins.  
When he goes to war,  
Ahead of all, he rushes upon the enemy  
To pull off his loin-cloth.  
Frightened by this gesture, the enemy runs away,  
And triumphant Mr. General returns home asking his mother  
to kill some chickens for his troops to feast upon.*

We see an abundance of comic details in this song: a general sits by himself on his horse: what a marvel. Pull off the enemy's loin-cloth: how heroic. Celebrate a victory with some chickens: what munificence.

- The soldier:

*293. Cậu cai buông áo em ra  
Để em đi chợ, kẻo mà chợ trưa.  
Chợ trưa rau đã héo đi,  
Lấy gì nuôi mẹ, lấy gì nuôi em.  
Mr. Caporal, please release my gown  
So that I can get to the market on time.  
If I arrive there too late, my vegetables will wither,  
And with what will I feed my mother and my young brothers?*

And here are some sarcastic remarks hurled at society's parasites.

- The bad monk:

*294. Ba cô đội gạo lên chùa  
Một cô yếm thắm bỏ bùa cho sư.  
Sư về, sư ốm tương tư,  
Ốm lãn ốm lóc cho sư trọc đầu.  
Ai làm cho dạ sư sầu,  
Cho ruột sư héo như bầu đứt giây.  
Three young ladies carried rice to the pagoda  
And the one with a bright red breast-supporter cast a spell on the monk.*

*Ever since, the monk is love-sick,  
How cruel you are, fair maiden, to make the monk so sick;  
His bowels are as withered as a gourd cut off from its vine  
and ready to fall down.*

- The boastful geomancer:

**295. Hòn đất mà biết nói năng  
Thì thầy địa lý hàm răng chẳng còn.**  
*If the lump of soil could speak  
The geomancer would not get away with keeping his jaw intact.*

- The evasive soothsayer:

**296. Số cô có mẹ có cha  
Mẹ cô đàn bà, cha cô đàn ông.  
Số cô có vợ có chồng,  
Sinh con đầu lòng chẳng gái thì trai.**  
*Your fate is to have a father and a mother,  
Your mother is a woman, and your father a man, isn't it so?  
Your fate is to be married  
And to have as first child either a girl or a boy.*

Such are the predictions revealed by the soothsayer exaggerated ad absurdum to become mere redundancies.

- The wizard is no more definite when he claims to invoke the spirits:

**297. Hồn rằng hồn thác ban ngày  
Thương cha nhớ mẹ, hồn rầy thác đêm.**  
*The ghost says he died in the day time  
Unless he dies at night, for painfully he is thinking of his parents.*

### **3. Miscellaneous Observations:**

- On the hair:

**298. Đàn bà tốt tóc thì sang  
Đàn ông tốt tóc chỉ mang nặng đầu.**  
*Luxuriant hair is a smart sign for women  
But only makes men's heads heavy.*

Indeed, less than a half-century ago, men as well as women wore long hair wound into a bun.

- On the eyes:

**299. Người khôn con mắt đen sì  
Người dại con mắt nửa chì nửa than.  
An intelligent person's eyes are jet-black  
Whereas dull ones are half lead and half coal.**

**300. Những người ti hí mắt lươn  
Trai thì trộm cắp, gái buôn chồng người.  
Those whose eyes are small like an eel's  
The men, they become thieves; the women, they steal other's husbands.**

- On the mouth:

**301. Đàn ông rộng miệng thì sang  
Đàn bà rộng miệng tan hoang cửa nhà.  
Large-mouthed men are distinguished persons  
But large-mouthed women destroy family peace.**

- On the voice:

**302. Thử chuông cho biết chuông ngân  
Thử bạn đôi lần cho biết dại khôn.  
A bell shows its value by the quality of its tone,  
To find out whether a person is intelligent or not, let him talk for a little  
while.**

**303. Người thanh tiếng nói cũng thanh  
Chuông kêu sẽ đánh bên thành cũng kêu.  
A handsome person's voice is always pleasant  
Like a resonant bell that, when lightly struck, gives at once a clear  
sound**

- On laughter and gait:

**304. Vô duyên chưa nói đã cười  
Chưa đi đã chạy là người vô duyên.**

*Ungraceful is he who laughs before speaking  
So is he who looks as if he runs when he is walking.*

**305. Những người phình phĩnh mặt mo  
Chân đi chữ bát, dù cho chẳng thềm.**  
*Those whose faces are bloated like a spathe  
Or who walk with splayed feet are to be refused even when offered free.*

- On the waist:

**306. Những người thắt đáy lưng ong  
Đã khéo chiều chồng lại khéo nuôi con.**  
*Small-waisted women like bees  
Are those who take good care of their husband and children.*

**307. Những người béo trọc béo tròn Ăn  
vụng như chớp, đánh con rằm rằm.**  
*Women fat like barrels  
Are used to eating stealthily and beating their children.*

Philosophical Observations:

- Law of change:

**308. Người đời khác thể phù du  
Sớm còn tối mất công phu lỡ làng.**  
*Man is like a day-fly;  
What he acquires in the morning disappears by evening,  
making all his efforts vain.*

- Law of karma:

**309. Ông cha kiếp trước khéo tu  
Nên sanh con cháu võng dù nghênh ngang.**  
*Because they have properly behaved in their former life,  
They now give birth to children who gloriously go about  
in hammock with parasols.*

- Belief in destiny:

**310. Số giàu đem đến dưng dưng**

*Lựa là con mắt tráo trưng mới giàu.*

*Số giàu tay trắng cũng giàu*

*Số nghèo chín đụn mười trâu cũng nghèo .*

*If you are destined to be rich, rich you will be without effort. What's the good of opening wide one's eyes to try gathering a fortune? If you are destined to be rich, rich you will be even*

*if you are now penniless*

*If you are destined to be poor, poor you will be even  
if you have currently nine stacks of paddy and ten buffaloes.*

## CHAPTER VIII

### SPECIAL SONGS

In this chapter the reader will find some specially featured songs. First, there are the children's songs with intentionally childlike lyrics, conceived in the image of the children's world. Then come the lullabies recited by mothers, sisters or nursemaids with an accent of indescribable melancholy. Third, we have the riddles where the Vietnamese wit is given free play. Finally, in the singing tournaments organized at village festivals, such as the Mid-Autumn's or throughout the year whenever there is full moon, the two groups of young men and girls improvise tricky questions, or declare love for each other.

**1. Children's Songs.** They may be classified into four categories:

- the songs used to accompany some games: dancing, blindman's buff, skipping, and so on;
- the ones recited by children to pay compliments;
- the naive songs created to entertain children;
- and finally, fables and falsely naive songs, with a tendency to satire, aimed at jeering at society's depravity or at teaching morality.

**a/ Songs used to Accompany Some Games:**

*311. Con vôi con voi  
Cái vôi đi trước  
Hai chân trước đi trước  
Hai chân sau đi sau  
Cái đuôi đi sau rôt.  
Tôi xin kể nốt  
Cái chuyện con voi  
Con vôi con voi  
Cái vôi đi trước*

.....

*The ele, the elephant  
Is walking, its trunk ahead,  
Its two forefeet ahead  
Its two hindfeet behind  
And its tail last of all.  
I will tell you more  
About the elephant.  
The ele, the elephant  
Is walking, its trunk ahead,*

.....

The song may go on endlessly. It is used in children dances.

**312. Nu na nu nóng  
Cái cống nằm trong  
Cái ong nằm ngoài  
Củ khoai chấm mật  
Phật ngồi Phật khóc  
Con cóc nhảy ra  
Con gà ú ụ  
Nhà mụ thổi xôi  
Nhà tôi nấu chè  
Cố chân thì rụt.**

*Let's sing in turn  
The sewer rat is lying inside.  
Outside are the bee  
And the tuber of potato soaked in honey.  
Lord Buddha sits down, he weeps,  
The toad jumps out,  
The hen clucks.  
You cook sticky rice  
We make sugared soup.  
Curl up, this leg.*

This song is intended for the following game: Several children sit in a circle, their legs stretched out toward the center. One of them sings, accenting each word by a light pat on the legs. The last one patted has to

curl up his leg. And the game proceeds with one leg less each time, until their remains only one leg.

Here is a variant, used in blimman's buff. The children gather together, but remain standing, and the singer pats rhythmically on his companions' heads. The last one patted is appointed the hunter.

**313. Thả đũa ba ba  
Chớ bắt đàn bà  
Phải tội đàn ông  
Cơm trắng như bông  
Gạo thuyền như nước  
Đổ mắm, đổ muối  
Đổ chuối, hạt tiêu  
Đổ niêu cứt gà  
Đổ phải nhà nào  
Nhà ấy phải chịu.**

*Keep away, leeches and tortoises.*

*Don't arrest women*

*For misdemeanours perpetrated by men.*

*Well, rice is as white as cotton*

*And as abundant as water.*

*I pour out pickle and salt*

*Bananas, pepper*

*And a cooking-pot full of hen droppings.*

*Let the house to which that happens*

*Endure it.*

It is obvious that these songs are incoherent and meaningless. Maybe originally they had come meaning, but in the course of time they have been so distorted that it is now impossible to find out their original wording.

**b/ Songs-compliments.**

**314. Súc sặc, súc sê.  
Nhà nào còn đèn còn lửa  
Mở cửa cho anh em chúng tôi vào.  
Bước lên giường cao**

*Thấy đôi rồng ấp Bước  
xuống giường thấp  
Thấy đôi rồng châu  
Bước ra đằng sau  
Thấy nhà ngói lợp  
Voi ông còn buộc  
Ngựa ông còn cầm  
Ông sống một trăm  
Thêm năm tuổi lẻ  
Vợ ông sinh đẻ  
Những con tốt lành  
Những con như tranh  
Những con như vẽ  
Xin ông bà cho anh em chúng tôi một tràng pháo  
Toc tac . Toc tac.  
Open your door and let us go in.  
On the higher bed  
We see two broody dragons,  
On the lower bed  
Two dragons facing each other.  
At the back we see  
A tile-roofed house  
In which are fastened  
An elephant and a horse.  
You are, Sir, to live one hundred  
And five years more.  
Your lady will give birth  
To children all pretty  
Like paintings  
Or drawings.  
Please give us a packet of crackers.*

In the last night of the year, poor children used to go from door to door and offer New Year congratulations by striking the ground rhythmically with a bamboo collecting-box which contains some coins to bring out the characteristic onomatopoeic “toc tac”. In this song, they

wished prosperity, longevity and many children to people who gave them, in return, some money instead of crackers.

c/ Naive Songs.

**315. Con chim mà ở trên cây  
Tao đứng dưới gốc mà bay đàng nào?  
O bird perching in the tree,  
Where could you fly away to if I stood at its foot?**

**316. Con kiến mà ở trong nhà  
Tao đóng cửa lại mà ra đàng nào?  
Con cá mà lội dưới ao  
Tao tát nước vào, mà chạy đường mô?  
O ant inside my house  
How could you go out if I shut the doors?  
O fish swimming in the pond  
Where could you swim away to, if I poured water into it?**

**317. Cào cào giã gạo tao xem,  
Tao may quần đỏ áo đen cho mà.  
O grasshopper, grind rice for me  
And I will make red and black dresses for you.**

**318. Thằng cuội ngồi gốc cây đa  
Đẻ trâu ăn lúa gọi cha ời ời.  
Cha còn cắt cỏ trên trời  
Mẹ còn cưỡi ngựa đi chơi cầu vồng.  
The liar Pebble, sitting at the foot of the banyan-tree  
On seeing his buffalo browsing on rice-eras, call his father for help.  
But his father is busy cutting grass in the sky,  
And his mother is riding a horse on the rainbow.**

In Vietnamese, the word “cuội” has double meaning: a pebble and a liar. People fancy they see him on the face of the moon, sitting at the foot of a banyan-tree.

d/ Satiric Songs and Fables.

- Against stupid people:

**319. Thằng bòm có cái quạt mo  
Phú ông xin đổi ba bò chín trâu.  
Bòm rằng bòm chẳng lấy trâu  
Phú ông xin đổi ao sâu cá mè  
Bòm rằng bòm chẳng lấy mè  
Phú ông xin đổi một bè gỗ lim  
Bòm rằng bòm chẳng lấy lim Phú  
ông xin đổi con chim đồi mồi Bòm  
rằng bòm chẳng lấy mồi  
Phú ông xin đổi nắm xôi Bòm cười.**

*The maned boy has a spathe fan*

*That the rich man wishes to buy with three cows and nine buffaloes*

*- No, the maned boy answers, I don't want buffaloes*

*- A pond full of fish, then?*

*- No, I don't want fish.*

*- A raft made of ironwood.*

*- No, I don't want ironwood.*

*- Maybe a fine bird with feathers like tortoise shell would please you?*

*- No, no, I don't want any bird.*

*- What do you want then? A loaf of sticky rice?*

*The maned boy smiles in agreement.*

- Against irresolute people:

**320. Cái kiến mà đậu cành đào  
Leo phải cành cọc, leo vào leo ra.  
Cái kiến mà đậu cành đa  
Leo phải cành cọc, leo ra leo vào.**

*The poor ant, settling on a peach tree,*

*Comes upon a dry branch, and endlessly goes to-and-fro.*

*The poor ant, settling on a banyan tree,*

*Comes upon a dry branch, and endlessly goes to-and-fro.*

This song makes fun of the irresolute man who, faced with a dilemma, does not know what to choose. He is like the famous donkey of Buridan.

- Warning little girls:

**321. Chè la chè lầy  
Con gái bảy nghề  
Ngồi lê là một  
Dựa cột là hai  
Ăn khoai là ba  
Ăn quà là bốn  
Trốn việc là năm  
Hay nằm là sáu  
Láo táu là bảy.**

*Tonton, miroton,*

*Girls have seven sins: Sitting  
everywhere: one Leaning on  
pillars: two Eating sweet  
potatoes: three Fond of  
tidbits: four*

*Slipping away from work: five*

*Always lying: six*

*Hastily speaking without thinking: seven.*

- Praising upright people:

**322. Con cò mà đi ăn đêm  
Đậu phải cành mềm lộn cổ xuống ao.  
Ông ơi, ông vớt tôi nao,  
Tôi có lòng nào, ông hãy xáo măng.  
Có xáo thì xáo nước trong**

**Đừng xáo nước đục đau lòng cò con.**

*The little stork, going at night to search for food,  
Stumbles on a thin branch and falls into a pond.*

*- Sir, she cries, please pull me out of the water  
Or, if I am guilty, cook me with bamboo-shoots,  
And if you wouldn't mind, please use clear water  
Instead of turbid water that would soil me.*

The white-feathered stork is the symbol of the righteous man. Even dying, she wished to be cooked with clean water, as the righteous man would rather die than save his life with disgraceful compromises.

- Discrediting wicked people:

**323. Con mèo mào chèo cây cau  
Hỏi thăm chú chuột đi đâu vắng nhà.  
- Chú chuột đi chợ đàng xa  
Mua mắm mua muối giỗ cha con mèo.**

*The cat climbs up an areca-tree  
And inquires after the mouse.*

*- She's gone to a distant market, he is answered.*

*To buy pickle and salt to celebrate your father's anniversary.*

A debtor is likely to have written this song to insult his rapacious creditor.

**2. The Nursery Songs.** Among the moral proverbs we have already encountered, some are in the form of lullabies. Here are some others:

**324. Cái ngủ mà ngủ cho lâu  
Mẹ mà đi cấy đồng sâu chưa về.  
Cái ngủ mà ngủ cho say  
Mẹ mà vất vả chân tay tối ngày.**

*Sleep, my child, sleep a little more*

*For your mother, going to transplant rice plants, has not returned.*

*Sleep, my child, sleep soundly*

*For your mother has to labour hard all day long.*

**325. Gió mùa thu mẹ ru con ngủ  
Năm canh chầy thức đủ năm canh. While  
the Fall wind is blowing, I lull my baby,  
Staying awake all through the five watches.**

**326. Em ơi đừng khóc chị yêu  
Nín đi chị kể chuyện Kiều em nghe.  
O little brother, cry no more and I'll love you**

*And tell you the story of Thúy Kiều.*

To feel the deep melancholy of these lullabies, one must listen to them on a summer afternoon when everything seems to be dozing under the overwhelming heat of the sun, or on a winter night when the country is wrapped up in its mantle of darkness and cold. At those times, the lullabies

coming from a poor thatched cottage call to mind the undying soul of the native land, this humble soul continually oppressed but always gallant, that is telling of its sadness and its hopes.

**3. The Riddles.** The Vietnamese people enjoy riddles in much the same way the Westerners enjoy cross-word puzzles. In both cases, the question is to guess a thing through an intentionally simplified definition, keeping only its characteristics and if possible unexpected features. For instance:

*327. Minh tròn, lưng không khòng khong,  
Làm cho con gái phải lòng tử, tôi,  
Ông sư có biết cái không khòng khong là gì?  
His body is round, his back curved.  
Young girls are madly fond of him  
But the monk doesn't care.*

It is the comb with its rounded back, dear to young girls, but perfectly useless to monks whose heads are shaven. Most often, to make the riddle more interesting, things are personified:

*328. Năm thằng cầm hai cái sào  
Đuổi đàn trâu trắng chui vào trong hang.  
Five little children, armed with two poles,  
Push a herd of white buffaloes into the cave.*

It is the five fingers holding two chopsticks. The white buffaloes are grains of rice, and the cave is the mouth.

Sometimes, a contrivance is used which is not very fair, but is apt to bring forward and irresistibly comical result: it is to define a perfectly respectable object by coarse or even obscene words. For instance:

**329. Ăn đàng đít, ỉa đàng lưng,  
Động mó đến sừng thì ỉa cứt ra.**  
*He eats with his anus, and defecates through his back.  
If his horns are touched, at once he ejects excrements.*

What is it? I bet that you have difficulty guessing it. Well, it is only the plane that nibbles at wood with its lower face and ejects the shavings with its upper face.

The following riddle would make young girls blush:

**330. Khi xưa em trắng như ngà  
Vì chàng quân tử em đà hóa thâm.  
Trách chàng quân tử vô tâm,  
Chàng đánh chàng đập, chàng lại còn nằm với tôi.**  
*Once I was as fair as ivory  
Because of you, I am growing dark.  
How I am vexed with you, my dear,  
You beat me, and you lie down on me.*

It is a mat, white when it is new, and darkened when it is worn. It is beaten from time to time to take the dust away.

Another means to intensify the difficulty is to use puns which have a two-fold meaning. For instance:

**331. Ngả lưng cho thế gian nhờ  
Vừa êm, vừa ấm, lại ngờ bắt trung.**  
*I lie down to attend to people,  
Both soft and warm, I am nevertheless suspected of treason.*

It is the “phản”, meaning both a wooden bed and treason. Since the puns are incomprehensible to the foreign reader, we merely give this one riddle as an example. Follow are some riddles with no pun. If it amuses you, try to guess them before looking for the answers at the bottom of the page.

**332. Anh ngồi đâu, em cũng ngồi châu  
Anh yêu em, anh mớm quết trầu cho em.**

*Where you sit, I am*

*For you love me so much that you give me mouthfuls of betel.*

**333. Có cổ mà không có đầu,  
Hai chân trước thì ngắn, hai chân sau thì dài.**

*She has a neck but no head,  
Short forefeet and long hindfeet.*

**334. Một đàn cò trắng phau phau,  
Ăn no tắm mát rủ nhau đi nằm.**

*Like a flock of white storks,  
They go to bed after enjoying a big meal and taking a fresh bath.*

**335. Nhà xanh lại đóng đổ xanh,  
Giữa đỗ trồng hành, thả lợn vào trong.**

*Green is the house, and green are the walls,  
Among the beans onions are planted and pigs are bred.*

**336. Sông không đến, bến không vào,  
Lơ lửng giữa trời làm sao có nước.**

*No river comes there, and no wharf,  
He is hung between the sky and the earth, and yet holds water.*

**337. Bộ tịch quan anh xấu lạ lưng  
Khom lưng, uốn gối, cả đời cong.**

*Lưỡì to mà sức ăn ra khoét,  
Cái kiếp theo đuôi có thẹn không?*

*How ugly you are, my friend,  
Your spine is curved, and so are your knees all your life  
Are you not ashamed of always walking behind other people?*

**338. Bốn ông đập đất,  
Một ông phát cờ,  
Một ông vợ cõ  
Một ông bỏ phân.**

*Four gentlemen are hitting the ground,  
One is waving the flag,  
One is gathering grass,  
And one is spreading manure.*

**339. Bốn bên thành lũy, không thấp không cao,  
Có sông, có nước, cá chẳng vào.  
Voi đi đến đây dừng chân lại,  
Bây giờ binh sĩ luận làm sao?**

*All around are strongholds neither low nor high  
Kept apart by a river where no fish lives.  
The elephant going there must stop;  
What is to be done with the soldiers?*

**340. Sớm đi bốn chân,  
Trưa đi hai chân,  
Chiều đi ba chân  
Tối đi tám chân.**

*In the morning he walks on four legs,  
On two at noon  
On three in the afternoon,  
And on eight at night.*

**4. The Singing Contests.** The Vietnamese language is monosyllabic and allows each sound to be uttered in six different tones: a neutral and five fitted with a mark:

- Sắc : sharp á
- Huyền: grave à
- Hỏi : interrogative ă
- Ngã : inverted interrogative ã
- Nặng : deep ạ

Thus, it lends itself wonderfully to music and versification. As a matter of fact, any Vietnamese can easily improvise some verses and sing them. That is why singing competitions find such favour in our country. Particularly between young boys and girls, declarations of love and lovers' tiffs are more easily expressed in songs than in prose.

Indeed, the song admits indirect or indiscreet hints forbidden by decency in the everyday language.

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332. It is the spittoon, going everywhere with the people addicted to betel, who spit into it the residue and reddened saliva.

333. It is the breast-supporter, made of a trapezoid scrap of material fastened to the neck by two short laces and to the waist by two longer ones.

334. They are white chinaware bowls, which are washed after the meal, then put back by the wall.

335. It is the “bánh chung”, a cake made of sticky rice. It is wrapped in green leaves. In the middle is a small kernel of ground beans mixed with onions and pork.

336. The coconut.

337. It is the plough whose shape is curved. Its tongue is the ploughshare which tirelessly breaks lumps of soil. On the other hand, the fact that the plough always follows the buffalo gives rise to a moral thought.

338. It is the buffalo with its four legs, its tail, its mouth and its haunches.

339. The set of chess-men. The two factions are indeed separated by a blank space, called the river, that all pawns may pass through, except for the general, his two aides-de-camp and two elephants.

340. It is man, who crawls when he is a baby, walks in his youth, leans on a stick in his old age, and when dead is put into a coffin carried by four bearers (eight legs).

As previously pointed out, songs may be sung in quite varying tunes, according to each region: barcarolles, “quan họ”, “trống quân”, and so on. Their favorite topic is of course love, and their usual form, at least at the beginning, is that of a riddle. Then, after the two singers have known each other a little more, would come declarations of love, laments of love-sickness, promises of marriage, lovers’ tiffs, and so on. Only some songs serving as preludes to the singing competitions will be quoted here. It must be noted that songs are most often improvised during the competition along determined guidelines, which clever singers usually modify to suit the circumstances.

Let's picture one such singing competition on a splendidly moonlit night. The stage may be the open country where people go to irrigate ricefields during a period of drought, or a farm-yard where paddy ears are ground after the harvest, or the village hall during a festival. The young girls are sitting on one side, and the boys on the other. First, they watch each other cautiously, gauging the skills of their opponents. At last, a challenge is sent in a loud voice:

**341. Ba đồng một trái hồng ngâm**

**Bên ấy không nói thì câm mắt mồm.**

**Ba đồng một trái hồng dai**

**Bên ấy có tài thì cất tiếng lên.**

*Three pennies, that's the price of a soft kaki,*

*If you don't speak up, may be your mouths are sewn up?*

*Three pennies, that's the price of a tough kaki,*

*If you are clever, please speak up.*

The contest has started. The other clan retorts at once with some futile but tough questions:

**342. Đố ai biết lúa mấy cây**

**Biết sông mấy khúc, biết mây mấy tầng?**

**Đố ai quét sạch lá rừng**

**Để ta khuyên gió, gió đừng rung cây.**

*I defy you to tell how many ears there are in a rice-plant,*

*How many windings a river has, how many strata a cloud has.*

*I defy you to sweep all the leaves out of the forest*

*So that I could advise the wind not to shake the trees.*

**343. Đố anh con rít mấy chân**

**Cầu Ô mấy nhịp, chợ Dung mấy người?**

*Please tell me how many legs a centripede has,*

*How many girders support the crow bridge<sup>1</sup>, how many people visit the  
Dung market.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> According to a legend, the Weaver, daughter of the Heavenly Emperor, neglected her work after she married the Cowherd. As punishment, the Heavenly Emperor kept apart the two amorous stars by the Milky Way, on which crows build a bridge

**344. Em ơi !**

***Em đổ chi câu đổ ngặt nghèo***

***Anh đây đổ lại: Chớ con mèo có mấy lông ?***

*O little sister !*

*Why do you ask me such tough questions?*

*Please first answer this one: how many hairs has a cat?*

The reader may have noticed the absurdity of these questions. Those concerning History or Geography are worthless. After all, their only use is to induce love confidences. If you want to fully appreciate their witty side, you will have to go to the Lim village in Bắc Ninh province, where girls are known as the prettiest in North Vietnam, or to sail on the Perfume River in Huế, where the boat-women can make you forget the most famous stars in Venice.

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on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> lunar's month allowing the two lovers to meet again once a year.

<sup>2</sup> The Mạc cầu Dung market is in Long Xuyên province.

## **P A R T T H R E E**

### **THE TALES OF GOLDEN TIMES**

#### **GENERAL FEATURES**

It has been mentioned that the tale is better than the proverb or the song as a tool to express ideas and feelings, and develop them by creating more or less fictitious characters. Also, in the tale one does not have to observe versification rules like in the song, or be concise like in the proverb.

There are also novels in poetic form (such as *Bích Câu Kỳ Ngộ*, *Phạm Công Cúc Hoa...* ) that some people consider as part of the folk literature. Although these long novels in poetic form have been obviously written by some unknown scholars, they differ from the tales in major respects.

First, the text of novels in poetic form is thoroughly homogeneous, except for trivial variants on some isolated words. The tale's text, on the contrary, is always fluid, and the same tale may have different versions. Moreover, each story-teller adds or abridges to his own liking. It is with regard to tales that one can speak of collective creation.

Secondly, whereas the novels in poetic form always come from a tale in the Chinese literature, the tales originate directly from the Vietnamese soul. This is a most important point. An inexperienced reader might mistake our novels in verse form for Chinese works translated into Vietnamese, but our tales have the undeniable stamp of our native land.

Lastly, almost all novels in poetic form have a lofty goal. Whether they tell about loyalty to the king, filial piety, friendship, or love, all are aimed at praising virtue and conquering vice, according to the Confucianist teaching. A few novels with religious tendencies aim also at relating the delights of the Buddhist Nirvana or of the Taoist Paradise to which only noble souls may have access. The tales, on the contrary, have a definitely richer scope.

What is the topic of our tales? Almost everything: morals, religion, superstitions, history, geography, natural science, comedy of manners. . . From this forest of tales, we can still distinguish three main categories:

- Tales by which our ancestors tried to explain in their own way some natural phenomena or historic events; we will call them instructional tales;
- Tales aimed at shaping the moral and religious education of the listeners: we will call them educational tales;
- Entertaining tales aimed at making fun of society's faults, or simply at amusing the listeners.

Of course, the same tale may belong to two or even three of these categories at the same time, such as the legend of the lime-pot which both explains its shape and sets forth a buddhist concept about repentance. We will adopt the above classification because it is convenient to put order in ideas, and particularly because it stresses the three great concerns of our tale-tellers: to instruct, to educate and to entertain.

## **CHAPTER IX**

### **INSTRUCTIONAL TALES**

The Vietnamese people, and particularly the common man, did not possess any scientific knowledge. To natural phenomena, such as the yearly flood of the River delta, he tried to give a supernatural explanation that suited his moral and religious ideas.

Similarly, he tried to give historic events an interpretation that could satisfy his national pride. For instance, to the Vietnamese people, living both in the coastal plains and the mountainous regions, the temptation was great to make themselves the descendants of dragons (which live in the sea) and immortals (the word Tiên 仙, immortal, is indeed formed by the juxtaposition of two words: Nhân 人: man and Sơn 山: mountain). As to the giants in history, and especially the founders of dynasties, the common man willingly believed in their divine mission. We must add that the absolute monarchy, by maintaining in the people the cult of the Emperors, sons of Heaven, powerfully encouraged the birth of legends that assign supernatural origins to the emperors.

Last of all, some customs such as the quid of betel, the Cây nêu, and so on, also had marvellous legends to explain their origin and also to praise brotherhood, conjugal fidelity, Buddha's mercifulness....

We will distinguish then three categories of instructional tales:

- those concerning cosmology and natural science;
- those concerning History;
- and those concerning Sociology.

#### **1. Tales Concerning Cosmology and Natural Science.**

a/ Natural phenomena .

## **1/ Why does the moon show on its face the picture of a tree?**

*Once upon a time, there was a young man named Pebble. One day, he went into the forest to cut down some trees, and found a litter of newborn tigers. He killed them with his hatchet and was getting ready to bring them home when he heard the mother tigress coming. Hurriedly, he climbed up a leafy tree and hid in it. On seeing her dead cubs, the tigress gave vent to her grief and anger with dreadful roars. Then she calmed down and went to the edge of a nearby brook to gather some leaves off a tree. She chewed them, then put them little by little into her cubs' mouths. Soon the cubs returned to life.*

*Vitally interested, Pebble waited for the tigress and her cubs to go away, then came down from his hiding place. He went to the miraculous tree, dug it up with all its roots, and replanted it in his garden. With its leaves Pebble accomplished many miracles: he restored the sick to health and even raised up the dead. So he took care to tell his wife every time he went out on business:*

*- If you want to urinate, do not do it on my tree.*

*His incessant injunctions succeeded to annoy his wife who, for the mere pleasure of teasing her husband, made up her mind to disobey him. Hardly had the holy tree been polluted when it uprooted itself and rose off the ground. At that very moment, Pebble came home. He just had enough time to get hold of the roots, and tried to pull the tree back. Wasted labour. The tree continued to rise up to the moon, carrying away Pebble at its roots.*

And that is why, during moonlit nights, you see on the moon's bright face a tree and at its foot unlucky Pebble, the first victim of female malice since the creation of the Universe.

## **2. Why is the Northern delta flooded every year?**

*In the region of king Hùng XVIII lived a poor woodcutter. One day, after he had cut down a precious tree, an old man appeared, touched the*

*tree with his stick, and made it spring up again. Then the old man gave the woodcutter his stick, saying:*

*- Since you are a virtuous man, I give you this miraculous stick that will help you save human lives.*

*The woodcutter warmly thanked his benefactor. Then giving up his woodcutting business, he became a physician and accomplished many miracles. One day, at the seaside, he saw some boys amusing themselves by brutally beating a snake. Moved to pity, he touched the animal with his stick. The snake recovered consciousness and dived into the sea.*

*Some days later, a young man called on the physician with somptuous gifts - gold, pearls, diamonds - and told him:*

*- Sir, I am the son of the Southern Sea King. Having ventured the other day to the seaside in the form of a snake, I would have died but for your generous intervention. Please accept these humble gifts I am offering you as a token of my gratitude.*

*The physician declined the offer, saying he did not engage in good work to be rewarded. Then, the young prince invited him to go round his maritime domain. Before them, the waters parted, and it did not take them long to reach the Sea king's palace, sparkling with gems. The physician remained three days in the warm and concerned hospitality of Their Majesties who were anxious to please their son's savior. When he expressed his desire to return home, the king offered him a book, saying:*

*- Sir, you did not want to accept any of my gifts. I admire your unconcern for riches, but please allow me to offer you this book which has the power to realize all your wishes. I am sure it is in good hands, and that you will use it to relieve people's worries.*

*Provided with this talisman, the physician returned to land. Wherever he went, he discreetly helped the unfortunate by giving them gold, material or rice that he made at will. However, men's wickedness disgusted him. In the long run, he settled at the summit of Tản Viên mount, in Phúc Lộc prefecture, Sơn Tây province. He had a long road built from the base of the mountain to the summit, a road fringed with*

*palaces where he liked to come and rest. People of the nearby villages, on seeing these miracles, worshipped him under the name of the Genie of Tản Viên, or more simply of Sơn Tinh, the Mountain's Genie.*

*At that time, Princess Mị Nương reached the age of puberty. She became the most beautiful young lady of the kingdom, and her father, King Hùng XVIII, had it proclaimed in the entire kingdom that anyone who aspired to the honour of becoming his son-in-law must come to the Court to be examined by His Majesty.*

*When the competition day came, the Court was crowded with numerous candidates. Handsome scholars, gallant warriors, prominent musicians, all exhibited their erudition, their vigour, or their virtuosity. But they were all surpassed by two young men divinely good-looking and gifted with supernatural powers: Sơn Tinh, the Mountain's Genie, who could shift mountains as he liked, and Thủy Tinh, the Water's Genie, to whom rain and wind obeyed.*

*Wonder-struck and perplexed at the same time, King Hùng finally said:*

*- Both of you are heroes, but unfortunately I have only one daughter. So, come back here tomorrow with wedding gifts. The first comer will have the princess.*

*The following day, at the first crack of dawn, Sơn Tinh appeared before the royal palace with elephants and tigers laden with heaps of gold and gems. He was accepted, and obtained permission to take the Princess off to his mountain.*

*Coming too late with gifts no less magnificent which he had fetched in the bottoms of rivers, Thủy Tinh foamed with rage on finding out that his rival had preceded him. At once, he dashed off in pursuit of Sơn Tinh with his army of aquatic monsters.*

*Titanesque was the war between the two genii. Thủy Tinh called up torrential rains to drown his foe. With the help of the flood, fishes, crabs and octopuses went over the top of the mountain. But, stopped by barrages stretching across the rivers, they were crushed by lumps of*

*stone which the elephants and tigers threw at them. At last, Thủy Tinh had to retreat. But his rancour unappeased, he repeated his attacks year after year.*

The epic struggle is described as follows by the Versified History of the Great South (Đại Nam Quốc Sử Diễn Ca):

*Thủy Tinh lữ bước chậm chân  
Đùng đùng nổi giận đem ân làm thù.  
Mây tuôn gió thổi mịt mù,  
Ào ào rừng nọ, ù ù núi kia.  
Sơn thần hóa phép cũng ghê  
Lưới dăng sông Nhị, phen che ngàn Đồi.  
Núi cao sông cũng còn dài,  
Năm năm báo oán, đời đời đánh ghen.  
By ill luck, the Water's Genie came late,  
Enraged, he turned love into hatred.  
Clouds and winds broke furiously,  
Deafening forests and mountains.  
Not less dreadful was the Mountain's Genie  
Who locked the Red River with nets, and covered the Western forest  
with defensive works.  
For a long time mountains have been standing and rivers flowing,  
But irrepressible is the feud between the two genii who, year after year,  
fight with each other to death for the love of a woman.*

The tale of the God's war is only the folk poetic explanation of the terrific flood that devastates the Red River delta every year. But it also offers two other interests, one psychological, and the other sociological. For one, it shows the preponderance of love in the affective life of the Vietnamese people. For the love of a woman, two heroes did not hesitate to devastate a whole country, like the furious warriors of the Trojan war. The tale also informs us that since prehistoric times, it was customary to offer gifts to the family of the woman one wanted to marry. Thus, there had been some marriage rites as early as those remote times, long before the coming of the Chinese who, after the official records, taught us those rites.

### **3. The Lake of Three Seas.**

Any tourist who has traveled across North Vietnam knows this famous lake, enclosed by Bắc Kạn mountains, and shaped in three bulging parts connected by two narrow channels: hence, its name of Lake of Three Seas (Hồ Ba Bể). An island sits in the middle of the lake.

*According to the legend, this lake was originally a valley. One holiday, an old leper, her clothes awfully polluted with blood and pus, called on the villagers, asking for alms. Wherever she went, she was brutally pushed away. Finally, she knocked at the door of a poor widow who compassionately gave her food and shelter for the night.*

*The next morning, the old leper bade farewell to the landlady, and told her:*

*- Thank you very much for your hospitality. Actually I am the Bodhisattwa Kwannon, and I came to test these villagers. Except for you, they are all wicked people, for their hearts are so hardened that they have neglected the holy duties of hospitality. Nothing can save them now. As for you, good woman, pour out paddy around your house, and remain here tonight, come what may.*

*Thereupon, the Bodhisattwa disappeared into the air.*

*That night, a dreadful storm broke out. Water-spouts poured into the valley, quickly flooding it and turning it into a lake which swallowed up rice-fields, houses, trees, people and animals. Because her house was raised, the good woman alone survived.*

### **4. The “mother and her child” mountain.**

*A peasant couple had two children: a girl and a boy. One day, the children were quarreling over a trivial thing. The boy took the knife used to peel sugar-canes and hit his sister on the nape of her neck. The girl fell down, covered with blood. Horrified, the boy ran away.*

*The girl did not die. Her brother was searched for everywhere, but in vain. The aged parents, driven to despair, weakened from day to day. No more son, nobody to keep up their cult after their death. The painful thought tortured them day and night, and at last they died of sorrow. Left alone, the girl could not protect her small heritage. Soon, she was compelled to sell her house and try her luck elsewhere.*

*After running away, the boy found refuge on a merchant junk. He spent many years in coastal navigation, and at last succeeded in saving a small amount of money. However, the memory of his crime haunted him endlessly. Finally, he decided to return home to ask forgiveness from his parents and sister, if the latter was still alive. Alas. His father and mother were dead, and his sister had gone away nobody knew where.*

*Driven to despair, the boy did not want to remain in his village that reminded him of such cruel memories. He moved to a neighbouring district. There, he met a very beautiful and virtuous girl, and like him an orphan. They fell in love with each other and married. Soon they had a son who completed their happiness.*

*On a summer day, the wife washed her hair that, uncoiled, showed a long scar at the nape of the neck. As he saw it, the husband inquired about its origin.*

*- It is a very sad story, answered his wife. I was seven years old and my brother was six when one day we quarrelled, and he hit me with a knife used for skinning sugar-canes. He believed he had killed me and ran away. My parents died of despair, and though all this happened over twelve years ago, I still often cry when I think of my unhappy brother. What has become of him? Is he dead? Is he alive?*

*The husband was petrified with pain and horror. So, it was his own sister, his beloved sister he had married. After having perpetrated a first crime, fortunately without fatal consequence, he has perpetrated a second, and what a crime, incest. What is to be done? Tell his wife his true identity? No, that is not possible, that would make her die of shame. Let her stay in the dark and continue to live with her as in the past? He*

*shrank with horror as he thought of prolonging his monstrous incest. The sole acceptable solution came to his mind: to go away, and spend the remainder of his life in prayers and penance to expiate his crimes. His sister-wife would surely suffer from his disappearance, but at least it would be a pain devoid of sin.*

*No sooner thought than done. The next morning, he bade farewell to his wife and told her that he was going for a long journey beyond the seas. And from that time on, nobody heard from him. Meanwhile, his wife kept on hoping. Everyday, with her child in her arms, she went up a cliff in the mountain overlooking the seaside, and there she tirelessly watched for her husband's return. Maybe Heaven had pity on her, for finally one day with her child she was changed into rock.*

This mountain, topped by a miraculous statue, was henceforth called the Waiting Wife Mountain (núi Vợ Phu), located in Bình Định province. It is also known by the name of “The mother and her child” given by the French.

**b/ Common Animals and Wares.**

## **5. The Mosquito.**

*A worthy man, named Ngọc Tâm, was unfortunately married to a beautiful but coquettish woman named Nhan Diệp. He was madly in love with her, but Nhan Diệp did not return his love, for he was rather poor.*

*Some years after the marriage, Nhan Diệp fell ill and died. Frantic with grief, Ngọc Tâm did not want to bury his beloved wife; he kept her corpse in his junk, his floating house, and carried it with him wherever he went. An Immortal, taking pity on this love that endured beyond death, recited a magic prayer, then told Ngọc Tâm to give three drops of his blood to his wife who would revive.*

*The miracle was performed. But Nhan Diệp, even though she had returned from death, did not become any wiser. One day, when her husband was not home, she set eyes on a rich businessman, decided to*

*divorce Ngọc Tâm and marry the rich man. On his return, Ngọc Tâm was informed of his wife's cruel decision. His tears and supplications could not change it. At last, Ngọc Tâm sadly told his wife:*

*- Very well, I give you back your freedom. But give me back the three drops of blood I gave you.*

*Quite happy to be let off so easily, Nhan Diệp took a penknife and pricked her finger to get three drops of blood. But hardly had she made this gesture when she dropped dead. For good this time.*

*Divine justice condemned her to become a small insect, the mosquito. In her new form, she did not forget the mishap that happened to her in her previous existence. And so she endeavoured to prick people and take three drops of blood, hoping hence to regain her human form..*

## **6. The Monkey.**

*A townsman and his wife were well known for their greed and heartlessness. Though very wealthy, they had never given a penny to anybody. On the other hand, they were ferociously stingy with their share-croppers. They had at their service a maid, a rather ugly orphan but very kind of heart.*

*One evening at dinner time, an old woman in rags came before the door.*

*- My good Sir, my good lady, she said in a quavering voice, I am dying of hunger and cold. Please give me for charity's sake a penny or a bowl of rice.*

*- Go away, shouted the husband.*

*- Lotus, the wife ordered her maid, drive away this villainous beggar at once.*

*The maid drew near the beggar and whispered:*

*- Grandmother, go and wait for me at the foot of the banyan-tree you see there. When my masters finish eating, I will come and bring you a bowl of rice.*

*In fact, half an hour later, the maid came and gave the beggar-woman a big ball of cooked rice hidden in the tail of her coat.*

*- Well, grandmother, eat it.*

*- Thank you, my good young lady. Aren't you afraid of suffering your masters' anger?*

*- Don't worry, grandmother. They will not notice anything, for it is my own meal that I have brought you.*

*- But then you will have nothing to eat tonight, my poor child.*

*- It is nothing. I am young and can stand hunger till tomorrow morning. So, eat freely, you must have been fasting for a long time.*

*The old woman ate, then told the maid:*

*- You are a good girl, and I'll give you some good advice. In this direction, about one mile from here, there is a brook. Take a bath in it every day; you will feel all the better for that.*

*So saying, the old woman rose up in the air and disappeared. Aware that it was the Bodhhisattwa Kwannon who just appeared to her, the young girl knelt down and wholeheartedly thanked the goddess. Then, she went in the direction indicated and actually found a brook. There she took a bath, then came home.*

*From that day on, she underwent a gradual transformation. She improved in looks from day to day, her complexion brightened, her hair grew longer, her hands became more refined, and her eyes acquired an incomparable glow. Amazed, her masters questioned her. Candidly, she let out that she had bathed in a brook, and that this bath had transformed her.*

*At once, her masters went to the miraculous brook. But while they gamboled there, the water suddenly turned burning hot. Howling with pain, the two old people jumped out of the brook. Wasted labour. Their skin hurt atrociously, and they had to scratch themselves unceasingly to soothe their burns. But where they scratched, at once hairs grew. And in a few minutes, they became monkeys, unable to utter any human word.*

*They ran to their house to hide their shame. Terrified, the maid called the neighbours for help. The monkeys were pushed back, but returned later to the charge. To thrust them away once and for all, the neighbours brought to a white heat two big lumps of stone that guarded the door. When they sat on them, the monkeys had their haunches awfully burnt. They ran away and never dared return to their former house.*

Such would be the origin of the red-haunched monkeys.

## **7. The black cuckoo.**

*Once upon a time, a man had all the virtues but patience. For this reason, he was nicknamed the Impatient. Anxious to find salvation, he made up his mind to practise an old monk's advice. To do a hundred days' penance in a deep forest without opening his mouth.*

*During the first days, everything went very well. Frightened by the presence of that man, the birds at first carefully moved away and left him in peace. Then, emboldened by his entire immobility, a couple of birds came to make their nest in his bun of hair. And before long, they gave birth to a lot of fledglings that made a deafening uproar day and night upon the unfortunate Impatient's head. However, he managed to remain impassive.*

*One day, it was the ninety-ninth day of his penance, the two birds quarrelled with each other. The female accused the male of betraying her with another female when she went to seek food for their young. In turn, the male swore he had always been faithful to his wife. His wife not being convinced, he called upon the monk as witness, asking repeatedly:*

*- Is it not true, Sir, that I have always been faithful to her?*

*And he punctuated his questions with forceful pecks on the unfortunate Impatient's head, who finally exhausted his patience and opened his mouth saying:*

*- Damn you.*

*Having disastrously failed his first test of patience, our Impatient tried another consisting of ferrying a hundred persons across a dangerous river.*

*After several days, he had succeeded in bringing 98 persons from one side of the river to the other, when a woman and her child arrived unexpectedly. Very pleased to see his penance on the point of being accomplished, he helped them to get into his boat, and vigorously rowed. But halfway across the river, the woman told him brusquely:*

*- Stop, boatman. I forgot my bag on the bank. Please go back so I can get it.*

*The boatman docilely obeyed her. But halfway across the second time, the woman again stopped him:*

*- What was I thinking about? I also forgot my child's bowlful of rice. The dearest boy is hungry. Can you not go back a second time?*

*Impatient had the utmost difficulty to control his anger. Nevertheless, he succeeded in keeping his equanimity and obeyed his passenger.*

*But at the third crossing, when the boat had almost reached the other bank, the woman stopped him for a third time:*

*- Woe betide me. I forgot my sand-shoes. How will I manage to walk? Full speed astern, boatman. I cannot walk bare-footed.*

*The boatman then lost his patience and burst out:*

*- It is a very good thing, my lady, that you have your breast on your chest. Otherwise, you would forget them too.*

*At these words, the passenger changed into the Bodhisattva Kwannon and said:*

*- And so you want to find salvation? You are only shamming patience.*

*And she rose up in the air, leaving the unfortunate Impatient quite flabbergasted and desperate. So desperate was he that he changed into a*

*black cuckoo, always bitterly repeating the cruel reproach of the Boddhisattwa Kwannon: Tu Hú (Sham salvation). Since then, the black cuckoo has been called the Tu Hú bird.*

## **8. The toad.**

Among the folk songs, this one looks somewhat surprising:

*Con cóc là cậu ông Trời  
Hễ ai đánh nó thì Trời đánh cho.*

*The toad is Heaven's uncle,  
And he who ventures to beat him will be punished by Heaven.*

Here is the explanation:

*Once upon a time, a dreadful drought was raging on earth. All ponds, pools and lakes were dried up. The Plants drooped, and the animals did not find a drop of water anywhere to quench their thirst. A toad made up his mind to go and see the Celestial King to ask him the reason for this calamity. On his way, he met a bee.*

- *Where are you going, toad?*
- *To Heaven, to request Heaven to stop this drought.*
- *Then I'm coming with you. All the flowers are dead, and I cannot find sap anywhere.*

*A little while later, the two comrades happened to meet a rooster, then a tiger. They told them the reason for their journey, and persuaded them to come along. At last, they reached the door of Heaven.*

- *Stay here, said the toad, and rush up as soon as I call for help.*

*The toad got into the drawing room of the Celestial King and found him playing cards with some Immortals. The toad hopped onto the camp-bed, puffed out his cheeks and looked angrily at the players:*

- *Who is this rascal who dares disturb me? cried the Celestial King. Hallo ! Have him arrested.*

*Some soldiers move forward to seize the toad. But they were furiously stung by the bee flying to the aid of the toad, and had to beat a hasty retreat.*

- *Go forward, Thunderbolt and Lightning genii, ordered the Celestial King.*

*But before these could intervene, they were turned away by the rooster who gave them hurried pecks.*

- *Rush at them, O Celestial Wolf.*

*In the twinkling of an eye, the tiger put the Celestial Wolf to flight. Exhausted of all resources, the Celestial King was compelled to come to terms with the winner.*

- *Uncle Toad, what have you come for?*

- *Sir, for several months not a drop of rain has fallen down the earth, and all of us, animals as well as plants, are suffering horribly from the drought.*

- *Oh ! It is the Rain Genie who is at fault. Let him come here.*

*Confounded, the Rain Genie admitted his laziness. The toad took advantage of the favorable situation and declared:*

- *The sky business is no concern of ours. From now on, I want it to rain as soon as I grind my teeth. Understood? Otherwise, you'll hear from me.*

- *Yes, Uncle, answered politely the Celestial King.*

Actually, it has been noted that when the toads grind their teeth, it is a very reliable sign of the coming rain. Henceforth, this verse of Emperor Lê Thánh Tông in his poem about the toad:

***Nghiến răng chuyển động bốn phương trời.***

*By grinding his teeth, he makes the four corners of the sky tremble.*

The reader may also notice the insolent tone of the toad toward the Celestial King who is supposed to be the father of the Emperor reigning on earth.

## **9. The lime pot.**

*Once there was a thief who lived near a pagoda. As he grew older, he could not afford to carry on his business in the far-lying areas, and was compelled to rob the pagoda from time to time to survive. All pieces of furniture: incense burners, flower vases, and even the altar were successively stolen, but the monks dared not recriminate, for the first command of the Buddhist teaching is to abstain from returning evil for evil.*

*At last, the thief repented and came before the Monk-Superior to confess his sins:*

*- Venerable Master, said he, I am horrified at the crimes I have committed so far. What must I do to expiate them?*

*That was an unexpected opportunity for the monk to get rid of his thief. Yielding to his resentment too long restrained, he said:*

*- My son, if you really want to repent, tomorrow morning climb up the big banyan-tree in front of the pagoda. Recite a prayer, then throw yourself upon the ground. If Buddha forgives you, he will set out a net to carry you to Heaven.*

*The thief obeyed literally this treacherous advice which, in the mind of the revengeful monk, would surely involve the sinner's death. But, to his great amazement, the monk, on the look-out in the pagoda, actually saw a large net set out to support the thief and carry him to Heaven.*

*This miracle immersed the monk into a deep meditation. He told himself: "If the thief who has been a great sinner all his life is saved by Buddha, why should I not be, I who have spent all my life in prayers?"*

*So he climbed up the banyan-tree, recited his prayers, and threw himself upon the ground. Deplorably he died, and his belly, hurled at a stone, swelled beyond measure to keep the lime whose caustic taste symbolizes the wickedness that had remained in him in spite of a virtuous life. He became a lime pot and was sentenced to have his belly endlessly stirred by people who take lime to season their quid of betel.*

## **2. Historical Tales.**

a/ The origins of the Vietnamese people.

## **10. Dragons and Immortals.**

*According to legend, the first Vietnamese dynasty of Hồng Bàng goes back to the Chinese Emperor Đế Minh, grandson of Emperor Thần Nông (the patron Saint of agriculture). On his way to inspect Hồ Nam province, Đế Minh happened to meet an Immortal at the base of Ngũ Lĩnh mountain and married her. Of this marriage was born a son, Lộc Tục, whom the emperor loved dearly and to whom he would be glad to bequeath the Chinese empire. But Lộc Tục did not want to take what should be due his eldest brother Đế Nghi. He received as apanage the southern portion of the empire, the kingdom of Xích Quỷ extended to the Động Đình lake in the North, the Champa in the South, Tứ Xuyên province in the West and the Chinese sea in the East.*

*King Kinh Dương Vương, son of an Immortal, married the daughter of a dragon, the king of Động Đình lake. His son Sùng Lãm took the name of Lạc Long Quân (king of dragons)*

*Here ended the range of supernatural marriages. Lạc Long Quân was satisfied with marrying his cousin Âu Cơ, daughter of Emperor Đế Lai and grand-daughter of the Chinese Emperor Đế Nghi (Kinh Dương vương's brother). Âu Cơ gave birth to a bundle of one hundred eggs which, after hatching, became one hundred boys. Then the king told the queen:*

*- I descend from the dragons and you from the Immortals. We cannot live together for a long time. So, you take fifty of the children and bring them to the mountains. I'll take the other fifty and bring them to the seaside.*

*The decision was soon executed. Thus was founded the Vietnamese nation, including altogether inhabitants of the mountains and of the coastal plains. The eldest son of the king was named Hùng Vương I, and reigned over the Văn Lang kingdom which included 15 provinces from*

*Tuyên Quang in the North to Quảng Trị in the South. The Capital was settled at Phong Châu, in Vĩnh Yên province.*

This legend claims to give the Vietnamese people illustrious origins going back to the first imperial dynasty of China. This snobbery is not to be wondered at, as China was then considered the only civilized nation in the world. Nevertheless, the legend does hold some truth, for a great part of the Vietnamese were people driven out of China by war of famine.

Then, the Vietnamese people's first ancestors would be Immortals and dragons. Apart from the eagerness common to all peoples to seek illustrious origins, we find in this legend an evident allegory. Immortals here indicate merely people living in mountainous areas. As to the dragons, they represent the inhabitants of coastal regions; indeed, we know that the Văn Lang people tattooed their bodies with pictures of dragons to frighten the sea monsters.

**b/ Ancestry of the Great Men in History.**

## **11. The Genie of Phù Đổng.**

*In the reign of king Hùng Vương VI, the Văn Lang enjoyed a prosperous peace. This prosperity aroused the greed of the Chinese emperor who marshalled his troops at the frontier and tried to take hold of this splendid prey.*

*News of this reached king Hùng. For a long time the country had lived in peace and had neglected the military art. No lạc tướng ( military mandarin) nor lạc hầu (civil mandarin) dared assume the responsibility of taking supreme command of the Army. Worried, the king proclaimed in the whole kingdom that whoever succeeded in pushing back the foreign invaders would be magnificently rewarded.*

*At that time, at Phù Đổng village (Võ Ninh province, presently Bắc Ninh), there lived a three-year old child who could not speak or stand up*

yet. When the envoy came and delivered the royal proclamation, his mother said to him in jest:

- My poor child, you are not the one who can defeat the enemy and bring back to his old mother the royal reward.

*Miracle. The child at once stood up and told his mother:*

- Go and fetch the royal envoy, mother.

*Frightened and pleased at the same time, the woman did not know what to do. Aware of this miracle, the neighbours crowded in and advised her to send for the royal envoy:*

- What risk are you running, after all? Even if your child says silly things, he will not be punished.

*The royal envoy came, and seeing the child asked him:*

- It is you who sent for me? What do you expect me to do?

*Rising up on his short legs, the child majestically answered:*

- Your Excellency, go back quietly to the Court and request from the king a horse, a helmet, and a seven-foot long sword, all of them made of wrought iron. Tell His majesty not to worry about the enemy, I will crush them.

*Overjoyed, the royal envoy transmitted to the king this strange request. Blacksmiths were at once ordered to carry out the work. Meanwhile, the mother was madly anxious. What would happen if her child had bluffed? But the boy in a few words heartened her:*

- Don't worry mummy. All you have to do is to give me enough food.

*Actually he was growing up visibly and had gotten an insatiable appetite. Though wealthy, his parents soon could not cope with this situation and had to request help from their neighbours. Two months later, the royal envoy came back with the wrought-iron horse, helmet and sword. The child stretched himself, became a two-fathom tall giant, put on the helmet, brandished the sword, mounted the horse, and cried:*

- I am a Celestial Genie.

*At once, the iron horse uttered a fearsome neighing, and galloped away to Châu Sơn mountain where the enemy army was encamped. The Celestial Genie wiped it out, pursued it to the Ninh Sóc mountain where he destroyed it completely. Then, slapping his horse's head which belched forth flames setting a whole forest on fire, he rose up into the sky.*

*The king had a temple built to celebrate his cult. The spot where his horse breathed fire still retains vestiges of the supernatural fire, and is given the name of Làng Cháy (the burnt village).*

## **12. Đinh Tiên Hoàng.**

Emperor Đinh Tiên Hoàng (968-978) was the founder of the second dynasty after Vietnam recovered its independence. The first dynasty, the Ngô (939-965) had sunk into anarchy, and twelve warlords had shared the kingdom between them. One of them, Trần Minh Công, held sway over Thái Bình province. At his death, his best lieutenant Đinh Bộ Lĩnh inherited his power. Thanks to his genius in the art of war, Bộ Lĩnh succeeded in quickly defeating his eleven rivals, and ascended the throne in 968 under the name of Đinh Tiên Hoàng. His magnificent victories gave the young emperor a supernatural prestige, from which the following legend was born.

*Hoa Lư, native village of Bộ Lĩnh, in Ninh Bình province, was watered by a brook where a huge otter lived. One day, while Đinh Công Trứ's wife took a bath there, she was raped by the otter and shortly after became pregnant. When the otter was killed by the villagers, she gathered its bones and hid them in the kitchen. A few months later, she gave birth to Đinh Bộ Lĩnh who showed from his infancy marvellous aptitudes for swimming. After Công Trứ's death, Bộ Lĩnh was raised by his uncle who employed him to tend his buffaloes. One day, a Chinese geomancer, by pursuing the Dragon's vein from the Chinese frontier, came to Hoa Lư village. There he found a deep whirlpool, and knew it was the dragon's head, a miraculous place capable of giving the descendants of him who was buried there the means of ascending the royal throne. But how could bones be buried in this whirlpool? The*

*Chinaman promised a great reward to the one who would dare dive into the whirlpool and relate to him what was at the bottom. Đinh Bộ Lĩnh, excellent swimmer, volunteered. He dived in and saw at the bottom of the pool a stone horse. He related this to the Chinaman.*

*- Very well, boy. Dive in once more and give the horse this wisp of straw. And tell me what the horse does with it.*

*After a while, Bộ Lĩnh came up again and, very nervous told the Chinaman:*

*- Sir, the stone horse has opened its mouth and swallowed your wisp of straw.*

*- That is fine. Don't tell this adventure to anyone. Here is your reward.*

*And the Chinaman went back to China to exhume his father's bones and put them into the mouth of the stone horse. But he had not dealt with a silly boy. From the mysterious looks of the Chinaman, Đinh Bộ Lĩnh understood at once that he had just found out the site of a miraculous grave. He asked his mother:*

*- Where are my father's bones, Mummy?*

*- What do you want to do with them?*

*Then Bộ Lĩnh related the adventure he just had with a Chinaman. His mother made no more difficulties about entrusting the otter's bones to her child. He wrapped them into a wisp of straw, dived into the whirlpool, and gave it to the horse to swallow.*

*From then on, Đinh Bộ Lĩnh's strength and courage grew considerably. He became the chief of the village's young cowherds, and amused himself dividing them into two clans who everyday made pitched battles at each other. And he compelled his "soldiers" to carry him shoulder high, and to escort him with reeds by way of spears and banners.*

*One day, to feast his little army, he killed a buffalo of his uncle's. A villager ran to warn the uncle of what was happening. Furious, the old man rushed headlong with a stick at his nephew in order to punish him.*

*Bộ Lĩnh ran away hastily. Reaching a river, he pitched himself down. A dragon appeared and held him upon the waters. Before this miracle, his uncle fell to his knees.*

*Shortly after, Bộ Lĩnh enlisted in Trần Minh Công's army. His valour was so great that he quickly became his indispensable lieutenant. And the rest was history. Bộ Lĩnh overcame all the feudal lords and proclaimed himself emperor.*

*Now let's get back to the Chinese geomancer. Several years later when he returned to Vietnam (for journeys in those times were very hazardous and slow), he was informed that Đinh Tiên Hoàng had made use of the miraculous grave for his own benefit. Very annoyed, he decided to have his revenge. He came to the Court and begged for an audience with the emperor.*

*- Sir, he said, it was Your August Ancestors' virtue that gave Your Majesty this gift of Heaven. But your horse wants a sword for your glory to be complete.*

*Unsuspectingly the Emperor took this treacherous advice. He had a sword suspended at the neck of the stone horse. His glorious reign distinguished itself by more victories but was short-lived because, under the action of the whirling waters, the sword in the end cut off the stone horse's head. Indeed, Đinh Tiên Hoàng was murdered after only a few years of reign.*

### **13. Lý Thái Tổ.**

*Lý Thái Tổ, the founder of the Lý dynasty, was of unknown lineage. The legend asserts that his mother had conceived him in a dream, from a genie. Expecting a child without having been married, she was compelled to leave her village. One evening, she collapsed from fatigue before Ứng Tâm pagoda, and gave birth to a boy. That night, Lý Khánh Vân, the monk superior of the pagoda saw in a dream a genie telling him:*

*- Go and welcome His Majesty the emperor who is now in front of the pagoda.*

*Early in the morning, the monk woke up and actually found before the pagoda a new born baby, and beside him his dead mother. The monk had his mother buried and took care of the child whom he adopted as his son and name Lý Công Uẩn.*

*The child, whose lines on the palm of his hands showed the hazy letters Sơn Hà and Xả Tắc (Mountains and Rivers, Genii or earth and harvesting) was gifted with an unrivalled mind. When he was only 6 years old, he could already read fluently all the prayer books. But, very mischievous, he took one day the sticky rice balls intended for cult, and hollowed their interior to eat it. The Genie guardian of the Pagoda informed the Monk Superior of this in a dream. After the mischief had been investigated, the young fellow was severely reprimanded:*

- Who informed you, Master?*
- The Genie guardian of the pagoda.*

*Furious, Công Uẩn wrote on the back of the Genie's statue: "Sentenced to exile three thousand miles away". That night, the Genie guardian of the pagoda appeared again before the Monk Superior and sadly told him:*

- His Majesty just expelled me. Good bye.*

*On awakening, the monk effectively found the condemnation written on the back of the Genie's statue. In vain did he attempt to wash it out with a cloth and water. Then he sent for Công Uẩn who easily washed out the condemnation with his saliva.*

*When Công Uẩn was nine years old, the monk Lý Khánh Vân had nothing more to teach him. So he sent his adopted son to the famous Vạn Hạnh, the best scholar in the kingdom. With this erudite master, Công Uẩn did not take long to become himself an outstanding scholar, learned in theology as well as in Confucianist philosophy and skilled in the art of war.*

*For some delinquency, he was condemned one day by his master to keep kneeling for the whole night. Then he improvised the following couplet:*

***Canh khuya không dám giang chân ruỗi***

***Vì ngại non sông xã tắc xiêu.***

*At midnight I dare not stretch my legs*

*For fear that the country would be overturned.*

*In these proud words, the monk Vạn Hạnh recognized in his disciple a future emperor.*

*Thanks to his vast knowledge, Công Uẩn was soon appointed mandarin at the Court of the former Lê. When Emperor Lê Trung Tông was murdered by his brother Lê Long Đĩnh, only Công Uẩn stayed behind with the victim and cried for him. Affected by this courage, Long Đĩnh who usurped the throne, thought highly of Công Uẩn and even entrusted him with the command of his life-guards.*

*At the death of this depraved prince, ignominiously known in history by the name of Lê Ngọa Triều (the king who held audience in reclining position because of a shameful illness), Lý Công Uẩn was acclaimed emperor by all the officials.*

#### **14. About Lê Thái Tổ.**

*His family came from Như Ang village. Strolling one day in the Lam Sơn region, Thanh Hóa province, Lê Lợi's grandfather saw a lot of crows whirling round and round over a hill. At once, he told himself: "Here is a blessed land", and he moved there. The Lê family quickly prospered in their new estate and became landlords with authority over hundreds of share-croppers.*

*When Lê Lợi reached manhood, Vietnam had fallen under the Chinese domination (1407-1428). Well informed of his great abilities, the Chinese authorities offered him an important office in their administration. But he refused, saying to his circle of friends:*

*- Saving his country and performing heroic deeds, such is the objective of a hero. As to becoming the servant of a master, no thanks.*

*He welcomed to his estate all who opposed the Chinese domination. Among these, the legend particularly mentioned Nguyễn Trãi and Trần Nguyên Hãn. The latter was a peddler. During his wanderings, he happened to stop one evening at the Chèm temple (near Hanoi). At midnight, he overheard a talk between the genie of this temple and the genie of a neighbouring village:*

*- There is a Heaven Council tonight. Are you going there?*

*- No, because I have a distinguished guest, a future duke. But you go ahead and let me know on your return which measures have been taken.*

*Not long after, the neighbouring village's genie came back and informed his colleague of Chèm that the Heaven Council had decided that Lê Lợi would be emperor of Vietnam and Nguyễn Trãi his counsellor.*

*Trần Nguyên Hãn called in Nguyễn Trãi and related to him this surprising talk. Incredulous, Nguyễn Trãi asked to have the Chèm genie confirm it himself. The genie appeared to him in dream:*

*- I dare not disclose the secrets of Heaven. But try to ask princess Tiên Dong to tell you. As a woman, she won't be blamed for her gossiping.*

*So Nguyễn Trãi went to the temple dedicated to princess Tiên Dong at Hung Yên, and formulated his request. The goddess appeared to him in dream:*

*- Nguyễn Trãi, she said, don't you know that Lê Lợi will be emperor and you his counsellor?*

*Confident of this divine revelation, Nguyễn Trãi and Trần Nguyên Hãn called on Lê Lợi in his refuge of Lam Sơn. They became his best lieutenants during the ten-year Independence War (1418-1428). As a reward Trần Nguyên Hãn received a dukedom for his numerous victories, and Nguyễn Trãi was appointed marquis and prime minister.*

*It is also related that Lê Lợi, while hiding in the Lam Sơn mountains found a miraculous sword during a fishing party, and that this godsend decided him to raise the flag of revolt against the Chinese domination.*

*Later on, as emperor, he went for a boat-ride on the Little Lake of Hanoi. A gigantic turtle appeared, threatening to upset the imperial boat. Lê Thái Tổ drew his sword to fight the turtle which seized it and disappeared at once to the bottom of the lake. The lake was pumped out in vain; the sword as well as the turtle remained untraceable. The Emperor came to the conclusion that the sword had been given to him to save the country; now that his mission was accomplished, the sword must be returned to Heaven. For this reason, the Little Lake was since then baptized the Lake of the Restored sword (Hồ Hoàn Kiếm).*

## **15. Trịnh Kiểm.**

*He was a pious son. Fatherless, he was full of attention for his mother whose besetting sin was a fierce greediness for chicken. But Trịnh Kiểm was very poor and could not afford to buy a chicken every day for his mother. So he was induced frequently to steal chickens from his neighbours. One day, while he was busy cutting wood in the forest, his neighbours seized this opportunity to get rid of the old greedy lady; they threw her into a pit. It happened that this pit was a holy place which was at once filled up. A geomancer, after examining this miraculous grave, uttered this prediction: "This grave will generate a family of lords who, though not emperors, will have all the powers of the nation in their hands. And this family will last two centuries, at the end of which it will decline through its own faults".*

*After he lost his mother, Trịnh Kiểm left his village and went to seek adventure as far as Laos. At that time, the Mạc had dethroned the Lê, but a supporter of the fallen dynasty, Nguyễn Kim, succeeded in saving one of its offsprings, and helped him to re-ascend the throne in a remote region of the kingdom, the Trấn Ninh plateau, a former Laotian province annexed to Vietnam many years ago.*

*Trịnh Kiểm enlisted in the loyalist general's army, and was instructed to keep the stables in good order. One night, while Trịnh Kiểm was sleeping, Nguyễn Kim inspected the camp, and to his great surprise saw a red gleam leaking through the stables' roof. He went in,*

*and found Trịnh Kiểm sleeping soundly; a miraculous glimmer emanated from his body.*

*Most impressed, Nguyễn Kim associated Trịnh Kiểm with his fortune, and gave him command of his troops. Trịnh Kiểm revealed himself a brilliant strategist, and helped his benefactor to slowly win over the whole Nghệ An province. To keep Trịnh Kiểm more closely at his side, Nguyễn Kim gave him his daughter Ngọc Bảo in marriage. At the generalissimo's death shortly after, Trịnh Kiểm naturally took his place as the head of the royal army, for his brother-in-law Nguyễn Uông and Nguyễn Hoàng were then infants.*

*That how the Trịnh acceded to the supreme power. Trịnh Tùng, son of Trịnh Kiểm, expelled the usurper Mạc from the capital Thăng Long and united the kingdom again under the sham authority of Emperor Lê, whereas he held the effective power, both civil and military. His title of Prince (Vương) was to be passed on to his descendants throughout two centuries, until 1786.*

### **3. Sociological Tales.**

#### **16. Betel and Areca.**

*In the reign of king Hùng IV, a tribal chief by the name of Cao had twin boys who looked like two peas. The two brothers Tân and Lang loved each other dearly. Orphaned at sixteen, they were taken in by one of their father's friends, who had an extremely beautiful daughter, Xuân Phù. The two brothers immediately fell in love with her. But Xuân Phù could not tell the one from the other, so alike they were, both physical and morally. To solve her dilemma, she waited on them at a dinner, but put only one pair of chopsticks. Lang, the younger twin, hurried to offer respectfully the chopsticks to his elder brother Tân. Xuân Phù then confessed to her father her love for Tân. The marriage was joyfully celebrated, for Lang, before his brother's evident happiness, bravely repressed his unrequited love to the bottom of his heart.*

*Many months went by. Lang always showed his brother and sister-in-law a respectful affection, but Tân, engrossed in his conjugal happiness, neglected his younger brother more and more. Finally Lang made up his mind to leave rather than bear that coldness which hurt his sensibility. Sick at heart, he walked onward day after day, aimlessly. At last, he came to the bank of a river. There he collapsed, completely exhausted. Heaven took pity on his immense sorrow, and changed him into a stone block.*

*Tân was surprised at his brother's absence. Then, understanding its cause too late, he bitterly blamed himself for his selfishness, and decided to go and seek the runaway and beg for his pardon. He followed the road his brother had taken and, like his brother, reached the bank of the river. He leaned his back against the stone block that had been his brother, and wept mournfully. He wept so much that he died and was changed into an areca palm tree.*

*In her turn, Xuân Phù set out to find her beloved husband. The same river which had stopped the two brothers stopped her. Tired out, she dropped at the foot of the areca palm tree, the form of which her husband had assumed. She put her arms around it in a final effort and breathed her last. She was then changed into a creeping plant called betel which wound round the arec palm tree.*

*So died those three victims of brotherliness and conjugal love. Heaven had mercy on them and awarded them the titles of genii. They appeared in dreams to the neighbouring people who hurried to build a temple in their honour. News of it came to king Hùng IV. He went to see the stone block, the tree and the creeping plant, and heard the story of their miraculous origin.*

*- What do you think? he questioned his mandarins.*

*- Sir, said an old courtier, it is customary to test the blood relation of two persons by mixing together a few drops of the blood of each one. If they blend perfectly, the test is positive. Maybe we can try the same test in this case. Please Your Majesty to give orders to mix together a leaf of the creeping plant, a fruit of the palm tree and a piece of the stone coarsely ground. We will see what the result is.*

*The King agreed and, to the general wonder, the mixture showed a fine red colour. Very pleased, the king wanted to taste it himself, and found it full-flavoured, nicely tart.*

This legend probably gave rise to the Vietnamese habit of chewing quids of betel that include a portion of areca nut and a betel leaf rolled round a little slaked lime. Moreover, the quid of betel has become the indispensable element of wedding gifts.

### **17. The New Year's Pole.**

*In prehistoric times, the Vietnamese territory was haunted by malicious devils. Taking pity on the sufferings of its inhabitants. Buddha called on them one day. He was at once crowded round by the devils who blocked his way.*

*- This land please me, he said. Will you sell it to me?*

*- No.*

*Then Buddha opened his hands, and from them fell a lot of gold, diamonds and pearls.*

*- All these treasures are yours, if you agree to sell me only a small area.*

*- How large? asked the devils, over excited by desire for the wonderful treasure they saw.*

*- Just enough to spread my robe over it.*

*- Only that? All right then.*

*- Thank you. But I warn you that this area will definitely belong to me, and that you will be forbidden to set foot on it again.*

*- Of course. Well, spread your robe on the ground, and give us your treasure in return.*

*Buddha threw his robe, which spread outwards boundlessly, shoving back the devils who howled painfully as they ran away.*

*- Come here, my children, said Buddha to the Vietnamese people who timorously lay in hiding in the neighbouring bushes. This land is yours from now on, and protected from the devils' influence. You can live there in peace. Nevertheless, be ware that during the New Year*

*festivals hell is opened for the devils who oppressed you. They might come here during these holidays to disturb you. To forbid them access to your dwellings, you have only to fix into the ground of your front yard a tall bamboo pole topped by a baked clay plate bearing my emblem. On seeing this Cây Nêu, the devils will know that you are my friends and dare not trouble you.*

*Thus has originated the custom of fixing the Cây Nêu when the New Year draws near.*

## **18. The rice cakes.**

*King Hùng VI had 22 sons by various wives. When he was getting old, he wanted to choose a successor. He called in all his sons and told them:*

*- Soon the New Year will come. Everyone of you will have to offer a tray containing dishes of food intended for the ancestral cult. I will give the throne to the one whose gift is the best.*

*The Princes hastened to send messengers to search for the most wonderful foods: dragon's liver, pâté of phoenix, minced meat of peacock, and so on. Only prince Tiét Liêu, motherless, and for that reason unprovided with great wealth, did not covet the royal crown. But one night, a genie appeared to him in a dream and told him:*

*- Nothing on earth is more precious than rice which nurtures people. Therefore the best food will be cakes made out of rice. To symbolize the sky, you will make some of the cakes in a round shape. Make others in square shape to symbolize the earth. The round ones will be made only of sticky rice well boiled and pounded. For the square cakes, take rice, put in the middle of it a little paste of green beans, wrap up the whole with banana leaves, and finally boil it. The wrapper symbolizes the protection your parents gave you, and the nucleus of green bean paste symbolizes the virtues handed down to you by your ancestors.*

*Overjoyed, prince Tiét Liêu observed the genie's directions meticulously. On the New Year day, the princes put their trays of food on*

*the altar. Prince Tiết Liêu's tray was the least pretentious, but the most praised by king Hùng who acknowledged in this wise son an eminent virtue: gratitude to the sky, the earth, and the ancestors.*

*From then on, youngsters and grown-ups alike enjoy the rice cakes bánh chưng and bánh dày during the Tết festivals, of which they are the indispensable element, for they always evoke the lively atmosphere of the Tết in Vietnam. What Vietnamese living abroad has not felt his heart ache in the last night of the lunar year, while thinking of those simple cakes, to which no pasty, no caviar, no turkey in the world could be compared?*

## CHAPTER X

### EDUCATIONAL TALES

Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism had equal influence on the Vietnamese mind. This assertion is true for the common people as well as for the scholars, although each has his special way of understanding the three philosophical teachings. These differences are further elaborated at the end of this book. Below are a few tales that express the Taoist, Buddhist and Confucianist thoughts of the common people.

#### 1. Tales of Taoist Propensity.

a/ Belief in the existence of the genii and the immortals.

#### 19. Chử Đông Tử.

*Princess Tiên Dong, king Hùng III's daughter, was divinely beautiful but somewhat whimsical. In spite of her father's displeasure, she rejected all proposals of marriage and asserted her decision to remain single. As such, she could gratify her passion for travelling and enjoy the wonders of nature. Because the king loved her tenderly, he granted her wishes and ordered a large fleet to escort her on all the rivers of the kingdom.*

*At that time, in Chử Xá village, Hưng Yên province, lived two poor fishermen, Chử Cù Vân and his son Chử Đông Tử. A fire having destroyed all their belongings, they had only a loin-cloth left that they were using in turn. When he felt he was dying, Cù Vân told his son:*

*- Keep the loin-cloth for yourself after my death.*

*Chử Đông Tử was a pious son: he could not bear to let his father be buried naked. So, having nothing left to clothe himself with, he had to go*

*fishing by night. In the day time, he remained immersed in water, and sold his fishes and shrimps to the boats moored in the neighbourhood.*

*One day, princess Tiên Dong happened to travel by and stopped with her brilliant retinue at the very place where Chử Đồng tử was immersed in water. Quite frightened, he hid in a bush on the river bank, under a layer of sand. But princess Tiên Dong, attracted by the picturesque scenery, wanted to take a bath. She had curtains drawn around the bush, undressed and poured water on herself. How amazed she was to see suddenly a naked young man appear on the sand.*

*- Who are you? and what are you doing here? she cried out.*

*- Madam, answered Chử Đồng Tử, I am a poor fisherman who hasn't any clothes. When I saw your boats drawing near, I had to hide here. I humbly beg your pardon.*

*The princess hastily put on her clothes, threw the young stranger a piece of material so that he could look decent enough, then meticulously questioned him about his life. At last, after careful consideration, she sighed:*

*- I wanted to remain single all my life, but it seems Heaven doesn't want it. Let's Heaven will be done then.*

*She called in her ladies-in-waiting and officers, told them of her extraordinary adventure, and informed them of the decision she had just taken.*

*- Your Highness, Chử Đồng Tử hastened to protest, how dare I, a poor fisherman, marry a royal princess?*

*- It is fate that settles it. So have no scruples about it.*

*- Long live Their Royal Highnesses, cried all the ladies-in-waiting and the officers in unison.*

*The royal marriage was celebrated sumptuously that very evening. When he learned of it, the king became dreadfully angry.*

*- In marrying a tramp, Tiên Dong has insulted her royal rank. Let her be banished from the Court.*

*For her part, the princess dared not face her august father's wrath. To support her people, she was forced to trade. She sold all her jewels,*

*bought land, and so founded a commercial port at the Chử Xá village. Her town quickly prospered and became a meeting place for the merchant ships of the Văn Lang kingdom and overseas countries.*

*One day, a rich trader came and advised her to send someone abroad to buy some unusual goods that could be resold for a large profit. Chử Đông Tử was entrusted with this mission. He set sail with the trader. On landing at Quỳnh Viên island, he happened to meet a Taoist priest who, after examining him, declared that he was predestined to become an Immortal. Overcome with enthusiasm, Đông Tử committed his gold to the trader's care and remained on the island for a year to learn the secrets of the Way (Đạo). When he left, his master gave him a magical hat and a magical stick.*

*As soon as he was back, he converted his wife to Taoism. Both overcame their worldly illusions; they gave up trading and went to seek refuge in a deserted area so that they could devote all their energies to study the true teachings. That evening, they came to a rural site. Tired out, Chử Đông Tử fixed his magical stick and hat into the ground. At once, o miracle, a town appeared, crowded with soldiers and inhabitants.*

*The king heard of it, thought it was a revolt led by his daughter and sent an army to fight the rebels. The princess was urged to take precautions for self-defense.*

*- No, she answered, I won't try to defend this town which is but a manifestation of Heaven's will. Anyhow, a daughter must not oppose her father with arms.*

*The royal army, encamped on the other side of the river, was ready to storm the town. But during the night a dreadful thunderstorm broke out, carrying away the whole town with its inhabitants. The next morning, its former site was occupied by a sand-bank near a pond. The sand-bank was from then one called the Sui Generis Bank, and the pond, the Pond-formed-in-One-Night.*

## 20. Phạm Viên.

*The Vietnamese people believed firmly in the existence of Immortals. Below is the legend of Phạm Viên which is rather a true story as it provides accurate details of the times and places where the story happened. The serious reader can easily check their veracity.*

*Phạm Viên was a native of An Bài village, Đông Thành sub-prefecture, Nghệ An province. His father Phạm Chát had received the doctorate degree during the reign of emperor Lê Thánh Tông (1619-1642), and held the post of Thị Lang (head clerk in a ministry) at the Court.*

*Contrary to his elder brother Phạm Tân, a very bookish student, Phạm Viên did not like to study. He spent his time strolling through the fields, or dreaming endlessly in a corner of the house. The Thị Lang was furious with this lazy son who was a disgrace to his family. Before his father's reproofs, Phạm Viên submissively bowed and took a book, trying to read it, but as soon as his father went away, he let go of the book and was again immersed in a reverie. At last, he declared:*

*- Why take so much trouble to live? Even if you live for 80 years, it is merely a dream of the millet boiler.<sup>1</sup>*

*And he left his house to go deep into the Hồng Lĩnh mountains. After three days of walking, he met an old man dressed as a Taoist priest. He bowed down to him, and asked to be his disciple. The old man led him to*

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<sup>1</sup> Lư Sinh was a poor scholar who had just failed a literature examination. He stopped at an inn where he met a Taoist priest to whom he told his misfortunes. The priest gave him a pillow and advised him to lie down on a bed while waiting for the millet to boil.

Lư Sinh found himself passing an examination, appointed prime minister, marrying a princess, father of five sons all mandarins at the Court, and grandfather of about ten grandchildren all nice and intelligent. At last, he died when he was 80 years old, replete with all wordly happinesses.

At this very moment, he woke up; the millet was not yet cooked. The taoist priest told him, smiling:

- So is life, that lasts less than a dream

*a thatched cottage furnished only with a table with a jar of water on it. Then the old man gave him a book to read:*

*- When you are hungry or thirsty drink this water. I will come back when you know this book by heart.*

*Phạm Viên was left alone in the thatched cottage. How much time did he stay there? He did not know exactly. When he came to the last page of the book, the water in the jar was also used up. Then the old man appeared and told him, smiling:*

*- Very good, my son, now you may go back to your home.*

*So saying, both the old man and the thatched cottage disappeared miraculously. Phạm Viên went out of the forest, in the direction of the sunrise. In a short while, he arrived at his village. He had been away for twelve years.*

*Nobody in his family knew he had become an Immortal, but his strange behaviour was noticed: sometimes he slept ten days running, and ate almost nothing, maybe a spoonful of rice-soup every two or three months. "He is crazy", that was what his friends and relatives thought of him.*

*Phạm Viên had a 70-year old childless aunt. He gave her 21 pennies:*

*- Take these 21 pennies, my aunt, but spend only 20 within the same day. You will regain the 21 on the next day.*

*The miracle of the multiplication of pennies was repeated every day, till the old lady's death.*

*One day, having stopped at the inn of Ngọc Sơn, Phạm Viên told the innkeeper:*

*- You will have a fire before long. To put it out, throw in it only this bottle of alcohol that I give you.*

*In the fifth month, a fire actually broke out. The summer monsoon was blowing a gale and spread the fire until it threatened to consume*

*everything. Then the innkeeper remembered Phạm Viên's prediction. She threw the bottle of alcohol into the fire: at once, a torrential rain poured down and put out the fire. And it was noticed that the rain water smelt strongly of alcohol.*

*Another day, while going across Hoằng Hóa sub-prefecture, Phạm Viên met an old beggar. Moved by compassion, he gave him a stick and told him:*

*- You need not go and ask for alms. When you come to a market, place this stick in the ground and wait until you have got one hundred pennies before going off.*

*Indeed this stick had the magical power of attracting good fortune. From the moment it was set somewhere, people hurried in to make their contributions. And the old beggar was freed from all bodily worries till his death.*

*A peasant from Phạm Viên's village asked to be taught the Chinese characters.*

*- Very well, said Phạm Viên, learn these two words: cát cao, the water pail.*

*The next day, the peasant asked to be taught other words.*

*- What is the good of it? retorted Phạm Viên. These two words, if you know them well, will be sufficient to give you honours.*

*Some years later, our peasant was called up in the army. One day, he was escorting Prince Trịnh in a sailboat on the Great Lake of Thăng Long (Hanoi of the present day). Out of sheer caprice, the prince ordered a list of all articles found in the boat to be made. When the water-pail was brought in, nobody could remember what that vulgar impliment was called in Chinese. Then our peasant moved forward and humbly said:*

*- Your Highness, your Excellencies, I have been taught by my master that the water-pail is named cát cao in Chinese.*

*Delighted with the knowledge of his soldier, the prince at once ordered that he be given the royal warrant of six class mandarin.*

*It is to be remembered that Phạm Viên's father worked at the Thăng Long capital as head clerk in a ministry, whereas his family remained at An Bài village, Nghệ An province. One day Phạm Viên urged his mother and his brother to go to Thăng Long and take care of the Thị Lang who, he asserted, was very ill. They did not believe him at first, but finally, at his repeated request, they started for Thăng Long. Too late. The Thị Lang had just died the day before.*

*It was suggested that a large junk be hired to carry the coffin back to the native village by sea. But Phạm Viên insisted on taking the land route. The others had to put up with his decision, although in his heart of hearts each one told himself that Phạm Viên was not in his right mind to carry the coffin for so many hundreds of miles. So the funeral procession left Thăng Long at the first cock-crow. O miracle, hardly had the sun risen up over the treetops when the procession found itself at An Bài.*

*When his father's funeral rites were over, Phạm Viên went off into the mountains. Five years later, his mother died. On the evening of the funeral, Phạm Viên came back to weep on her grave, then set out again. The next day, his family found on the grave a trunk on which were written these words: "From the orphan Phạm Viên". The trunk was opened, and out came, as from a magic box, a buffalo, a pig, cocks, cakes, some rolls of fabric and one hundred ingots of silver.*

*From then on, Phạm Viên was never to appear again to his family. But he was still met occasionally either in Thăng Long or at the mouth of the Thần Phù river. In the reign of Bảo Thái (1720-1728), a distinguished scholar named Trương Hữu Điền started a school in Thăng Long. One day when he gave an exercise in literary composition to his students, a poorly dressed peasant mingled with the others, wrote his composition in the twinkling of an eye, handed it in, and disappeared. On examining that work Trương Hữu Điền said to his students:*

*- This piece of literature must be from an Immortal. Surely it is Mr. Phạm Viên who wanted to poke fun at me.*

## 21. The man who married a toad.

*A wealthy farmer and his wife were getting on forty and still childless. Very piously, they went to all pagodas to ask for one child. At last, their wish was granted, but the woman, after a normal pregnancy, gave birth to a female toad. The couple, at first sadly disappointed, got over their sorrow when they saw that their baby, save for her animal form, spoke and acted exactly as a normal child. Better still, the toad revealed herself extremely intelligent, and learned reading and writing with ease. But since she was a girl, her parents, after some years, took her away from school and entrusted her with overseeing the agricultural work. Before her vigilant eyes, no farm-hand dared be idle.*

*One day, a student went across her fields and, likely immerse in meditation, trod upon some sheaves of corn. He heard a gracious voice telling him:*

*- Sir, please take care, you are bruising my sheaves of corn.*

*The student looked around but saw nobody. Peals of laughter burst out:*

*- I am here, at your feet. I am Miss Toad, daughter of Mr. Hai the farmer.*

*The student looked down, and actually saw a toad.*

*- Is it you who spoke to me?*

*- Why, certainly.*

*- Oh. Excuse me, Miss Toad. I am Xuân, with my compliments.*

*- And where are you going, Mr. Xuân?*

*- I'm going to Mr. Doctor's school, which is in the neighbouring village.*

*- Aha. You are very lucky, you are, to be a boy. You are allowed to pursue your study to the end.*

*- You have studied, haven't you?*

*- Oh. Merely a few books.*

*Agreeably surprised, the student started a serious talk with the toad about literature, philosophy and history. And he had to admit that she knew almost as much as he did.*

*From that day on, the student would chat with her for long hours. Gradually he came to love her to distraction. At last, he confided in his*

*mother who laughed in his face. But he stood fast and threatened to commit suicide if he was not allowed to marry Miss Toad. For the sake of peace, his mother had to yield to his fierce determination. She asked, for her son, Miss Toad's hand in marriage. Mr. and Mrs Hai agreed, and the marriage was celebrated pompously, while his schoolmates mocked at him. But the student, quite lost in his love, did not pay much attention.*

*To annoy him, his schoolmates decided that every student would have to offer a tray of food when an anniversary at the teacher's house was to be celebrated. Xuân came home, perplexed, and was asked the reason for it by his wife.*

*- I have, answered Xuân, to offer a tray of food to the Doctor. But you know, Mother is old and not very clever in cooking. As for you, darling, I don't think you. . .*

*- Don't worry. You will have your tray of food on time.*

*The students eagerly waited for the anniversary day at their teacher's for they were interested in knowing how Xuân would manage with this toad-wife. But great was their amazement when Xuân's offering was judged the best.*

*They fell back upon a second test and decided that the teacher's robe being worn out, each student must offer him a new robe without taking any measurements. Again, Xuân entrusted his trouble to his wife, who again assured him that things would be all right. Actually, while the Doctor was taking a nap, she changed into a mosquito and carefully took his measurements, so that the robe she made fit perfectly, whereas the other robes, made by guesswork, were either too loose or too tight.*

*Twice defeated, and inexplicably so, the students made up their minds to strike the great blow. They decreed that on the New Year day, all married students had to bring their wives to the teacher's in order to offer him their wishes for the New Year. This time, Xuân came home seriously depressed. Once again, he entrusted his sorrow to his wife, but she only smiled.*

*On New Year's Day, Xuân, very abashed, called on his master, his wife hopping behind him. Half way there, she told him to stop for a while. She went behind a bush, got rid of her toad wrapping, and joined her husband who saw coming out of the bush, instead of a toad, a young*

woman of dazzling beauty. He cried out joyfully, jumped into the bush, took hold of the toad wrapping, tore it up, then asked his wife:

- Ah, darling, why were you so long in making me happy?

- Because the time had not yet come for me to resume my human form.

- And this time has come?

- Yes, she answered shamefacedly.

- Heaven be thanked for it.

Triumphantly they walked into the teacher's house, amidst exclamations of jealous fury from the students and their ugly wives.

## **22. The water-carrier and the Immortal.**

It is said that the daughters of Eve are curious; so are Immortals. In the paradise where they live, they have all the amusements they want. In the long run, though, they grow tired of it all, and set out to go down to Earth and examine closely that valley of tears.

*Thus, one day three fairies got their wings, put them on, and went to visit the human world. After wandering all morning, they came to a pool.*

- Oh. What limpid water. Let's take a bath here.

*They hid their wings in a bush, then joyfully frolicked in the fresh water.*

- That is enough, said the eldest fairy after an hour. Let's go back up to the sky.

- Yes, let's go back, the second fairy nodded in agreement.

*So saying, the two came out of the pool and recuperated their wings.*

- Oh, my sisters, cried out the youngest, why such a hurry? Are we not very well here?

- Our escapade has lasted long enough, and the Heavenly King might notice it. Let's get back quickly.

- What a coward you are. Go back if you want. I will remain here for another hour.

- Good bye. And be prudent, eh?

*The two Immortals flew away in a rustle of wings, leaving their younger sister on Earth. Meanwhile, a peasant coming to the pool to draw water, saw a beautiful woman frolicking there. Carefully he hid in*

*the bush and there he found a pair of wings. He understood that they are a fairy's attributes and hurried to hide them in his corn loft. Then he came back to the pool.*

*The Immortal had gone out of the water and was looking for her wings.*

- *Did you see my wings, Sir? She asked the water-carrier.*
- *No, Miss, he answered with false ingenuousness.*
- *Oh. Woe betide me. I can never again go back to the sky.*
- *Where are you going now?*
- *I don't know. I do not know anybody on Earth.*
- *Then come to my house.*
- *To your house?*
- *Yes, to my house. Although it is only a small thatched cottage, it is a shelter to protect you against wolves and tigers.*
- *Wolves and tigers, what are they?*
- *They are wild beasts that would devour you, Miss, if they chanced to meet you.*
- *Oh. Woe betide me. Woe betide me.*
- *Well, are you coming with me or not? I have to go back and fix my dinner.*

*The unlucky immortal had no choice but to follow the peasant to his shoddy thatched cottage, to marry him, and to work laboriously from morning to evening. She who had spent all her time singing and dancing, now she was busy with menial work that spoilt her fine hands: sweeping, mending, cooking, and so on.*

*After a year, there was another complication: she gave birth to a boy. And from then on she had to breastfeed him, lull him to sleep, and nurse him when he fell ill.*

*One day, after she had gone to the market, the peasant stayed at home with his son. To entertain the little boy, he took his wife's wings out of the corn loft, attached them on his armpits, and danced. The small child shook with laughter. Another day, it was the husband's turn to be absent from home. The child wept bitterly, refusing his mother's breast, and pointed persistently at the corn loft.*

- *What does he want, my son? Let's see what is in this corn loft, the mother told herself.*

*She searched and discovered her wings. Overjoyed, she put them on, breastfed her child, then flew up the sky.*

*On his return, the peasant could not find his wife anywhere. He saw the corn loft upside down, and guessed what had happened. He then took his child in his arm and wept bitterly.*

*He wept throughout the day and the night. The next morning, Buddha appeared before him, disguised as an old man.*

- *Why do you cry, my son?*
- *My wife just left me to return to the sky.*
- *Do you want to meet her again?*
- *Oh yes, my good father.*
- *But for that I must burn down your house. Do you agree?*
- *I would consent to die if I could but see her once more.*
- *Very well. Hold your child close, and close your eyes until you don't hear the wind blow any longer.*

*The old man set fire to the house. A billow of smoke arose, and carried the peasant and his son up into the air. After a long while, the peasant no longer heard the wind blow and opened his eyes. He was in the sky. He set out to look for his wife. He met a maid-servant on her way to draw water from a well. Since both he and his son were thirsty, he asked the maid-servant to drink from her pail. Now it happened that this servant was actually his wife's servant. When later, she was pouring water from the pail into a wash-basin for her mistress, our Immortal found a comb there, her own comb which she had left on Earth.*

- *Where is this comb from? she inquired.*
- *Surely it belongs to the child who drank from my water-pail and dropped it there.*
- *Where is the child now? Was he alone or with someone?*
- *A man, maybe his father, was with him. I met them at the well.*
- *Please run and call them in.*

*The Immortal was perplexed. She loved her child, but she had been greatly horror-stricken over her earthy adventure. She was also afraid that her husband, with his coarse manners, would not be worthy of living in the fairies' abode. To test him, she prepared for him a splendid meal on a tray with bowls, spoons, chopsticks, and knives. The famished peasant used his fingers to eat more quickly. Disdaining the knives and*

*chopsticks, he grasped a roasted chicken and devoured it. In the same manner, he brought the great bowl of soup to his mouth and gulped it down without using any spoon.*

*The Immortal who was watching her husband from behind a screen, shook her head in discouragement:*

*- No, impossible to keep him here.*

*After he had eaten his fill, she called him in with his son.*

*- Our marriage, she told him, was only temporary. It had ended, according to Heaven's will. You are to go back to the human world with our child. Both of you are fastened to a rope that will gradually uncoil as you go down. When you reach the earth, please beat the drum to inform me, and I will cut off the rope. Good bye.*

*- Good bye.*

*The child brought with him a ball of rice as provision for the journey. Some grains of rice were scattered on the drum, and half way down they were picked up by a hungry crow, causing the drum to beat rapidly. Thinking that her husband and child had arrived safely on earth, the Immortal cut off the rope, having no idea that they had been thrown down too soon.*

*For this unintentional crime, she was sentenced to be born on Earth in a poor family, and to marry her former husband who this time was born into a rich family. And the roles are now reversed. Instead of adoring her as an angel, he often beats her black and blue, according to that inherent justice that allows victims to have their revenge on those who did them harm in a former existence. She will be able to return to Paradise only after she has fully paid her debt. As to the crow, unintentional perpetrator of the crime, it was sentenced to wear a wholly black coat on which stood out some white dots, representing the grains of rice it had greedily devoured.*

**b/** Belief in the effect of the placement of tombs upon people's lives.

As we have seen above, the Vietnamese people often explained the extraordinary destinies of the great heroes by the mysterious effect of the placement of their ancestors' tombs. This conviction is strongly asserted in the history-legend of Tả Ao, our most famous geomancer.

### **23. Tả Ao.**

*His real name was Nguyễn Đức Huyền, but he is usually called after his native village Tả Ao, located in Nghi Xuân sub-prefecture, Nghệ An province.*

*His mother having been affected by a serious eye disease, Tả Ao followed a Chinese trader to China to learn ophthalmology, with the hope of later curing his mother. He had the luck to meet a great ophthalmologist who, moved by his filial devotion, taught him all the secrets of his science. After a year, Tả Ao had learnt all he could about ophthalmology, and was ready to return home. Just then, a geomancer who suffered from painful eyes sent for the Chinese ophthalmologist. Since the renowned doctor was too old to endure a tiring journey, he sent Tả Ao instead.*

*It was for Tả Ao an unexpected stroke of luck, because the geomancer, cared for with devotion and later cured, wanted to reward Tả Ao by teaching him his own science. To test him, the master geomancer fashioned a clay model representing mountains and rivers. Inside the clay, he hid 100 coins in the sacred places, and gave Tả Ao 100 pins to detect them.*

*Without any difficulty, Tả Ao succeeded in driving 99 pins into the holes of 99 coins, missing only slightly the hundredth. Before this remarkable performance, the master geomancer sighed:*

*- All my science is gone to the Southern country.*

*Then generously, he gave Tả Ao a geomancy compass that would help him locate the Dragon's vein, and taught him the magic spells to command the genie of the earth.*

*On returning home, Tả Ao was happy to cure his mother. Then, driven by the demon of geomancy, he wandered in search of a place suitable for a miraculous tomb. One day, while crossing the*

mountainous region of *Hồng Lĩnh*, he discovered a site in the shape of “Nine dragons playing with pearl”, he cried out triumphantly:

- Here is the place that will give the imperial power to the descendants of the one who is buried here.

At once, he transferred his father's bones there. Not long after, his wife gave birth to a splendid boy.

Meanwhile, the Chinese astrologers noticed that the stars in the sky were turning towards the South, and this meant that the Southern country (Vietnam) would have a wonderful emperor who could cause trouble to their Middle Empire. They informed the Chinese emperor, who ordered all the geomancers to go to Vietnam and destroy its dangerous tombs.

*Tả Ao's* master at once guessed that the culprit was his Vietnamese pupil. He ordered his son to go immediately to the village of *Tả Ao*.

- My brother, the Chinese said, did you find out some sacred site after your return?

Candidly, *Tả Ao* told him of his wonderful discovery. The Chinese then secretly destroyed the tomb, and *Tả Ao's* son died shortly following a mysterious illness.

Still, *Tả Ao* did not lose all his hopes for grandeur. As his mother too had died, he patiently sought for another miraculous tomb. And he found it at the seashore, a site in the shape of a dragon's mouth. But when the time came for burying his mother's remains there, a dreadful storm broke out, filling up the natural hole with sand. *Tả Ao* sighed:

- The dragon opens his mouth only every 500 years. Now that it is closed, there is nothing more to do.

Because he could not use his skill for himself, *Tả Ao* enjoyed helping others. He wandered everywhere, shabbily dressed. And if he chanced to come upon honest people, he would offer them his services without charge. For instance, one day he said to a humble peasant of *Bút Sơn*:

- *I have found in your village a miraculous tomb that may give great fortune within a few hours. Do you want to seize this opportunity?*

*The next morning, the peasant transferred his father's coffin to the site indicated by Tả Ao. Then he went to the river bank to wash his pickaxe, when lo, he found the body of a drowned man floating near the bank. Moved by pity, he pulled it ashore and gave it a decent burial. How surprised he was to find 50 silver ingots in a sash of the dead man.*

*Another time, Tả Ao ventured to Thanh Liêm village, and found there a site that would make dukes of the descendants of whoever was to be buried there. He inquired secretly among the villagers, and was told of a local wealthy farmer, a most charitable man who never refused to give assistance to the poor. He called on this man, introduced himself as a poor old man having neither hearth nor home, and was still warmly welcomed and treated with generous hospitality. Afterwards, Tả Ao said to the farmer:*

- *As matter of fact, I am the geomancer Tả Ao. Would you like to become a duke within a month?*

- *But, noble Sir, I do not deserve such great honour.*

- *You do because you are a good man. It was Heaven's will that guided me to your house. So please don't have any scruples about it.*

*Overjoyed, the farmer bowed down to the great geomancer. Then he transferred his father's bones to the new tomb.*

*Twenty days later, a starving man came to the farmer's house, asking for a good meal with alcohol. Always hospitable, the farmer waited on him, without even asking his name. After good meal, the stranger declared:*

- *Thank you, my host. I 've not had such a good meal for a long time. But I no longer want to live. I am the rebel general Mạc Kính Độ. You may deliver me to Prince Trịnh for a reward.*

*The honest farmer could not believe his eyes and ears. But, being very kind, he did not want to do such a vile thing as to deliver his guest to the authorities. The general had to insist repeatedly before his host*

*gave in. A few days later, the farmer was appointed a duke in reward for his "capture" of a formidable rebel leader.*

*We could quote countless other instances of the magic science of Tả Ao. But if he could perform miracles for others, he was not able to do so for himself. And he remained poor all his life. Finally, as he became seriously ill, he told his two children to carry him to a site he had previously noticed, one that would transform him into an Immortal if he were buried there. But half way, he felt he was about to die.*

*- Stop, said he to his children. I have not enough time left to reach the tomb I have chosen. therefore, bury me here, by the road. At least, I will become the guardian spirit of the neighbouring village.*

*He had time to give his children precise instructions concerning the exact location of his tomb. A few days after his burial, he revealed himself in a dream to the inhabitants of the neighbouring village who later worshipped him.*

*Thus, because his ancestors had not bequeathed to him a sufficiently virtuous heritage, the greatest geomancer of all times could never use his science for himself.*

**c/ Belief in Predestination and Fatalism.**

## **24. The tale of the watermelon.**

*King Hùng XVIII had an adoptive son named An Tiêm. He was a very intelligent boy, and much loved by the king. When he became an adult, time and again he helped the king to defeat rebellious vassals. So he was granted great favors by the king who appointed him governor of a province. He showed himself to be a good administrator, excelling especially in the exploration of the waste lands. Soon, he became immensely rich. To his circle of friends, he used to say:*

*- All this fortune that you see, I acquired it in my previous life.*

*For An Tiêm believed in predestination. Firmly he believed that everyone's fate was written in the Great Book of Heaven, and that*

*happiness or unhappiness in the present life was only the result of his actions in a previous life.*

*His imprudent words were related to the king by jealous colleagues who interpreted them as words on ingratitude.*

*- Ah, exclaimed the angry king, so An Tiêm claims that the wealth I gave him is his wealth acquired in his previous life? We shall see if he can get it again after I take it away.*

*By order of the king, An Tiêm was exiled along with his wife and their two children to a deserted island far off the coast, with only a three month's supply of food. An Tiêm bravely accepted this reverse of fortune. By dint of labor, he succeeded in getting almost everything necessary for his family's needs in this remote place - food, clothing and shelter. His belief in predestination remained as strong as ever.*

*One day, some birds coming from the West dropped some seeds that spouted and grew, and in time produced magnificent fruits with a green rind, a red and juicy pulp, and black seeds. An Tiêm tasted one and found it delicious. It was the watermelon, called the Western fruit (Tây qua) by An Tiêm. He planted a great number of them on his island, and at each gathering he got an extensive number of fruits. He put aside some of them for his family's needs, and threw the rest into the sea, after carving on the rind of each fruit his name and the approximate location of his island.*

*Many years went by. At last, one day some Chinese traders who had picked up his watermelons at sea, landed on his island. They were fascinated by his moving story, his courage and his cleverness. They bought all his reserve of watermelons, and gave in exchange clothes, tools, utensils, etc... .*

*From then on, An Tiêm came in contact with the world again. And at each monsoon season, many merchant ships came to his island, bringing him not only goods, but also immigrants, poor people attracted by his fertile island. Incontestably An Tiêm became the governor of this new colony. He enlarged his plantations, and formed a fishing fleet, part*

*of which was devoted to the gathering of the pearl oysters which were very abundant in the waters surrounding the island. With the gathered pearls, he could again enjoy the comfort and luxury he had been used to before his exile. He had a citadel built, as well as palaces, barracks, storehouses. His desert island became a prosperous little principality.*

*News of it reached king Hùng's Court. Incredulous, the king sent a delegation to investigate. An Tiêm welcomed the royal envoys sumptuously, and requested them to bring to the Court a cargo of watermelons and a lot of pearls as a sign of his unfailing loyalty to the king.*

*After his envoys had reported the result of their mission, the king sighed:*

*- An Tiêm was right when he asserted that the wealth I gave him was his wealth acquired in his previous life. Order him to return to the Court, and he shall be splendidly rewarded.*

## **25. The discovery of a treasure.**

*One day a peasant, while digging in his ricefield, found a jar full of gold. He unearthed it and put it on the border of his ricefield. Then, when night came, he went back home and said to his wife:*

- I just found a jar full of gold.*
- Where is it?*
- I put it on the border of the ricefield.*
- But you are a fool. It will be taken away by other people. Why did you not bring it home at once?*
- What is the good for it? If Heaven wants to give it to me, nobody will be able to take it from me. But if it is not Heaven's will, let another person take it. I will have no regrets.*

*Two robbers overheard the conversation. At once, they ran to the ricefield and actually found a jar there. They hastened to bring it to their house. But when they opened it, they found only snakes. Frightened, they dropped the lid of the jar.*

*The next morning, the peasant went to the ricefield and found no jar. He told his wife, who growled:*

*- Someone must have taken it. Finding a treasure and then letting it go. You are the fool.*

*The two robbers once again overheard the talk. They conferred:*

*- How silly this married couple is. They take snakes for gold. To mortify them, let's send back the jar.*

*And they put the jar back in the very place where they found it. The peasant was not surprised to see it reappear. He still did not bring it home, and only said to his wife on his return:*

*- Did I tell you? Because Heaven wanted to give me this gold, nobody could steal it.*

*- Enough lies. His wife burst out. You find gold, then lose it, then find it again. How can I believe you?*

*- But I told you the truth. I have looked in the jar, and there was real gold in it. You will see that it will come by itself, if Heaven really wants to give it to me.*

*The two robbers who were listening at the door (surely they were incorrigibly curious), lost their temper before this overwhelming stubbornness.*

*- Ah. You say that gold will come to you by itself? Very well. We shall bring the jar here so that the snakes will bite you.*

*Then they returned to the ricefield, opened the jar to be sure it contained only snakes and not gold, closed it and carried it to the peasant's house.*

*- Come and see, dear, exclaimed the peasant when he woke up and saw the jar in his yard. Didn't I tell you that the gold will come by itself if Heaven wants to give it to me?*

*The woman hastened to lift the lid of the jar: it was full of gold ingots.*

## **2. Tales of Buddhist Inspiration.**

a/ Belief in metempsychosis.

## 26. Tám and Cám.

*There were two sisters born of the same father but of different mothers. Tám's mother and their father had both died.*

*One day, Cám's mother said to the girls:*

*- Go and catch some shrimps. I'll give a bright red breast-supporter to the one who will bring back the most.*

*Lazy Cám went and lay down under the tree. Finally, when she saw Tám's basket full of shrimps, she told her:*

*Sister Tám, sister Tám, With  
dust your head is soiled.*

*Wash yourself in deep water,  
Otherwise you'll be scolded.*

*While Tám was rinsing her hair in the pool, Cám quickly emptied her sister's basket into her own, and went home. After Tám had washed her hair, she saw her empty basket and began to cry. Buddha appeared and asked her:*

*- My child, why do you cry?*

*- Because I have no more shrimps and shall be scolded.*

*- Look in your basket, and see whether anything is left.*

*- Yes, there is a little gudgeon.*

*- Put it into your well at home, and at each meal, instead of eating three bowls of rice, eat only two. Give the third to the gudgeon while saying these words:*

*Gudgeon, gudgeon. Come  
and eat my cooked rice Alike  
to gold and silver.*

*Don't eat other people's  
Badly cooked soup or mouldy rice.*

*Tám obeyed the venerable old man, and was amazed to see her gudgeon grow bigger from day to day. But Cám spied on her and soon learned her secret. She told her mother, who said to Tám:*

*- Tomorrow, you are to graze the buffaloes in an outlying meadow. If you graze them in our village, people will seize them.*

*Taking advantage of Tám's absence, Cám and her mother caught the gudgeon and feasted on it. And when Tám returned home, she vainly called her gudgeon: it did not come to the surface of the well. She sat down on the ground and wept. Buddha appeared and asked her:*

- My child, why do you cry?*
- Oh. Good grandfather, they have taken away my gudgeon.*
- Go and fetch its bones; then put them with water into four small earthen pots, and bury these under the four legs of your bed.*

*But Tám did not know where the gudgeon's bones were. A rooster told her:*

- Cock-a-doodle-doo. Give me a handful of rice, and I will fetch your friend's bones.*

*Tám gave some rice to the rooster. He then scratched the earth and uncovered a little heap of bones. Tám put them with water into four small pots which she carefully buried under the four legs of her bed, according to Buddha's instructions.*

*Before long, the king arranged a great festival to look for a girl worthy of becoming his wife. The stepmother gave Tám a basket full of mixed rice and paddy and told her:*

- When you have finished separating the rice from the paddy, you may join us.*

*She then went to the festival with her daughter. Again, Tám burst into tears.*

- Why do you cry, my child? asked Buddha who had just appeared.*
- Grandfather, I want so much to go to the king's festival, but by the time I could separate the rice from the paddy in this basket, the festival will be over.*

*Buddha called to a pigeon which, with a few rapid pecks, separated rice from paddy. But Tám kept on crying.*

- What is still the matter with you? asked Buddha.*

- *Alas. Look at my clothes, good grandfather. How dare I go to the festival in these rags?*

- *Oh. I forgot about that. Have you preserved carefully your gudgeon's bones?*

- *Yes, grandfather.*

- *Then go and unearth your pots. You'll find there all you need. In addition, wash yourself with the water in the pots. Good-bye, my child.*

- *Thank you very much, grandfather.*

*Tám unearthed her pots and actually found inside them magnificent dresses, jewels, and a pair of marvelous sandals encrusted with diamonds. Then, with the water from the pots, she took a bath. She had already been pretty, which had aroused her stepmother and sister's jealousy, but after the bath, she became divinely beautiful.*

*Overjoyed and dressed in her new garments, she went to the festival. Everybody admired her and took her for a princess. When the sun was setting, she hastened to return home before her stepmother arrived. In her haste, she lost one of her sandals.*

*The king happened to pass by, and picked up the sandal. He found it very dainty, and thought that its owner must be very beautiful. The next morning, he ordered an eunuch to go to all the houses of this village and try the sandal on the foot of every girl. But all had feet too big, including Cám, to her great despair.*

- *Do you want me to try it myself, Sir Eunuch? said Tám shyly.*

- *Oh. Oh. Oh. Both Cám and her mother burst out laughing. Do you hear this scullery maid who pretends to marry the king?*

*But the eunuch looked at Tám, and in spite of her miserable rags, found her pretty. He said:*

- *His Majesty's order is that every girl must try this sandal on. You may try, Miss.*

*To the general amazement, Tám's dainty feet perfectly fitted the dainty sandal. And Tám became the queen.*

*On the anniversary day of her father's death, she paid a visit home. Her stepmother told her to climb up the areca tree to pluck a bunch of areca nuts. Then the wicked woman took a big axe to cut down the tree.*

*- What are you doing mother?*

*- I am driving away the ants so they won't sting you.*

*The areca tree fell down, and Tám was rushed into the pool and drowned. The stepmother took her clothes and with these dressed up Cám who looked very much like her sister. The king did not notice this substitution.*

*The unfortunate Tám was changed into an oriole who came to the royal garden. To the maids who were hanging out the washing to dry on the hedge, the oriole sang:*

*Let my husband clothes  
Be hanged along the poles.  
But don't put them on the  
hedge Lest they be torn.*

*On hearing this clear twitter, the king murmured:*

*Oriole ! Gentle oriole !  
If you are my wife  
Quickly, quickly come into  
The sleeve of my robe.*

*At once, the oriole dashed at the king, who put it in a gilded cage. Since then, the king spent most of his time with his favourite oriole. The false queen Cám became jealous. Following her mother's advice, she had the oriole killed and scattered its feathers in the garden. From the feathers sprang two splendid trees from which the king liked to sling a hammock for his naps.*

*Cám, always advised by her wicked mother, had the trees cut down, and the wood used to make a loom. As she was working at it, Cám heard this song:*

*Hiss ! Hiss !  
You have taken my husband,  
I will poke out your eyes.  
Hiss ! Hiss !*

*The loom was burnt, and its ashes thrown on the roadside. At once, a persimmon tree with a superb fruit began to grow from this very place. An old woman, an innkeeper, walking by, exclaimed*

*Persimmon, Persimmon*

*Drop into my bag.*

*Your scent I will inhale*

*But your pulp I won't eat .*

*The persimmon fell down, and the old woman brought it home. She lived alone at her inn. But since the day she got the persimmon, her meals were always ready, prepared by a mysterious hand. Puzzled, one morning she pretended to go out then returned furtively. A beautiful woman was in her home, doing the housework, while the persimmon was empty of its pulp. At once, she understood that this was a fairy. She tore off the peel of the magic fruit, and put her arm around the fairy who henceforth lived with her as a daughter.*

*One day, the king passed by the inn. To quench his thirst, he went in to have a cup of tea. The old woman offered him a quid of betel fashioned in exactly the same way as the ones that Tám had made for him. He asked:*

- *Who made this quid of betel, madam?*
- *Sir, my daughter did.*
- *May I see her?*
- *Yes, Sir.*

*She called to her daughter who looked exactly like his former queen Tám, only more beautiful. The king brought her to his palace and gave her back the title of queen. On seeing Tám again, Cám asked:*

- *What did you do, my sister, to get this marvelous beauty?*
- *Will you try my method?*
- *Oh, yes. Certainly.*

*Tám had a deep hole dug, and told Cám to slide down into it. Then, she ordered her maid-servants to pour boiling water into the hole. Cám's corpse was then cut up into small pieces, salted, and put into a great jar to be offered to the stepmother. The wicked woman ate her daughter's flesh without knowing it and found it delicious, in spite of an owl which kept shouting:*

*Not that good*

*Not that good.*

*Of your daughter's flesh  
Give me a bit if there's any left.*

*In a rage, the wicked woman drove the owl away by throwing stone at him. But when she came to the bottom of the jar, she found her daughter's head. She died of shock.*

**b/ Belief in the Value of Repentance.**

## **27. A thief's repentance.**

*A monk had taken the religious vows since his childhood. Though he kept a strict discipline, he did not get the Perfect Enlightenment. So, he made up his mind to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land Of Buddha. On his way, he met a man who asked to accompany him.*

*- What have you done? asked the monk.*

*- Alas. So far, I have only stolen for a living. But I am repentant, and I would like to go and find salvation from Buddha.*

*- Friend, you are very mistaken. All my life I have done only good deeds, and I am not yet sure of getting salvation. What makes you think you can get it, you who have only committed crimes?*

*- But I sincerely repent now. Please, O Venerable One, let me accompany you.*

*The monk strongly declined this request, for he did not want to endanger his virtue by being in the company of a criminal. At last, the thief said:*

*- O Venerable One, if my despicable body isn't worthy of following you, at least may my well disposed bowels accompany you.*

*With a knife, he cut his belly open, drew out his bowels, presented them to the monk, and fell dead. The monk dared not decline this last request. Reluctantly he put the thief's bowels into his bag, and continued his pilgrimage. But in a few days, the bowels putrefied, giving out a nauseous odor. The monk threw them away; a crow picked them up and brought them to Buddha.*

*When the monk came to the Holy Land, Buddha scolded him:*

*- That thief was a criminal, but he had repented; he is worthy to enter Nirvana. As for you, bad monk, you have broken a promise given to a dying person. Through this fault alone, you have destroyed the*

*effect of an entire life of virtue. You are no longer worthy of Nivana; you are to go back to your pagoda to expiate your crime.*

c/ Belief in the Law of Karma.

## **28. The carambola tree.**

*A wealthy farmer had two sons. As greedy as was the elder, so was the younger gentle and unselfish. Fate accorded each of them a wife who matched his disposition.*

*On their parents' death, the two brothers proceeded to the sharing of their heritage. The older said:*

*- This house is mine because I am the elder and have to maintain the cult of our parents here. The ricefields are also mine because the income derived from them will be used to pay the anniversary expenditures. Likewise, the buffaloes and the servants who work in the fields are also mine.*

*- You are right, my brother. And what is my share?*

*- You must be pleased to have no expenses to take care of. But I am generous, and I give you the small enclosure where there is a carambola tree. You know how sweet its fruits are, don't you?*

*- Yes, my brother.*

*- Well, you are lucky fellows, you and your wife. You can afford to eat those royal carambolas.*

*- Yes, but how will we get rice? One cannot live only on carambolas.*

*- You have arms and legs, I suppose? Work, boy. The time is over when you could live as parasites of our parents.*

*The younger brother and his wife went to settle in the small enclosure located outside the village. No plant but a carambola tree grew there. Alarmed, the two looked at each other.*

*- How can we live on this barren soil? the wife sighed.*

*- Don't worry, darling. After creating the elephant, Heaven created the grass to feed it. You will remain at home to do the housework and try to grow some vegetables, if possible. As for me, I will go to the forest nearby to gather dead wood that I will sell to get rice and salt.*

*- Poor friend. Are you sure you can do this hard work?*

- *I must do it.*

- *You forget the carambola tree. Maybe we can get some money from its fruits.*

- *Sure. But just enough to buy a few yards of fabric every year.*

*By dint of courage and labour, the young couple managed to live somehow. Eagerly they waited for the carambolas to grow and ripen. Alas, no sooner was a fruit ready for picking than it was devoured by an eagle. At last, the woman lamented:*

- *Poor me. We expected to sell these carambolas to get some yards of fabric. But Sir Eagle is eating all of them.*

- *For each fruit I am eating, I will give a bit of gold in exchange, answered the eagle. Make a bag three spans wide to carry it.*

*Frightened and overjoyed at the same time, the wife recounted this adventure to her husband when he returned home. They decided to comply fully with the eagle's instructions. The next morning, the three spans bag made, the husband remained at home to wait for this miraculous bird. After eating some carambolas, the eagle told him to climb upon its back. They crossed a great stretch of sea, then landed on a islet.*

- *Take everything you want, said the eagle.*

*The islet was full of diamonds, pearls and gold ingots, and the young peasant was flabbergasted. But he was not greedy and restricted himself to filling up his three span wide bag only with gold ingots . . .*

*On his return, he spent part of this immense fortune to buy numerous ricefields and to have a magnificent palace built. Then he called on his brother and sister-in-law to invite them to his housewarming feast.*

- *What? Have you become rich by any chance?*

- *Oh. No, my brother, but I have acquired a new house and would be very happy if you would grace it with your presence.*

- *We will go if you put red-edged mats from my house to yours.*

- *Your words are orders for me, my brother.*

*The next morning, to his great stupefaction, the elder brother saw a long row of red-edged mats, worth a small fortune, stretching from his door to the horizon. With his wife, he walked on this splendid carpet and came to an enchanting palace, in front of which were standing, smiling modestly, the young brother and his wife.*

- *Dear brother, the covetous couple said in a smooth voice, how did you get rich so suddenly?*

*Very sincerely, the marvellous intervention of the eagle was told to them.*

- *Really? But then . . . stammered the husband.*

- *But then, the wife hastened to argue, the carambola tree must belong to us.*

- *By the right of the eldest, proclaimed the husband.*

- *As you like, answered the younger brother. I am willing to offer you the enclosure and the carambola tree.*

- *No, because as you just said, the eagle was moved to pity by your poverty. If I keep our parents' heritage, maybe the eagle won't want to give me his treasure.*

- *You will do as you like, my brother.*

*And the greedy couple, clothed in rags, went to settle down in the small enclosure. As soon as she saw the eagle eating the carambolas, the woman cried out dolefully:*

- *Oh Sir Eagle ! We have only these carambolas to live on. If you eat them, we shall die of starvation.*

- *From every fruit I am eating, I will give in exchange a bit of gold. Make a three-span bag to take some of it.*

- *We have the bag already, Sir Eagle, said the overjoyed husband.*

*As a matter of fact, and in agreement with his wife, he had made a six-span wide bag that he carried with him on the eagle's back. When he came to the treasure islet, he wanted to take everything. He filled up his large bag with gold and precious stones, put more in his enormous pockets, in his sash, and even in his trousers that he tied at the knees to make into addition pockets.*

*On the return flight an hour later, the eagle felt tired and said:*

- *Pleased throw a few of your gold ingots into the sea. You are too heavy, I can no longer carry you.*

- *Throw away gold? Oh. What a sacrilegious idea.*

- *But I am telling you that you are too heavy.*

- *Try a little harder, Sir Eagle, please. Keep in mind that with this gold, I will become the richest man in the kingdom. I will buy palaces.*

*Losing patience, the eagle shook its wings and let the greedy man fall down into the sea.*

## **29. The doctored scale.**

*A dishonest tradesman had made a doctored scale which contained a few drops of mercury in its weighing arm. When he was selling, he would slant the arm to the right, thus fraudulently increasing the weight of the goods he sold. But when he was buying, he slanted the arm to the left, so that the goods he bought showed a lesser weight.*

*Because of his dishonest manipulation, the tradesman soon became very rich. To crown his happiness, his wife gave birth to two sons, both very handsome and intelligent. One day, he told his wife:*

*- We are now wealthy, and I think we don't need to use fraud any more in our business. Let us destroy our doctored scale so that we may hand down to our children a virtuous heritage. Do you agree?*

*- You are right, my master.*

*And our man became the most honest of tradesmen. But, contrary to his expectations, his two sons died not long after of a mysterious illness. The parents, crazed with pain, turned over and over on the ground lamenting. They could not understand why Heaven had punished them for their good behaviour.*

*One night, Buddha appeared to them in a dream and told them:*

*- You have been dishonest, and Heaven had decided to punish you by sending you two devils who would waste your fortune and dishonour your name. Fortunately, you repented in time. If you continue to do good, you will have two other sons who will make your old days happy.*

*The couple scrupulously adhered to the Buddha's advice. They gave all their ill-gotten gains to the needy. Before long, they were rewarded with the birth of two sons who succeeded in the literary examinations and in their duties as higher officials to such an extent that their parents were granted a honorary title by the Emperor.*

### **30. The bamboo-stem with one hundred knots.**

*A farmer had a very beautiful daughter. A miser, he devised a good plan to hire a farm-hand without paying him by deluding him with a fallacious hope:*

*- If you work well, I will give you my daughter in marriage.*

*Very ingenious and fond of his young mistress, the farm-hand worked day and night, without taking care of his health. But at the end of three years, the miser gave his daughter in marriage to a wealthy landlord. On the wedding day, he wanted to keep his farm-hand away, so he told him:*

*- Go into the forest and fetch me a bamboo stem with one hundred knots. If you find it, my daughter will be yours.*

*Of course, the young man did not find any. After an arduous and useless search, he sat down on the ground and wept. Buddha appeared before him as an old man and asked:*

*- Why are you crying, my child?*

*- Sir, my master asked me to find a bamboo stem with one hundred knots before he would give me his daughter in marriage. But all my efforts have been in vain, I couldn't find it.*

*- Go and cut up one hundred bamboo stumps with a knot in each of them. I will help you.*

*The hundred bamboo stumps were soon ready. Miraculously they joined together when the old man said these simple words: "Stick to one another ". The young man was stupefied. He still had the problem of carrying it home because the long bamboo stem was too cumbersome.*

*- You will only have to say these words: "Detach yourselves from one another ".*

*At once, the hundred bamboo stumps fell apart. The young man bundled them together, warmly thanked the old man and went home.*

*- Don't forget, advised the old man, that those who touch your bamboo will also stick to it if you say the magic words.*

*On his return, the farm-hand found his master feasting his son-in-law and numerous people of the two related families. Without saying a word, he put his bundle of bamboo stumps in the middle of the yard, and muttered: “ Stick to one another”. A gigantic bamboo stem at one shot forth.*

- *Master, I have brought back a bamboo stem with one hundred knots. May I marry your daughter, just as you had promised?*
- *What nonsense are you telling me? First, let me see your bamboo-stem.*

*The farmer, furious and incredulous at the same time, went to the yard to touch the magic stem. At once the farm-hand muttered:”Stick to it”. The farmer’s hands immediately stuck to the bamboo and he couldn’t pull them away.*

- *Help ! He howled with fright. Pull me off this damned bamboo.*

*His intended son-in-law rushed to his aid and came under the same spell. Numerous other people followed him and were all fastened to each other. Throughout the house, there was a terrific chorus of cries and lamentations. Meanwhile, our young man-servant was wrought with laughter.*

- *Have pity. Have pity. Please release us, cried the sufferers.*

*The man-servant left them to their cries and moans until at last his master was forced to tell him:*

- *All right. Release us and you will marry my daughter.*
- *And Mr. Ba, will you still want to marry my wife?*
- *No, I withdraw this claim.*

*The man-servant raised his arm, muttering: “Detach yourselves from one another “. At once, the spell was broken and the people released. The man-servant got his beautiful mistress in marriage.*

### **3. Tales of Confucianist Influence.**

**a/ Filial piety.**

### **31. A pious son.**

*Once upon a time, there lived a motherless child. To support his father, he wove linen for a wealthy craftsman. But his father died in turn, and the young man did not have enough money to buy a coffin. He called on his employer and asked for some advance salary.*

*- With pleasure, answered the craftsman, on the condition that you will weave for me 300 rolls of material, free of charge.*

*To have a decent funeral for his father, the young man had to agree to such an exorbitant contract.*

*When the funeral was over, he set himself to weave linen around the clock to the point of exhaustion. One morning, on his way to the market, he met a beautiful young lady who offered to marry him.*

*- I would be delighted to marry you, he sadly answered, were I not in mourning for my father.*

*- I can wait till your period of mourning is over.*

*- But I am extremely poor. At present, I must work day and night to weave 300 rolls of material for my employer.*

*- I will help you.*

*Delighted, the young man took his fiancée with him. In spite of her provocations, he scrupulously kept the chastity required of a son in mourning. After uselessly tempting him, his fiancée acknowledged his perfect virtue. As she was a marvelous weaver, she succeeded, in less than a month, in completing the 300 rolls of material. The young man hastened to bring them to his employer.*

*On his return, he saw his fiancée changed into a fairy who rose into the air and told him:*

*- I am the fairy Ngọc Hoa. Moved by your filial piety, I came to help you in your duty. Good-bye, and keep on behaving virtuously.*

**b/** Brotherly affection.

### **32. The banyan-tree.**

*Three brothers lived on good terms; they loved each other warmly and shared the paternal heritage. But things began to sour when they married. The three sisters-in-law could not bear their mutual tempers and continually incited their husbands to divide the heritage so that each married couple would live apart.*

*Worn out by their wives' naggings, at last, the three brothers had to yield to their will. The division of the houses, gardens and ricefields was relatively easy, but there remained a big banyan tree standing in front of the main gate: each wife wanted to have it in her share.*

*- Let us pull down this tree, said the three brothers, and saw it. We will equally apportion its wood.*

*As soon as they had taken this decision, the tree suddenly began to wither. Its leaves yellowed and fell down. On seeing this sad miracle, the eldest brother burst out weeping.*

*- What's the matter with you, brother? asked the two younger ones. This tree is of no great importance and is not worth such painful regrets.*

*- My brothers, answered the eldest, I don't weep over the death of the tree, but over the death of our relationship. See for yourselves, even a tree devoid of feeling is so saddened by our misunderstanding that it is dying. How then could I remain insensitive?*

*Moved by these words, the two younger brothers burst into tears. They embraced each other and swore never to part. So did their wives, now converted themselves. At once the banyan tree miraculously grew green again.*

### **33. A clever test.**

*A rich man did not take care of his poor younger brother. Yet, in other respects he was not miserly and was quite generous to his friends. To his wife who reproached him for this behavior, he replied:*

- *Everyone for himself. Let my brother fend for himself. As for my friends, if I treat them well, it is because they are rich people who can help me should the need arise.*

*His wife then devised a good plan to open his eyes. One day, when he was out of the house, she killed a big dog and wrapped it in a mat. Then she told her husband on his return:*

- *This morning, a beggar came to ask for alms. When I refused him, he insulted me. In a passion, I threw a stick at him. I don't know how it happened, but the beggar died of it. What is to be done?*

- *We must bury him quickly, answered the terrified husband.*

- *Take his corpse on your shoulders and bring it to our ricefield. Here is a pick to dig his grave.*

- *I won't be able to do it by myself.*

- *Then go ask for help from your good friends*

- *Yes, you are right.*

*And he called on his friends to ask for help. They all declined his request. Disappointed, he went back home.*

- *Well, are they coming?*

- *They all refused.*

- *I thought as much. Go and try with your brother.*

- *Do you think he will help me?*

- *I can't be sure, but I think he won't refuse to help you in this emergency.*

*The man ran calling on his brother he had neglected for so long. Contrary to all expectations, his brother did not raise any objection to the undertaking of this macabre task.*

*But this experience did not end there. The following morning, the "good friends" came along to the alleged murderer and threatened to denounce his crime to the mandarin judge if he did not give them a lot of money. Disgusted but frightened, he was going to give in to their blackmail but his wife would not hear of it.*

- *Very well, said the "good friends", we shall see what the mandarin judge will have to say about your crime.*

*More dead than alive, our bourgeois was dragged by the police to the prefecture. His wife, perfectly calm, came with him. She told the truth to the mandarin. It was verified that it was a dog's corpse buried in the spot indicated. The mandarin paid compliment to the woman for her clever strategy and ordered twenty lashes for each of the false accusers.*

c. Conjugal Love.

### **34. Nhị Khanh.**

*Nhị Khanh was married in her early youth to Phùng Trọng Quy, son of the mandarin Phùng Lập Ngôn. Although she was still very young, she valiantly attended to her husband who, unfortunately, liked to amuse himself more than work.*

*Lập Ngôn used to speak the truth freely and got himself disliked for it by his colleagues. When news that Nghệ An province was ravaged by pirates reached the Court, they acted in concert to appoint him governor of this dangerous zone.*

*On leaving, Lập Ngôn said to his daughter -in-law:*

*- I don't want you to venture with us to this gang-ridden province. So, please remain here for some time. When security has been restored, I will send for you to come and join your husband.*

*Trọng Quy, who was very fond of his wife, did not want to part from her. Nhị Khanh had to comfort him:*

*- You must go to look after our father's security. Don't fail in your filial duty for my love.*

*Many years slipped away without any news from Nhị Khanh's husband. She had retired to her aunt's, but one of the aunt's nephews, the officer Bạch, captivated by her beauty, wanted to force her to marry him. She sent for an old servant of her family, and told him tearfully:*

*- If I haven't yet taken my life, it is because I am waiting for my husband's return. Go to Nghệ An and try to find news of him. If he's dead, I will follow him in the tomb.*

*After a month of hard journey, the old servant came to Nghệ An. He made inquiries after Trọng Quyè and was answered:*

*- His Excellency the Governor is dead, and his son has wasted all his riches. He lives in a shoddy hut near the market.*

*The old servant found his young master in a pitiful condition. He told him of the danger threatening his mistress. By begging their way, they at last managed to reach the Capital. Fortunately Nhị Khanh, who was a valiant woman, has safeguarded some of her former fortune. And the married couple enjoyed a new honeymoon, made sweeter after a long separation. But Trọng Quyè soon fell prey again to the demon of gambling, and it was not long before he was spending all his time in the gambling dens. His playing partner was a trader named Đổ Tam who lusted after Nhị Khanh's beauty. For his part, Trọng Quyè lusted after Đổ Tam's riches.*

*Nhị Khanh unceasingly put her husband on his guard against Đổ Tam, but in vain. One day, the trader proposed to stake ten thousand strings of copper coins for Nhị Khanh. Trọng Quyè who so far had easily won the game accepted the proposal. They played dice. In three casts, Trọng Quyè had lost the game. He called for his wife and told her:*

*- It's too late for me to repent. I have lost and must give you up to this gentleman.*

*Nhị Khanh said smilingly to Đổ Tam:*

*- Leaving a poor husband for a richer one, I have nothing to complain of. But first, I must bid my children good-bye. Afterwards, I will come back to follow you.*

*Delighted, Đổ Tam let her go home unsuspectingly. She kissed her two sons, telling them:*

*- Although your father is shameful, I cannot bring myself to break our love oath. Alas ! How deeply I suffer to leave you on this earth.  
And she hung herself from a beam.*

*After this tragedy, Trọng Quyè was tortured with remorse. Sternly, he broke away from his former habits, and devoted all his energy to his*

children's education. One day, as he was sitting under a tree, he heard his dear wife's voice telling him:

- Are you Phùng? If you still think of me, please go to the Trung Sisters' temple tomorrow evening. You will find me there.

Trọng Quỳnh looked at the sky and saw only a cloud drifting away to the North. Very surprised, he made up his mind to go to the indicated appointment.

The temple was perfectly isolated, quiet, and dark. Trọng Quỳnh waited for long hours, but did not see anyone coming. At last, crushed with fatigue, he lay down on the ground. About midnight, he heard some faint sobs. At once awake, he opened his eyes and saw before him a human form: it was his wife Nhị Khanh. She told him:

- The Heavenly Sovereign had pity on me and assigned me to His Secretary's office. My duties are very engrossing and allow me no time to go and see you, and kiss our children. The other day, being exceptionally entrusted with doing the rainfall over a distant region, I luckily met you. This is why I could give you this appointment.

- O darling, have you forgiven me?

- Of course, since I am here. Besides, it was Fate's decision which created the crisis that brought you to the right way.

- Yes. After your death, I thought again about my sins, and I have painfully expiated them. Were I childless, I would kill myself to see you again hereafter.

- It's precisely for our two children that I wanted to see you.

- Ah ! How is that?

- I have heard the Heavenly Sovereign had determined that the Hồ dynasty will soon come to its end. From the year Bính Tuất (1406) on, our country will be devastated by war. During twenty years, two hundred thousand people will die by fire and sword. All those who do not care to lead a virtuous life will not escape from that calamity. A hero named Lê Lợi will give our country independence and peace. Please advise our children to be in the service of that liberator. It's what I had to tell you. Good-bye.

- O darling, can't you remain here a little longer.

*But already Nhị Khank's shadow has vanished. Trọng Quyè firmly believed what his wife had told him. Laboriously he worked to give his two sons a strenuous education in the military art. When Lê Lợi raised the flag of insurrection against the Chinese in his Lam Sơn mountainous region, the two sons of Trọng Quyè were among his first followers. They had the opportunity to gain a lot of victories at the side of their chief, and at Lê Thái Tổ's enthroning, they received high mandarin ranks. The emperor, to whom they related their mother's moving story, granted her a posthumous warrant of deity of the first class.*

**d/ Friendship.**

### **35. Lưu Bình and Dương Lễ.**

*Long ago, in a little village there lived two friends: Lưu Bình and Dương Lễ. Both were intelligent and very skilled in literary dissertations. But whereas Dương Lễ, who was poor, studied without respite, Lưu Bình, belonging to a rich family, was more willing to spend his time in drinking and amusing himself with the singing-girls than in studying. Time and again Dương Lễ had advised his friend to devote less time to fun and to think more of the triennial competitive examination that was to take place at the end of the year. But his advice slid off the frivolous Lưu Bình as water from a lotus leaf.*

*And what was bound to happen, happened. Dương Lễ succeeded splendidly in the literary examination, whereas Lưu Bình failed miserably. Appointed mandarin in a distant province, Dương Lễ went to his prefecture, after he had implored his friend to work better from now on. It was a waste of breath: Lưu Bình kept on wallowing in vice. Then, in a rapid succession, many misfortunes befell him: His parents died, his inheritance disappeared, and finally his house burned.*

*Entirely broke, he thought of looking for help from his friend. This one had not forgotten him. On the contrary, Dương Lễ, in his distant prefecture, regularly inquired after his foolish friend whose bad behaviour as well as his misfortunes had been related to him. He thought that now was the opportunity to lead his friend on the right way.*

*By giving him some money? No. He knew his friend well: once he had money in his purse, he would think only of entertaining himself. To make him work, there was but one way: to wound his pride, even to humiliate him and goad him toward a fierce determination to succeed at the next triennial competitive examination.*

*His plan drawn up, Dương Lễ summoned his three wives and explained it to them.*

*- But I need someone, he added, to prevent Lưu Bình from sinking into gloomy despair, to comfort him daily with gentle words, to hearten him in continuing his studies, and also to assure him of a carefree life. Who of you will attend to this?*

*- My lord, what a thought, answered Ngọc Lan, the first wife. Please bear in mind that your wife would be alone with your friend for a whole year, and that her reputation would be forever jeopardized by this cohabitation. No, my lord, I am your humble servant, but I cannot offer my honour in sacrifice to your friendship.*

*- And you, dear Bạch Tuyết, what is your opinion? said Dương Lễ to his second wife.*

*- Me? answered laughingly the frivolous Bạch Tuyết, why do you want me to leave your cozy harem to bury myself in a miserable country spot with your peasant friend? Besides, I am so fond of you. How can I leave you?*

*Dương Lễ turned toward his third wife:*

*- Châu Long, you haven't spoken a word so far. Are you also of your two sisters' opinion?*

*Dainty Châu Long pondered for a while, then answered:*

*- I'll go, my lord. Because of my great love for you, I'll help you save your friend. I don't fear the hardships of peasant living, nor the loss of my reputation because for me nothing matters but your esteem. Command, my lord, I will obey you.*

*- Our little sister Châu Long is very valiant, sneered the two other wives.*

*- Indeed, she is very valiant, retorted Dương Lễ, and neither of you can hold a candle to her. Now, listen, Châu Long. Lưu Bình, who is now waiting at the door of the yamen, will be given an unfriendly reception. He will leave this place full of anger for me. You will join him at the first*

inn he stops at. Then you'll try to enter into conversation with him. You'll tell him that you have run away from your family because your parents wanted to marry you, against your will, to a wealthy but illiterate landlord, whereas your ambition is to marry a scholar who can later become a mandarin. If, fascinated by your beauty - and I have no doubt about that - he asks you to marry him, answer that you accept with pleasure, but to be sure he works well at his next examination, you will not marry him before he succeeds. Nevertheless, while awaiting that happy day, you are quite willing to come and live with him to keep house with the savings you have taken with you.

That is, dear Châu Long, what I expect from you. With your angelic beauty and your subtle intelligence, I am sure you'll succeed in this task. As to your faithfulness to me, I love and respect you too much ever to doubt you. Here are ten bars of gold for your expenses. Come home as soon as you know of my friend's success, that is in a year, for I am full of hope about it.

The plan was carried out accordingly. Lưu Bìnħ was badly received, not by Dương Lễ himself, but by one of his clerks, and angrily threw back a string of coins which the clerk had offered on behalf of his master. He went out, swearing to succeed in the next examination and revenge himself on his disloyal friend. On the return journey, hungry and shaken with anger, he reached a miserable inn. He ordered a modest meal, but after he had eaten, he became wild with fear on noticing that he had not a single penny to pay the innkeeper. A young girl who had silently come in the inn while he was eating, helped him out by lending him the cost of the meal. Lưu Bìnħ warmly thanked her, and was dazzled by his benefactress' glowing beauty. The two young people entered into conversation and Châu Long had no difficulty getting what she set out to achieve.

- Agreed. Lưu Bìnħ said at last, I consent to our sleeping in separate rooms until I succeed in the next examination, but what a long time it will be for me.

- Believe that it will be as long for me as for you. But this condition is absolutely necessary so you can put all your energy into your studies.

*The falsely married couple went to live in Lưu Bìnħ's village. While this one was wearing himself out studying, Châu Long was forcing herself to keep awake in her separate room in order to hearten the young student. Before so much beauty and solitude, more than once Lưu Bìnħ felt unable to keep his promise. But always, Châu Long succeeded in restraining his impetuous eagerness by sweet but firm words. She was not herself completely insensitive to the handsome young man's love either. More than once, she felt troubled, but always her innate integrity and love for her absent husband recalled her to the path of duty.*

*Thus passed away the drizzly Spring, the stormy Summer and the Fall gloom with fog, in an atmosphere of feverish waiting and keen toil. At last came Winter bringing to the four corners of the empire the august proclamation of the Emperor: a great literary competitive examination to begin on the 15th day of the 11th month.*

*On the day of Lưu Bìnħ's departure for the Capital, Châu Long prepared a sumptuous meal, set it on the altar and prayed fervently for Lưu Bìnħ's success. In spite of the impending separation, the farewell dinner was merry. Lưu Bìnħ was fully confident in his abilities. Before long, he would be a laureate, then he would marry this marvellous beauty for whom he had kept to such hard work for a whole year. Châu Long, too, was happy to have succeeded in her difficult mission and to be able to see her husband again.*

*- I drink to our eternal love, said Lưu Bìnħ raising his cup of alcohol and looking affectionately at Châu Long.*

*- To your success first of all, my friend. I will be here waiting for the good news. Make sure I will be the first to rejoice.*

*The examination took a whole month. Lưu Bìnħ passed brilliantly all tests and became the laureate. The great news was at once conveyed to his village authorities so that they could organize a splendid reception on his return. As soon as she was informed of this, Châu Long disappeared. And when, three days later, the new laureate triumphantly went home, among a festive population, he found only a deserted house. Immense was his woe. He was thinking of leaving everything: honours,*

*high positions, to go everywhere in search of his beloved, when a servant of Dương Lễ came and brought him a letter from his master:*

*- “ . . .I have been informed of your triumph, and have made my house ready to welcome you. Please give an old friend the honour of offering you a modest cup of spirits. . . “*

*Lưu Bình’s first impulse was to refuse, then he thought it over. Here was the opportunity to revenge himself on his disloyal friend. So he followed the servant to Dương Lễ’s house.*

*Perfect was the reception given to him. A great feast was organized with the assistance of musicians and singing-girls. But whereas Dương Lễ was unceasingly praising his friend’s talent Lưu Bình remained silent and scarcely spoke.*

*- As a new laureate, you don’t look very happy. What’s the matter with you?*

*- Oh. Nothing. But amidst the honours I am now loaded with, I can’t help growing sad over the affronts heaped on me when I was a poor student. People are very vile and contemptible, aren’t they?*

*- I am entirely of your opinion. But among all people, don’t you make an exception?*

*- Oh yes, and a great one. When my best friends rolling in wealth were pushing me back, a country girl, a stranger, saved me from despair, gave me board, and made me what I am now.*

*- Oh. That must be a marvelous tale. Would you mind telling it to me ?*

*- Not at all. Maybe it will help to alleviate my pain.*

*And with an inexpressible emotion, Lưu Bình told his friend of his marvelous adventure: the meeting at an inn, the arrangement of the false married couple, his exhausting work throughout the year, his success in the competitive examination, and finally the angel’s disappearance.*

*- Yes, I tend to believe that she was an angel coming down from Heaven to help me mend my ways. Otherwise, how explain her persistence in not sharing the bedroom with me, and then her mysterious disappearance? What do you think of it?*

- *You are perhaps right. But allow me to say that you have drunk almost nothing. Is it because the singing-girls here aren't pretty enough. I'll call for my third wife Châu Long to fill a cup of spirits for you. I hope you won't refuse her. Hallo, Ask her ladyship the Third to come here.*

*Lưu Bình was sadly keeping his eyes downcast when a beloved voice, the melodious tone of which was well-known to him, resounded in his ears.*

- *Sir Laureate, would you accept a cup of spirits from your humble servant?*

*Quickly he looked up. Could it be true? It was She. His amazement was beyond words. But seeing Dương Lễ and Châu Long smiling at him sweetly, he suddenly understood that for a year he had been under a plan devised by his friend.*

- *Will you kindly forgive us, my dear friend, for having deluded you? said Dương Lễ. You were very much more intelligent than I was, but allow me to tell you frankly that you were also much too disposed to frivolous ways. The only solution to incite you to work was to wound your pride at first, then raise your spirits by means of an affectionate woman's presence. I asked my beloved Châu Long to fulfill this task. We have inflicted suffering on you, but it was a useful suffering, and we hope you will forgive us by taking into account our good intent.*

*Lưu Bình fell on his knees and said to the married couple:*

- *My brother, my sister, how grateful I am for your having saved me. Without you, I would still be a depraved waste. Thanks to your enlightened friendship, my brother, and thanks to your noble abnegation, my sister, I have been able to start my life over, to become a citizen useful to the society. Please accept my boundless gratitude.*

*Dương Lễ raised his friend up and told him laughingly:*

- *You are the first laureate of the last examination. All happinesses are henceforth within your reach, including a magnificent love. Châu Long cannot belong to you, but there are on earth a lot of young ladies more beautiful than she is, and whose only desire is to make you happy.*

- *You are joking, my brother. Henceforth, Châu Long is for me a sacred sister, and I have for her unlimited admiration and respect. I request only that my sister Châu Long choose for me a wife comparable to her in every respect.*

- *Granted. Sir Laureate, Dương Lễ and Châu Long answered laughingly.*

e/ Love Stories.

### **36. The miraculous cross-bow.**

*The king of Thục conquered Văn Lang country in 257 B.C. He joined the two countries into one named Âu Lạc, over which he reigned as An Dương Vương. He moved the capital to Phong Khê, in the present Đông Anh prefecture, Phúc Yên province. The citadel he had built kept collapsing every time it was about to be completed. The king then offered prayers to the genii. A Gold Tortoise introduced itself and helped the king get rid of the magnificent spirits which had opposed the erection of the citadel. Once firmly built, the citadel took the spiral shape of a snail, and thus was named Loa Thành (the Snail Citadel).*

*Its task completed, the Gold Tortoise took leave of the king, in spite of his fervent prayers for it to remain at the Court and help him manage the kingdom.*

- *Sir, it told him, the prosperity or decadence of empires depends on the Heavenly will, but also on human deeds. If your Majesty always acts with virtue, He will have nothing to fear.*

*The Gold Tortoise then took a claw from its paws and gave it to the king to be used as sear for a cross-bow.*

*At that time, emperor Tân Thủy Hoàng reigned over China. The people, particularly those on the borderlands of the empire, suffered from his tyrannical government and wanted to revolt. Triệu Đà, governor of Nam Hải province, seized this opportunity to proclaim independence. Then, to spread his power, he tried to conquer the neighbouring country of Âu Lạc. He had cause to rue it, because king An Dương, with his*

*miraculous cross-bow, killed thousands of his soldiers with one arrow only.*

*Triệu Đà, who could not win by force, resorted to trickery. He asked for peace with king An Dương, and sent as messenger his own son, prince Trọng Thủy. The prince was a handsome and well educated young man. He had no difficulty charming king An Dương and his daughter, princess My Châu. The state of war ended and became a two-fold alliance, political and matrimonial. The Chinese prince Trọng Thủy became king An Dương's son-in-law, and remained in his wife's family, according to the Vietnamese customs in those days.*

*The young married couple lived in perfect happiness for some months. My Châu was extremely fond of her husband who sincerely returned her love. But, as a good son, he could not forget his father's secret injunctions. One day, as the married couple was merrily feasting, Trọng Thủy took advantage of this unguarded moment to tell his wife:*

*- It's a great honour for me to be accepted as son-in-law of such a great king. I admire his military genius. Truly, he is invincible, and even Emperor Tần Thủy Hoàng cannot be his equal.*

*- You are right, my prince.*

*- Why then had he not harboured the thought of conquering the Tần empire.?*

*- Oh. You know, Daddy is a good-natured man who likes to spend his time drinking among his singing-girls. Besides, to tell you the truth, he is not at all as great a warrior as you think. The victories he has won, he owes them to . . .*

*- To what, my dear princess?*

*- But you won't tell it to anyone, will you? It is a state secret.*

*- On my word of honour.*

*- Well, . . . but I have sworn to secrecy.*

*- Not even to your husband?*

*- Oh ! What a pity ! We are one, aren't we? I have no right to keep a secret from you.*

*- Certainly, dear little sister.*

- *Well, all our army's strength comes from a miraculous cross-bow, whose sear is a claw of the Gold Tortoise. A single arrow of this cross-bow can kill ten thousand enemies.*

- *Really? Oh ! How glad I am to have become the son-in-law of so powerful a king, and especially to be my so graceful princess My Châu's husband.*

- *Oh ! You naughty thing.*

- *On the word of a prince, I love you more than anything in the world. And may I see this miraculous cross-bow?*

- *Certainly. Daddy, who doesn't like war, preferred to entrust me with it rather than his generals. I put it in this trunk, with my dresses. Look, here it is.*

*Trọng Thủy acclaimed the magnificence of the cross-bow and even made poems to praise his wife's beauty. A few days later, on her absence, he took the miraculous claw and put in its place an ordinary sear.*

*Some months passed by. At the end of that year, Trọng Thủy asked for An Dương Vương's permission to go visit his parents and visit his ancestors' tombs. Unsuspectingly, the king let him go. Trọng Thủy bid his weeping wife a moving farewell.*

- *You will come back soon, won't you, my dear prince?*

- *Certainly. Our separation will be more painful to me than to you. But, by the way. . .*

- *What?*

- *If unfortunate happenings were to force you to leave this palace, how could I find you again?*

- *What do you mean by that? If I were forced to leave this palace?*

- *It's only a wild assumption, but it's said that wise people must foresee everything.*

- *You are right. Well, I have, as you know, a coat made of goose feathers. Were I forced to leave this palace, I would drop the goose feathers on my way so that you could find me by following their trail.*

- *All right. You set my mind at rest. See you again soon.*

*Trọng Thủy told his father of his rival's secret. At once, Triệu Đà sent his army to conquer Âu Lạc kingdom. News of it reached the Court.*

- *Does he want to commit suicide, poor Triệu Đà? said king An Dương confidently. Needless to go and meet him, let him come here. I will crush his army with my miraculous cross-bow.*

*And he kept on sleeping in the pleasure of alcohol and music, without a care.*

*The awakening was tragic. His cross-bow revealed ineffective. As a last resort, An Dương Vương was forced to flee the capital, with his beloved daughter on the pommel of his horse. At last, he came to the seaside.*

- *O Gold Tortoise, come and save me, he cried out.*

*The Gold Tortoise appeared at his call for help, but shook with anger.*

- *Sir, it said, instead of wisely governing your kingdom, you have lived in debauchery. The divine protection has left you.*

- *At least, tell me why my miraculous cross-bow has lost its power?*

- *It's your daughter herself who has betrayed you, Sir.*

*In anger the king thrust his sword into the princess' body, then leapt with his horse into the waves. The unfortunate princess, victim of love, was left with her blood flowing out into the sea, to be absorbed by oysters and made into pearls.*

*As to Trọng Thủy, who had been bound by filial piety to deceive his wife shamefully, he desperately set out to look for her. Guided by the goose feathers she had scattered during her flight, he came to the seaside where he found only the lifeless body of his beloved princess. He brought her to the capital and ordered a solemn funeral for her. Then, conscience-stricken and driven to despair, he threw himself into a well, the water of which ever since can give pearls an extraordinary lustre.*

This legend, obviously made up to bolster the wounded national pride (the defeat would be caused by the opposition's treachery and not by our inferiority), is also a very moving love story. She is greatly to be pitied, princess My Châu who was so ruled by the love for her husband

that she had not hesitated to betray, though unknowingly, her father and her country.

Trọng Thủy's personality is no less attractive. For filial duty, he had to cheat his beloved wife, but he refused to outlive this treachery which is for the interest of his country. Rather than enjoy the profitable outcome, he took his life to stay loyal to his wife.

My Châu and Trọng Thủy have proved that two nations may be at odds with each other over political issues, but that love knows no frontier and rises over material interests. This great moral lesson in the very beginning of our history has been engraved in the hearts of the Vietnamese people.

### **37. Trương Chi.**

*A high mandarin had a beautiful daughter named My Nương, who never left her living quarters. All her time was devoted to reading, embroidering, or drawing. When she got tired of work, she drew aside the curtains of the windows to look at the river running peacefully beside her palace. Although she had reached puberty, her virgin heart had not fluttered yet. One afternoon, while the light rain was falling, she heard a melodious and low-pitched song coming up from the river. She opened the windows, and saw a boat rocking on the waves. A human shape whose features she could not discern, was busy fishing and singing with the voice of an angel.*

*For many days after, the same scene repeated itself. It seemed to My Nương that her life was hanging on the divine music that delightfully stirred her heart. But about a month later, this enchantment abruptly ended. In vain did she spend all her afternoons by her windows. No more did she see the familiar silhouette of the fishing boat. She lost her appetite and her sleep. Gone were her laughter and her health. She had the impression that after having caught sight of the splendours of Paradise, her eyes now came up against the tomb's black night. She fell seriously ill. Her father summoned to her bedside the best physicians of*

*the kingdom. But those learned persons could not make out what was wrong with their young patient. No fever, no cough, no sweat, no throbbing; inexplicable she had fallen into a decline. They were completely discouraged. Fortunately a maid-servant, more observant, had guessed the cause of her mistress' illness.*

*- Your excellency, she said to the desperate father, please call in the fisherman who used to sing every afternoon in front of our house. It's his song, or rather its interruption, that has made my mistress ill.*

*- You are sure?*

*- Yes, Your Excellency.*

*- Well, then go and fetch him. He must live in the village opposite.*

*Shortly after, the fisherman, Truong Chi, was brought to the mandarin's palace. He was very ugly, with a darkish complexion, a flat nose and a protuberant jaw. He was ordered to sing in a room next to My Nuong's. At once, the lady had enough energy to sit up on her bed where she had lain motionless for many weeks.*

*- Where is my singer? I want to see him.*

*- All right, answered her father.*

*And Truong Chi was shown into the patient's bedroom. On seeing him, My Nuong was painfully disappointed but definitely cured. It was not so with the poor fisherman who, after having gazed closely at the lady's magnificent beauty, came home love-sick. It was a hopeless love, so it was not long till he died from it. He was buried, then after a year exhumed to receive a new sepulture. Among his remains was found, instead of his heart, a transparent stone block. This extraordinary curio was put on the prow of the late Truong Chi's boat.*

*One day, My Nuong's father had to cross the river, and saw this stone block on the boat plying to and from between the two banks. He found it interesting and bought it. He later asked a jeweller to make a tea cup out of it. Now it happened that when tea was poured into this cup, the image of Truong Chi in his boat appeared at the bottom of the cup. Informed of this miracle, My Nuong saw again her unfortunate lover, and let fall a tear of pity into the cup. At once, the cup dissolved into a patch of blood.*

*Such was the legend of Trương Chi, who sang so beautifully but happened to be so ugly. It was cruel because though the aristocratic lady My Nương was well disposed to marry a poor fisherman, she had withdrawn before his physical ugliness. But the young lady atoned for her unintentional cruelty with an extremely moving gesture. She wept over the unfortunate man who beyond death, had preserved a desperate love to such a point that his heart had turned into stone.*

**f/ Modesty.**

### **38. The Stone dog.**

*Once upon a time, there was a student of exceptional intelligence. He could memorize a whole book after only one quick reading.*

*One morning, on his way to school past the village temple, he noticed that the stone dog at the temple's door wagged its tail. The same supernatural phenomenon occurred again the succeeding days. Puzzled, the student finally questioned the stone dog:*

- Why do you wag your tail when you see me?*
- Because you will pass the coming examination, and I am very happy for you.*

*The student related the strange conversation to his father. From then on, the father showed an unbearable arrogance. Every time he quarrelled with someone, he would threaten: "When my son becomes a doctor, I shall punish you."*

*Not long after, the stone dog remained motionless when the student passed by. Astonished, the latter asked:*

- Are you angry with me?*
- No, but sorry for you. Your father's arrogance displeased the Heavenly Sovereign who decided to remove your name from the list of laureates.*

*In fact, the student did not graduate that year. All his papers were excellent, but a small mistake had stolen into the last paper and made it valueless.*

*The student's misfortune distressed his father who understood that he had, with his thoughtless arrogance, jeopardized his son's fine prospects. With utmost sincerity he sternly mended his ways and became the most modest and the most charitable.*

*When the next examination came up, the stone dog started wagging its tail again as the student passed by.*

*- Your father, it said, has overcome his shortcomings and the Heavenly Sovereign has put your name on the list of laureates this year. I am very glad of it.*

*The student dared not disclose the good news to his father and only thought of doubling efforts to study. He passed the examination brilliantly this time.*

## CHAPTER X I

### ENTERTAINING TALES

In this category, we clearly distinguish two groups:

1. The properly called funny tales, that make fun of everything: miserliness, laziness, self-conceit, henpecked husbands, and mainly sexuality. On this last point, there is ample literature that we must, much to our regret, disregard to be within the limits of decency. The folk joke is indeed often expanded to a surprising extent which outdistances the poems by some scholars. This is because the common people, unlike the scholars, have no Freudian inhibitions. They laugh out freely at their licentious jokes, fortunately only verbal, for in actual fact they generally behave quite properly.

2. The satirical tales aimed at the scholars and the authorities. First, at the scholars as in the following song that we have already seen:

*Nhất sĩ nhì nông  
Hết gạo chạy rông  
Nhất nông nhì sĩ.*

*First are the scholars, in second rank stand farmers .  
But when rice gets short, the scholar runs anxiously to borrow it  
In such case, farmers are ahead of scholars.*

We must not see there an animosity of the peasants towards the true scholar whom he always admires. But the peasant is right in despising and laughing at the ignorant scholars, those who know little but who live as “scholars” nevertheless, becoming perpetual parasites at the expense of their families and of society, dressed up as school masters, physicians, fortune-tellers or wizards.

The peasant’s aversion for authorities is more deeply rooted. The monarchical system was imported from China, whereas the Vietnamese people had lived in self-governing clans under the nominal authority of the Hùng kings. Even after a strong central government had been set up,

it had to observe the self-government of the village, as is shown in this saying:

***Phép vua thua lệ làng.***

*The king's law gives way to the village customs.*

All the same, frictions could not be avoided between the country people and the central government authorities entrusted with tax collecting, carrying out forced labour, and dispensing justice. And this explains the revolutionary spirit of some tales.

1. The properly called funny tales.

a/ About miserliness.

### **39. The wooden fish.**

*A miser, in spite of his great wealth, abstains from making the least expense he considers unnecessary. At his meals, there is only rice, nothing but rice, never a morsel of meat nor the least bit of fish. Nevertheless, to sidetrack those who happen to call at his house at dinner time, he sets a ready-made superb wooden fish that majestically occupies a place of honour on the meal tray. He himself, his wife and their three children are allowed to look at the false fish everytime they swallow a mouthful of rice, by way of seasoning. But only once at each mouthful, no more.*

*Now, the youngest son, who is a greedy boy, looks thrice at the wooden fish before making up his mind to swallow his rice. He is caught at it by his eldest brother who loses no time in denouncing this disloyal act:*

- Daddy, the little one has looked at the fish three times.*
- Never mind. Let him eat too much of the salty stuff and he will die of thirst.*

b/ About laziness.

### **40. Better than his master.**

*A lazy fellow is lying at the foot of a fig-tree, waiting for some figs to drop into his mouth. Many of them are scattered around him, but our lazy friend is too lazy to pick them up. Along comes a passer-by.*

*- My brother, says the lazy one, be so kind as to pick up a fig and put it into my mouth. I am starving.*

*Unfortunately our man has come across another lazy one. Unwilling to take the trouble of bending down, this one picks up a fig with his toes and puts it into the other's mouth.*

*Full with admiration before that stroke of genius, the first lazy fellow asks the second one to accept him as a disciple, and so it is arranged.*

*The next morning, he brings along a bunch of bananas to his master, so that he may be solemnly recognized before the altar of the Great Sage Confucius. But he finds no table to put the bananas on.*

*- I'll go borrow one from my neighbour, says the master.*

*- It would be too tiring, retorts the follower. I will bend my back to serve as a table.*

*The master then falls down on his knees:*

*- You should be my master instead, and I should be your disciple.*

c/ About conceit.

#### **41. The wedding pig and the new robe.**

*A conceited man is celebrating his son's marriage. The pig to be sacrificed in the wedding festivities happens to escape. The man runs after it and asks everywhere:*

*- Have you seen the pig for my son's marriage?*

*- No, he is answered.*

*At last, he falls in with another conceited man. Showing his new robe, the second answers:*

*- Since I put on this new robe, I have not met any pig.*

d/ About henpecked husbands.

#### **42. If I were in his place.**

*Two neighbours have a common problem: they are both terribly afraid of their wives. One day when it rains, one of them forgets to take in the clothes his wife has hung in the yard to dry. On her return, finding them all wet, she makes a terrible scene.*

*The neighbour sees it from his garden, and curses:*

- Shame on him ! If I were in his place.. .*
- And what would you do in his place? Roars his wife who overhears this aggressive thought. Tell me what you would do if you were in his place?*
- But I would have taken the clothes in before the rain started.*

#### **43. The henpecked husbands' league.**

*In a certain village, all the husbands are afraid of their wives. One day, they convene a general meeting to put an end to this intolerable situation.*

- Gentlemen, says one, if we are frightened, it's because we stand apart from one another. Let us join together against our common adversary, and we will no longer be afraid.*
- Yes, yes, the others shout enthusiastically.*
- Therefore, I suggest we set up a league. If any one of us is ill-treated by his wife, the others must come to his help.*
- Well said. But who will be a chairman?*

*After an hour of animated discussions, the assembly unanimously elects as chairman Mr. Drooping Moustache, the most henpecked husband of the village.*

- Long live Chairman Drooping Moustache. Hip, hip, hurrah !*

*At once, the assembly decides to organize a great ceremony to inform the village's Guardian Deity of the formation of the League. The Village Hall is splendidly decorated with banners. On the altar table, two enormous candles, each one meter long, are lighted, and between*

*them an incense-burner exudes a thick smoke of sandalwood. Indispensable component of every festivity, a tray laden with food and drink is ready to be served to the members at the end of the ceremony.*

*With the warlike beatings of drums and gongs. Mr Chairman of the League moves forward on the flowered red mat spread before the altar. Clad in his sumptuous cloak with dragon-fly winged cap and embroidered ankle-boots, he majestically kneels down amidst two rows of leaguers standing respectfully. The ceremony is about to begin.*

*Just then some ladies on their way to the market, attracted by the beating of drums, draw near the temple. On seeing them, all the leaguers bravely run off at full speed. Then, when they cannot run any longer, they stop to recover their breath. They look back at the temple: Miracle of miracles. Their chairman is still kneeling down before the altar.*

*- What a heroic chairman we have chosen. They exclaim. Let us go back quickly to offer him our congratulations on his courage, and our apologies for our cowardice.*

*As the ladies, disappointed at not hearing any more drum beating, have by now left for the market, the leaguers courageously go back to the temple. Alas. Their chairman, who had no time to take flight, had died of fright at his post.*

#### **44. A clever trick.**

*A scholar has failed the literary examination several times. Yet, he is a distinguished scholar, gifted with an excellent memory and an unrivalled talent for poetry. But whether from bad luck or from bad placement of his ancestors' tombs, he has not yet had the happiness of hearing his name proclaimed in the examination camp, amidst the beating of drums and the admiration of the multitudes. This year, he fails once again. On his return journey, he is plunged into sad thoughts. What he is the most afraid of is his wife's wrath, for she is a terrible woman who will not fail to receive him with cutting reproaches. What is to be done? Suddenly he thinks of a strategy.*

*That night, he gets into his garden, climbs up a tree, and calls out aloud:*

*- Mrs So-and-so. I am the Genie untrusted with examinations on Earth. Get up, and come to listen to Heaven's decisions.*

*Awakened with a start, the scholar's wife comes out and kneels down in the garden.*

*- Lord Genie, I put myself at your disposal.*

*- I came to tell you that your husband will pass the examination this year.*

*- Heaven be thanked for it.*

*- But he will die immediately afterwards, for his ancestors' good deeds are not sufficient to give him both success and longevity.*

*- O, boo, hoo, hoo.*

*- Nevertheless, I am interested in him, because he has a good disposition and is often unjustly ill-treated by you. Isn't that so?*

*- I confess my faults. O my husband, will you forgive me?*

*- Keep quiet. You are a bad woman, and I should let you be widowed.*

*- Boo, hoo, hoo.*

*- Nevertheless, as I told you, I am interested in your husband and shall do my best to save him. If I cause him to fail this examination, he will have a long life and pass the next examination. Well, which situation do you prefer? Is he to pass this examination and die immediately after, or shall he fail and live?*

*The clever scholar waits for his wife to return to her room, then furtively gets out of the garden. He grants himself three days of aimless wandering, then returns home with a gloomy look.*

*- A plague on the Heaven, he cries violently as soon as he sees his wife. All my papers were excellent, I already expected to come out first, and my failure is absolutely incomprehensible.*

*- Get over it, my dear friend, his wife says gently. You have had a narrow escape, and you would have died but for my intervention.*

*- How so?*

*Ingenuously his wife tells him of the interview she had three days ago with a genie. Whereupon our scholar starts flying into a terrible rage:*

*- Wretched woman. What have you done? You have made me fail my examination.*

*- Be quiet, my lord. What is the use of passing the examination if you must die right afterwards?*

*- Hey ! I would rather succeed and die, than suffer the shame of an unjust failure. Oh ! Women ! What narrow-minded people !*

*At last, after many sweet words and apologies from his wife, our scholar consents to calm his haughty wrath. In consequence - and he is laughing up his sleeve - instead of scolding him viciously, his wife is full of attention for him. Not long ago, he was granted only scanty food and drink; now he is offered as much as he likes. And no more bitter words, no more sarcastic remarks from his wife. From a bad-tempered shrew, she has become all sugar and honey. Is she not the actual culprit of his failure at the examination?*

*One day, the mandarin - for our scholar has been appointed mandarin - has a chat with his wife in their official residence. Smiling, he says to her:*

*- Do you know the Genie who spoke to you that night, and of whom you asked for my failure?*

*- How could I know him?*

*- It was I.*

*- Ah ! Traitor ! Murderer ! You have misled me shamefully.*

*- Hush ! Aren't you afraid that this trick you fell into will be known among my people?*

*And at that they both burst out laughing heartily.*

e/ Some Licentious Tales.

#### **45. A too bushy beard.**

*A townsman covets nothing but a fine beard. Alas. In spite of all the remedies he has taken, whether for internal use or for external application, his face remains hopelessly bare.*

*Now, our townsman has just married a very pretty woman, and he wants his future son to have this virile ornament which Nature has cruelly denied him. He unburdens himself to his wife:*

*- Darling, you know how fond I am of beards. Unfortunately I am deprived of one.*

*- But you look very smart with your clean-shaven face.*

*- No. You flatter me, but that doesn't prevent me from being ashamed of not having a beard.*

*- But what is there to do?*

*- Nothing, unfortunately, at least for myself. But we must try to acquire a fine beard for our son to be.*

*- How so?*

*- Well, I will look for someone who has a fine beard, and I'll ask him to germinate it with you for our son.*

*- You are mad.*

*- Not at all. Wife, such is my will.*

*Such is his obsession that a few days later, seeing before his house a gentleman with a splendid beard, he politely invites him in. He feasts him lavishly; then, over the dessert, recounts his affliction of being devoid of beard and his hope of giving his son-to-be this virile ornament.*

*- My dear guest, you will help me, won't you?*

*- Be assured that I will do everything I can to help. But in all sincerity, I don't see how I can.*

*- Please go into this room. My wife is there waiting for you.*

*Very abashed, the stranger at first strongly declines this incredible offer. Then, in the face of the repeated requests and the sincere sorrow of his host, he finally gives in.*

*- How many tufts of beard do you want for your son?*

*- Three, Sir, Exactly like you.*

*- Very well. I will comply, but be assured that it's only to oblige you.*

- *We will be grateful to you forever.*

*The husband shows his guest into his wife's room, then waits outside.*

- *A tuft. He hears a few minutes later.*

- *Two tufts.*

- *Three tufts.*

- *That's enough. Thank you, cries the husband. Now, come out.*

- *Five, six, seven. The stranger keeps on working impetuously.*

*Enough. Enough. The husband shouts as he breaks down the door of his wife's room. I didn't ask you to make up for my son face totally covered with hair.*

#### **46. The bold brother - in - law.**

*A woman who has had one child gives birth to a second. She asks her sister to come and take care of her elder son and her housekeeping while she is busy with the baby.*

*But she did not reckon with her urchin husband. How could this one withstand his sister-in-law's beauty, her dimpled cheeks and her almond eyes? One night, believing that everybody is asleep, he silently crawls to the bed where his sister-in-law is sleeping with his elder son.*

*But his wife, who is feeding the baby in the next bed, noticed it. She sings:*

***Đêm khuya gà gáy o o,***

***Hỡi người quân tử kia bò đi đâu?***

*In the deep of night marked only by the cock-crow,*

*You who are crawling there, where are you going?*

*To keep his composure, the husband impudently answers:*

***Đêm khuya gà gáy o o,***

***Anh ngủ chẳng được anh bò đi chơi.***

*In the deep of night marked only by the cock-crow,*

*I can't sleep and crawl around to pass the time.*

*In her turn, the young girl stifling a burst of laughter, sings also in lulling her nephew:*

***Cháu ơi cháu ngủ cho no,  
Của dì, dĩ giữ, ai bò mặc ai.***

*Sleep gently, my nice nephew,  
My property, I will keep watch over it carefully, never mind those  
who crawl about.*

## 2. Satirical Tales.

a/ Against the ignorant scholars.

### 47. The poem of “The toad”.

*Three silly scholars believing themselves to be clever poets, decide to go together to the communal temple to compose some poems. After partaking of some cups of spirits, one of them cries out:*

- *My dear brothers, I am prompted by the noble Muse.*
- *So am I.*
- *So am I.*
- *Then, let's compose a poem all together.*
- *On which topic?*
- *Look here. A toad is moving toward us. An excellent topic of poetry. I will begin now:*

***Con cóc trong hang  
Con cóc nhảy ra.  
From its den,  
A toad is jumping out.***

*The second poet joins in:*

***Con cóc nhảy ra  
Con cóc ngồi đấy.  
After jumping out,  
The toad sits down over there.***

*The third closes the poem by these verses:*

*Con cóc ngồi đấy,  
Con cóc nhảy đi.  
After sitting down there,  
The toad then jumps away.*

- *Hurrah. Bravo. Splendid. Cry out in chorus the three poets. And they congratulate each other frantically.*

*Suddenly one of them burst out sobbing:*

- *My dear brothers, he says, we have exhausted our quintessence of genius in the composition of this wonderful poem. I am afraid we have very little time left to live. Boo hoo hoo.*

- *Boo hoo hoo. Yes, yes, you are right, great poets like us cannot enjoy a long life. Alas. We are doomed to die shortly.*

*To these three lamentations is soon added a fourth, that of the keeper of the communal temple. Amazed, the three poets ask him:*

- *We who are great poets, we are afraid of dying shortly, and thus we are weeping. But you, why are you crying too?*

- *Gentlemen, because I have heard your wonderful poem, I am also afraid that I may not be able to survive. Boo hoo hoo.*

#### **48 Because that's so.**

*A wealthy landlord has two daughters; he has married off the elder to a peasant and the younger to a student.*

*One day, to show off the student's knowledge and make fun of the peasant's ignorance, the landlord takes them for a stroll. On the way, coming upon a goose squawking, he asks his two sons-in-law why the goose is able to do that.*

- *Because it has a long neck, answers the student.*

- *Because that's so, answers the peasant.*

*Further, they see a flock of ducks frolicking in a pond.*

- *Why are ducks able to swim? Asks the father-in-law.*

- *Because they have feathers and little flesh, answers the student.*

- *Because that's so, answers the peasant.*

*Further on, they find a stone split in two on the road:*

- *Why isn't this stone intact?*
- *Because a thunderbolt or some roadman has split it.*
- *Because that's so.*

*After returning home, the landlord congratulates his younger son-in-law over and over for his vast knowledge, and jeers incessantly at the ignorance of the elder. Infuriated, the elder says to the younger:*

*- You said that the goose has a powerful squawk because it has a long neck. But the toad has no neck. Why does it have a powerful squawk too? You said that the duck can swim because it has feathers and little flesh. But a featherless and fleshless boat floats all the same. And as for the split stone, how silly your explanation was. Your mother's belly from which you were born, was it split by a thunderbolt or by your father? In my opinion, things are the way they are because that's so. The knowledge you get from the books is merely stupidity.*

#### **49. The "White Horse" poem.**

*A mandarin, very fond of literature, is used to testing the talent of needy scholars who call on him for help. He generously rewards those who are truly good poets.*

*One day, two students call on him at the same time.*

- *Who wants to be tested first? asks the mandarin.*
- *I will, Your Excellency, says one.*
- *Then describe the white horse which is tethered there, at my door.*

*After a minute of thought, the first student declaims:*

***Bạch mã mao như tuyết  
Tứ túc cương như thiết.  
Trống công kỵ bạch mã,  
Bạch mã tẩu như phi.***

*The horse's hair is as white as snow  
Its four legs are as strong as steel.  
When Your excellency rides on it,  
The white horse gallops as if it were flying.*

- *Very well, says the mandarin. Here is a string of coins for you. As for you, he tells the second student, please describe the old woman who is just coming in, probably to ask for alms.*

*After seeking in vain for other rhymes, the student, in desperation, finally declaims:*

***Bà lão mao như tuyết  
Tứ túc cương như thiết  
Trống công kỵ bà lão  
Bà lão kêu chí chết.***

*The old woman's hair is as white as snow  
And her four limbs are as strong as steel.*

*When your excellency rides on her,  
The old woman cries as if she were dying.*

- *What insolence, shouts the mandarin. Guards, seize him and give him twenty lashings.*

## **50. A literary competition.**

*A wealthy townsman wants to marry off his daughter. Three candidates present themselves to ask for the beautiful heiress' hand in marriage. Hoping to get a well-educated son-in-law, the townsman asks the three suitors to improvise a poem:*

- *Look at that horse of mine. The one who can say the best poem on this topic will have my daughter.*

*The first candidate, seeing a needle lying on the table, has an immediate inspiration:*

***Mặt nước để cái kim  
Ngựa ông chạy như chim  
Chạy đi rồi chạy lại  
Cái kim vẫn chưa chìm.***

*While I am putting a needle in this bowl of water,  
Your horse is galloping as fast as a flying bird.  
He gallops forward then backward  
Before the needle falls to the bottom of the bowl.*

- *Hum ! Your picture is not very poetic. Whose turn is it now?*

*The second candidate looks around to get his inspiration. At last, his eyes alight on a small stove used to boil water for tea. At once, he declaims:*

***Lửa đỏ để cái lông,  
Ngựa ông chạy như rồng.  
Chạy đi rồi chạy lại,  
Cái lông vẫn chưa hồng.***

*While I am putting a feather on this stove  
Your horse is galloping as a hurricane  
He gallops forward then backward  
Before the feather is consumed by the fire.*

- *Hum ! Hum ! Not very good, your comparison. And you over there?*

*The poor last candidate tears his hair in despair. In vain, he gazes around wide-eyed. There is nothing to inspire him. Fortunately his intended mother-in-law - he hopes so at least - suddenly makes a loud sound. Maybe she has been convulsed with laughter by the two unusual poems she just heard, and cannot hold back an involuntary motion of her bowels. Whatever the reason, this sudden little sound helps our poet, who gloriously declaims:*

***Ngã mẩu đánh cái rít  
Ngựa ông chạy như hít.  
Chạy đi rồi chạy lại  
Cái đít vẫn chưa khít.***

*While my mother is breaking wind,  
Your horse is galloping as fast as the wind,  
He gallops forward then backward  
Before the anus has time to close.*

The tale does not inform us to whom, among the three poets, the rich townsman gave his daughter in marriage.

b/ Against hangers-on.

## 51. The wizard.

*A man set himself up as a wizard. He boasted of giving orders to all the demons of Hell, and summoning as he pleased all the genii of Heaven, Earth, and Waters. But if he succeeded in deceiving his customers, he failed completely before his wife. One day, she asked him:*

*- You who pretend to be a wizard, aren't you afraid of ghosts, sometimes?*

*- Ignorant woman. Ghosts are merely my servants; how could they frighten me?*

*A few days later, the wizard, after practising his business in a neighbouring village, came back late. In a bag he carried a lot of food his customers gave him: a cooked pork's head, a bunch of bananas, and about ten sticky rice balls. As he pushed in his garden gate, the wizard saw a lurid glow dancing before his eyes. It was actually his wife, crouched behind a bush, who was brandishing a blazing log. Wild with terror, the wizard hurriedly stammered:*

*- Back, demon ! Back, demon !*

*But instead of moving back, the lurid demon came closer and closer. Well then, the wizard bravely ran off as fast as his feet could carry him, inadvertently dropping his bag of food.*

*He dared not return home before the next morning. His wife gave him a hearty welcome, and a sumptuous meal with a pig's head, sticky rice balls and bananas. Amazed, he looked at them and muttered:*

*- Why, the pork's head looks like mine. And this bunch of bananas looks like mine too. . .*

*- But what do you want a pork's head to look like, if not a pork's head? his wife burst out laughing. Do you mean it looks like your ghosts of last night?*

*The wizard understood that he had been tricked by his wife and henceforth dared not boast any more of his mastery over the ghosts.*

## 52. The bad physician.

*One day, the king of Hell fell ill. All the officials in the Underworld were alarmed, because there was no physician who could cure him.*

*- Your Majesty, said a venerable bearded counsellor, why do you not call in a doctor from the living world?*

*- You are right. But who are you going to call in? You must not bring an ignoramus here.*

*- Don't worry. I have an unfailing method for detecting the best physician on Earth.*

*- Ah ! ? Tell me.*

*- Does Your Majesty know that the ill people sent to us by ignorant physicians come back to Earth to stand before the houses of their unintentional murderers?*

*- Yes, and what then?*

*- Well the physician who has the least number of ghosts before his house is undoubtedly the best.*

*- Oh ! What a clever idea you've got. Please order a devil to go immediately in search of this good physician.*

*So a devil was sent to Earth. But before the house of every physician he found a large crowd of ghosts. Quite discouraged, he happened to pass the house of a physician before which stood only two ghosts.*

*"Here is the man I am searching for," said the devil to himself. And he carried off the physician's soul to Hell.*

*- Welcome, dear Master, said the King of Hell. Is it true that you practise the art of medicine?*

*- Yes, Your Majesty, I have been practising since this morning.*

*- What ! Only since this morning?*

*- Yes, Your Majesty. I have treated only two patients so far.*

*- And you have killed them both. Hallo ! Devils ! Take him back to Earth at once.*

**c/ Against High Society.**

Nguyễn Quỳnh was a mandarin who lived under the Lê dynasty, when Prince Trịnh monopolized the actual power. Quỳnh hated the dictator, but dared not openly oppose him. So he tried instead to annoy or even ridicule him, without causing great danger, on numerous occasions where he always managed to have the last laugh. Of course, legend has exaggerated his deeds, perhaps invented some he did not accomplish, to make him the symbolic champion of the people's opposition to tyrannical authorities.

Here we relate two of those juicy anecdotes.

### **53. The stolen cat.**

*Prince Trịnh had a very pretty cat which he fed with selected food. Quỳnh decided to take hold of this pet. He stole it surreptitiously, then kept it in confinement in his house. At dinner times, he would put two plates beside one another, one full of meat and fish, the other containing only rice and vegetables. Everytime the cat, accustomed to delicious food, went to the first plate, Quỳnh would whip the animal sharply. At the end of a month of this training, the cat spontaneously went to the plate of rice and vegetables, even when it was no longer threatened by whips.*

*Then Quỳnh openly walked with “his” cat along the streets in order to be seen in its company by the eunuchs of Prince Trịnh. Informed of it, the Prince summoned Quỳnh.*

- *I have been informed, Quỳnh, that you have stolen my cat..*
- *Your Highness has been misinformed. I bought my cat at the market.*
- *Well, bring it here. We shall see whether it is yours or mine.*

*Quỳnh brought “his” cat to the royal palace.*

- *Why, it's really my cat, the prince exclaimed.*
- *I humbly beg your pardon, but the cat is mine.*
- *Nevertheless this muzzle, these eyes are really my cat's.*

- *Your highness, there is one way to find out whose cat this is.*
- *Tell me.*
- *Your Highness, please order two plates to be brought here, one containing selected food from your kitchen, and the other containing only rice and vegetables. If this cat goes to the first plate, it is undoubtedly yours. But if it goes to the second plate, it means that it belongs to your humble servant who cannot afford to eat meat at his meals, and with greater reason cannot give fancy food to his cat.*
- *Yes, you are right. Eunuchs, perform the test Quỳnh had proposed.*

The test, as may be expected, ended in the prince's mortification. Quỳnh took away "his" cat while loudly praising the divine perspicacity of his prince.

#### **54. The castrated rooster.**

*Quỳnh learned that the Chief of Eunuchs of Prince Trịn took a vain pride in owning a famous fighting cock. To teach him a lesson, Quỳnh spread the rumour that he, too, had a formidable fighting cock. At once, the Chief of Eunuchs came along to Quỳnh to challenge many times on the plea of his cock's inferiority. Quỳnh finally accepted the bet.*

*On the day of the match, Quỳnh brought in an enormous castrated cock which the opposing cock put to flight shamefully with a single peck, to the triumphant laughter of the eunuch. Quỳnh then picked up his wounded cock and told it mockingly:*

- *My poor castrated thing ! You would do better to hide your disgrace. But you wanted to show off, and this is what happens to you.*

*The eunuch stopped his triumphant laughter and furtively slipped away without claiming the prize money of the bet.*

## WHY DO WE STUDY THE VIETNAMESE FOLK LITERATURE ?

Just as:

*Le divin Mahomet enfourchait tour à tour  
Son mulet Daidol et son âne Yafour,*

the common man uses in turn proverbs, songs and tales to express his ideas and feelings. How and which ones? Clumsily or skillfully? Are his ideas and feelings similar to or different from those of the scholars? Such are the two questions, one purely formal and the other fundamental, that we are going to study. The formal question constitutes the literary interest, the other one has two main elements: the sociological and the psychological aspects.

### 1. Literary Interest.

Some literary critics overpraise the folk literature to the detriment of the scholarly literature, as there are undeniable weaknesses in songs and tales. Indeed, often songs have poor or unmatching rhymes, while many tales are uninteresting or inconsistent. Only the proverbs, simply because they are extremely concise, may be considered as flawless pearls.

Actually, there is not a folk art completely distinct from the scholarly art. The same literary techniques are found in both: the personification of lifeless things, the rendering of abstract ideas by means of concrete images, the pun, the inversion, the intentional repetition of some important words for emphasis, antithesis, hyperbole, and so on. Nevertheless, it is true that on the whole the folk literature exhudes vitality, which is seldom found in the scholarly literature, with the exception of a few scholars who harmoniously blend their strong Chinese training with their own national spirit: Hồ Xuân Hương, Nguyễn Du, Nguyễn Khuyến, Trần Tế Xương. This difference in vitality comes from the following basic factor: whereas the scholar, even if he does not feel and think through his books, is at least influenced by his

bookish recollections; the common man feels and thinks directly according to his own experience of people and things. On the one hand, we find a sophisticated elegance which risks verging on affectation; on the other hand, we find a rough spontaneity which can too easily be tainted with over-exaggeration and rudeness.

The general features having been outlined, we now go into the details of the art of the folk literature.

a/ The reader must have readily observed that folk literature has little use for the rigid laws of prosody. One cannot measure the damage caused to our poetry by the laws of academic prosody, especially those of the Đường Luật. Such a poem is a jewel delicately engraved; it contains eight seven-foot verses, of which the first two must introduce the subject matter that the third and fourth will explain, the fifth and the sixth will develop, and the last two will condense in a final thought. Within this rigid framework, the poet still has to comply with the rules governing rhymes, shrill tones and low tones, and the word-for-word parallelism of the two couples of verses in the middle of the poem. It is a dreadful “monkey” trick. The scholars converted to modern ideas have fought against it since the start of this century, but it was not until the 1930’s that our great literary revolution could burst forth. Fortunately the common man did not feel the sacred veneration for the laws of academic prosody that the scholars did. He freed himself pretty rakishly by mixing four -foot, five-foot, six-foot and even ten or twelve-foot verses. The word-for-word parallelism of some couples of verses is also the least of his worries.

Whence comes this independent attitude which the scholars dare not have? The cause of these different attitudes is clear. We need not even put forward the mentality of the scholar, accustomed as it was submitting to the ancient writers’ authority; it is sufficient to think of the different intents and purposes of the poems of the scholars versus the folk songs. Whereas the scholarly poems can be declaimed only according to one or two fairly monotonous ways, the folk songs may be adapted to folk tunes varying widely according to the singer’s liking. Because folk songs are often improvised during singing competitions,

they are granted some liberties which the scholars would reject in disgust.

**b/** But this is not the most salient feature of the folk literature. Its chief difference from the scholarly literature lies in its dazzling abundance of concrete images. We may say that whereas the scholar thinks in the abstract, the common man thinks in factual terms. All the ideas that come to his mind are spontaneously transformed into concrete images, without any effort. One could see this as a mark of intellectual inferiority, a radical inability of the common people to rise above primitive concepts and reach the heights of abstract reasoning. Perhaps, but I do not believe it. If often the common man thinks concretely, he is nevertheless able to reason and even to reason subtly. The concrete image is for him a simple means of expression, and not a limit of his intellect. Let us select at random some proverbs and songs illustrating this marvellous ability of the common people to use concrete images; we have much to choose from.

To advise his children to behave properly even when they are in extreme poverty, what does the common man say? He compares a good reputation, the fruit of wisdom, to a beautiful garment, the symbol of riches:

***Tốt danh hơn lành áo.***

*Good fame is better than fine clothes.*

He sees perseverance through the image of a stream flowing ceaselessly day and night:

***Nước chảy đá mòn.***

*By steadily flowing, water wears down stone.*

To recommend moderation of passions, he compares happiness to flowers and buds:

***Có hoa mừng hoa***

***Có nụ mừng nụ.***

*Welcome a flower*

*Also welcome a bud.*

The parents who want their children settled in marriage see them docilely sitting on the chairs they have chosen:

***Cha mẹ đặt đâu  
Con phải ngồi đấy.***

*Where your parents put you,  
There you have to sit.*

Family ties are plainly illustrated by blood:

***Máu loãng còn hơn nước lã.***  
*Diluted blood is still thicker than pure water.*

To portray solidarity, the common man calls forth the image of a herd of horses:

***Một con ngựa đau  
Cả tàu không ăn cỏ.***  
*When a horse is sick  
All its stable companions refuse to be fed.*

From the proverbs, let us go now to the songs. To ask a girl he secretly loves whether her heart is free, the young man does not question directly by using the personal pronouns I and You, but makes the plants speak:

***- Bây giờ mận mới hỏi đào  
Vườn hồng đã có ai vào hay chưa?  
- Mận hỏi thì đào xin thưa  
Vườn hồng có lối nhưng chưa ai vào.***  
*- The plum tree wants to ask the peach tree:  
Has someone got into your colourful garden ?  
- To the plum tree's question, the peach tree respectfully replies:  
My colourful garden is not closed, but so far nobody has entered it.*

A haughty girl does not reject a suitor by telling him: "You are not worthy of marrying me", but:

***Thân chị như cánh hoa sen  
Em như bèo bọt chẳng chen được vào.***  
*Your elder sister is like a lotus flower;  
Little brother, how could you, marsh-lentil that you are, edge close to it?*

No more quotes are needed. The reader must already be accustomed by now to this characteristic of Vietnamese folk literature. What we want to emphasize is the discerning choice of images used to express the most abstract ideas and the most subtle feelings. Sometimes, the image is very vulgar, even unmannerly. For example:

***Nồi nào vung ấy.***

*To every pot its own lid.*

(One must marry someone of his society rank)

***Cá vàng bụng bọ.***

*The goldfish has its belly full of worms.*

(A good appearance often hides depravity)

***Ăn cháo đái bát.***

*He urinates into the bowl from which he just ate soup.*

But one cannot deny that those images are strongly picturesque. All terms of comparison (lotus, marsh-lentil, pot, goldfish, bowl, etc. . .) are things, plants or animals familiar to the Vietnamese peasant. And, even more than the scholarly masterpieces, the folk literature irresistibly evokes the alluring qualities of the native land which it is the most direct product.

c/ No procedure of rhetoric dear to the scholars is unknown to the folk literature:

1/ The pun, unfortunately incomprehensible to foreigners, is used by the folk artist as often as by the scholar, because it exercises the mind. We will quote only one example:

***Trăng bao nhiêu tuổi trăng già***

***Núi bao nhiêu tuổi gọi là núi non?***

*What is the age of the old moon?*

*What is the age of the young mountain?*

The phrase “Núi non” is actually a compound word formed by associating to the noun “núi” the word “non” which adds nothing to its

meaning, besides giving it a more harmonious sound. On the other hand, “non” also means “young”. And the phrase “Young mountain” wonderfully balances the phrase of “old moon” which is so called for many reasons: First, because the moon has been lighting the world forever, since the birth of mankind. Second, because the moon is viewed as the goddess of marriage, and the badly-matched husbands and wives always blame her and call her an old lady.

2/ Inversion is used in poetry mainly to adjust the rhymes. In prose, it is used more rarely because of the risks of misinterpretation. Nevertheless, proverbs use inversion perfectly, to emphasize the important words. For instance:

*Của người bỏ tất,  
Của mình lạt buộc.*

*With another's money, one is as open-handed as Buddha;*

*With one's own money, one binds it carefully with bamboo straps.*

or:

*Giàu sơn lâm lắm kẻ tìm đến  
Khó giữa chợ ít người hỏi.*

*Are you rich? Many go to your house in the forest. Are  
you poor? Nobody calls on you even when you live in  
the market place.*

3/ Repetition is very often used in folk literature. Here is a typical example:

*Ngồi buồn thơ thần đi ra  
Đụng phải cột nhà thơ thần đi vô.  
Ngồi buồn thơ thần đi vô  
Đụng phải cái bồ thơ thần đi ra.*

*Since he is sad, he wanders indolently out,*

*Colliding with a column, he indolently wanders in.*

*Since he is sad, he indolently wanders in,*

*Colliding with a basket, he indolently wanders out.*

Is it not a wonderful picture of the idle person who does not know how to spend his time, and wanders about like a lost soul in his own house, because nothing interests him?

4/ To jeer at some defect, either physical or moral, it is deliberately exaggerated. The process is not particularly gracious, but is irresistibly funny. We have seen such an example, used to point out a husband's blindness to his wife defects:

*Lỗ mũi em thì tám gánh lông  
Chồng yêu chồng bảo tơ hồng trời cho.  
Đêm nằm thì ngáy pho pho  
Chồng yêu chồng bảo ngáy cho vui nhà.  
Đi chợ thì hay ăn quà  
Chồng yêu chồng bảo về nhà đỡ cơm.*

*Her nostrils are full of enough hair to fill eight baskets  
But her husband who loves her says that's gossamer.*

*At night she snores noisily,  
But her husband who loves her says that it enlivens the house.  
Going to the market she gorges on delicacies, But  
her husband who loves her says that she does so  
to save rice at home.*

5/ And lastly, there is a rhetorical form which is peculiar to Vietnamese literature, consisting of setting forth absurd conditions in answer to a proposal which is being scornfully rejected:

*Bao giờ trạch để ngọn đa  
Sáo để dưới nước thì ta lấy mình.  
Bao giờ rau diếp làm đình  
Gỗ lim thái ghém thì mình lấy ta.*

*When the time comes that eels are born at the top of trees,  
And blackbirds under water, I will marry you.*

*When the time comes that vegetables can be used to build the temple,  
And ironwood to mix the salad, you will be able to marry me.*

d/ Now that we know all about the techniques of the folk literature, let us see how they are used for a landscape description, a portrait, or a narrative.

1/ The description. A landscape is only the reflected light of the soul, or a frame of mind:

*Cảnh nào cảnh chẳng đeo sầu,  
Người buồn cảnh có vui đâu bao giờ?  
Every landscape carries its melancholy;  
To the suffering people no landscape could be cheerful.*

- The drawing is restrained, reduced to a few essential strokes, like a Chinese watercolor.

These techniques, used in the scholarly literature, are found again in the folk literature, with two main differences:

- The topics of folk literature are always familiar landscapes specific to Vietnam, and not the more or less fancied landscaped described in the Chinese literature. We do not find there winter snow, nor autumn's fading leaves, nor citadels blurred in the twilight mist, but only ricefields, cottages, moonlight.

- In the description of these familiar landscapes, there is no need for historical or literary references that plague our classical scholarly literature.

Let us pick at random some of these descriptions, sometimes vulgar perhaps, but how very much alive:

*Rủ nhau đi cấy đi cấy  
Bây giờ khó nhọc có ngày phong lưu.  
Trên đồng cạn, dưới đồng sâu,  
Chồng cấy, vợ cấy, con trâu đi bừa.  
Let's go ploughing and transplanting  
The hard work now will bring us riches some day.  
Everywhere, in dry or flooded ricefields,  
The husband is tilling, the wife is transplanting, while the buffalo is  
ploughing.*

*Làng ta mở hội vui mừng  
Chuông kêu trống dón vang lừng đò bên.  
Long ngai thánh ngự ở trên  
Tả vãn, hữu vũ bốn bên rông châu.  
There is a great festival going on in our village  
The peal of bells and drums beating are resounding everywhere.*

*On his throne, the Guardian Deity is sitting  
With civil mandarins on the left, military mandarins on the right,  
and all around the dragons.*

Here is a picture of the Cloudy Pass, very impressionistic:

*Chiều chiều mây phủ Hải Vân Chim  
kêu gành đá, gấm thân lại buồn.  
Every evening, clouds cap the Hải Vân pass,  
And birds cry in the hollows of rocks, casting a gloom over the  
traveller's mind.*

The languid beauty of the Imperial City is evoked in these two verses:

*Gió đưa cành trúc la đà  
Tiếng chuông Thiên Mụ, canh gà Thọ Xương.  
The murmuring wind that makes the bamboo branches sway gently  
Mixes with the clanging of the bell at Thiên Mụ pagoda, and the cock-  
crow of Thọ Xương village.*

And the wilderness of the Southern new lands in these verses:

*Trời xanh, kinh đỏ, đất xanh,  
Đũa bu, muỗi cắn làm anh nhớ nàng.  
The blue sky, the red canal and the green land,  
The gripping leeches and the pricking mosquitoes incite me  
to think of you.*

2/ The Potrait. Here the folk literary is also more realistic than the scholarly literature. In the unforgettable masterpiece of Nguyễn Du, "The new heart-rending novel," we can admire the portraits of beautiful women, well-bred gentlemen, madams of brothels, henpecked husbands, jealous wives, heroes, and so on. Those portraits are in reality more symbolic than realistic. Quite different are portraits of folk literature. Here we find bolder strokes instead of a sketchy outline.

The beautiful girl:

*Cổ tay em trắng như ngà  
Con mắt em liếc như là dao cau.*

**Miệng cười như thể hoa ngâu, Cái  
khăn đội đầu như thể hoa sen.**

*Your wrist is as white as ivory  
And your glance is as sharp as a knife for cutting areca-nuts.  
Your mouth is as sweet is as a rose  
And the turban that envelopes your head is like a lotus flower.*

The hero:

**Đây ta như cây giữa rừng,  
Ai lay chẳng chuyển, ai rung chẳng rời.  
I am like a forest tree  
Which stands firm however shaken.**

The soldier:

**Ngang lưng thì thắt bao vàng  
Đầu đội nón dẫu, vai mang súng dài.  
Một tay thì cắp hỏa mai,  
Một tay cắp giáo, quan sai xuống thuyền.  
Thùng thùng trống đánh ngũ liên  
Bước chân xuống thuyền nước mắt như mưa.  
At my waist a yellow belt**

*On my head a conical hat, and across my shoulders a long gun.  
In addition, I have to hold in my hands an arquebusew  
And a spear. So armed, I am ordered to embark. While  
drums are beating imperatively  
I board the junk, my eyes are filled with tears.*

The sham general:

**Đồn rằng quan tướng có danh  
Cưỡi ngựa một mình chẳng phải vịn ai.  
Great is the reputation of Mr. General  
Who can sit on horseback without anyone's help.**

In all cases, neither the common man nor the scholar likes to paint complete portraits. He merely represents, for instance, the character of Chủ Động Tử, the pious son, with a loin-cloth for all garments, and completely naked after his father's death, or the character of Tâm, the

unfortunate orphan ill-treated by her stepmother, with ceaseless tears. We should note here that the portrait is not a strong point in Vietnamese literature. From a sense of decency, deference to public opinion, or contempt for the material on behalf of the spiritual? Perhaps all these elements contribute to the dislike of the ancient Vietnamese for carefully painted portraits.

3/ The description of feelings. On the other hand, the common man excels in the description of feelings. And he always goes straight to the point. He tells crudely what he thinks, with concrete images, as we have just seen. Here are some typical examples:

A mother's love and her children's ingratitude:

*Mẹ nuôi con biển hồ lai láng  
Con nuôi mẹ tính tháng tính ngày.*

*The cares a mother gives her children are as immense as lakes and seas,  
But those her children give her are counted up from day to day.*

Jealousy:

*Ớt nào là ớt chẳng cay  
Gái nào là gái chẳng hay ghen chồng?  
Vôi nào là vôi chẳng nồng,  
Gái nào là gái có chồng chẳng ghen?*

*Which pimento is not hot?*

*Which girl is not jealous?*

*Which lime is not acrid?*

*And which wife doesn't want to keep her husband's love to herself  
alone?*

Belated regrets:

*Ba đồng một mớ trầu cay,  
Sao anh chẳng hỏi những ngày còn không?*

*Bây giờ em đã có chồng,  
Như chim vào lồng, như cá cắn câu.*

*Cá cắn câu biết đâu mà gỡ,  
Chim vào lồng biết thưa nào ra.*

*With three pennies you could have bought a lot of tart betel*

*Why didn't you ask me in marriage when I was free?  
Now, I am a married woman  
Bound as a bird in its cage or a fish caught on a hook.  
How can the hooked fish free itself from the hook?  
How can the caged bird free itself from the cage?*

The adulteress's cynism:

*Hai tay cầm hai trái hồng,  
Trái chát phân chồng, trái ngọt phân trai.  
Lẳng lơ chết cũng ra ma  
Chính chuyên chết cũng khiêng ra đồng.  
Lẳng lơ cũng chẳng có mòn  
Chính chuyên cũng chẳng sơn son để thờ.  
In my two hands I hold two persimmons  
The sour one is for my husband, and the sweet one for my lover.  
Once dead, the licentious woman becomes a ghost  
But the virtuous one is no less buried in the fields. My  
sexuality is not more worn because I am licentious,  
And were I virtuous it would not be lacquered to be worshipped.*

Reaction against the alleged superiority of man over woman:

*Ba đồng một mớ đàn ông  
Đem về mà bỏ vào lồng cho kiến nó tha.  
Ba trăm một mụ đàn bà  
Đem về mà giải chiếu hoa cho ngò.  
Three pennies are enough to buy a lot of men  
Who are put in a cage where ants will take them away.  
But three hundred pennies are necessary to buy a woman  
Who is invited to sit down on a flower mat.*

4/ Narration. In my previous work, I have given a somewhat harsh opinion of the novels in verse form by the scholars, with a few exceptions. This is because the technique of those works is confined to an almost totally rigid formula.

The introduction begins with some moral or philosophical thoughts. Then follows the presentation of the characters in the novels.

The plot is extra-subtle, making use of the most extraordinary happenings, and always resorts to one solution: the good people must endure a string of misfortunes while the villains enjoy an impudent good luck. And the story inevitably ends with the triumph of Virtue over Vice. Again moral or philosophical thoughts close the poem.

Those immutable rules are scrupulously observed in the ancient versified novels, including even the famous masterpiece by Nguyễn Du, which atones for its conventional weakness only by the transcendent beauty of its verses.

On the other hand, the folk tales and songs successfully escape these old scholastic rules. The introduction is swift, the plot simple, clear and often unexpected. As to the ending, it may or may not be edifying. It is, more often than not, because the common man is also deeply imbued with Confucianist, Buddhist or Taoist morals. But in some cases it may be shocking, either simply to make the listener laugh, or from a tendency to revolt against social injustices. Let us take some examples:

*Em là con gái đồng trinh  
Em đi bán rượu qua dinh ông nghè.  
Ông nghè cho lính ra ve  
- Trăm lạy ông nghè, tôi đã có con.  
- Có con thì mặc có con,  
Thắt lưng cho dòn, theo võng cho mau.*

*I am a young girl, still virgin*

*While selling alcohol I walked before Mr. Doctorate's palace.*

*Mr. Doctorate sent a soldier out to court me.*

*- For pity's sake, I implored, I already have children.*

*- It makes no difference, I was answered.*

*Tighten your belt, and hurry up to Mr. Doctorate's hammock.*

Is it not a neatly turned little comedy? A young girl walks before the palace of a high mandarin, a respectable Doctorate in Literature as well. In spite of his high social position, his lust prevails over the dignity he should show as an example to the people under his administration. He sends out his soldiers to court the young girl. This is actually a true

illustration of the behaviour of the mighty officials. Because they cannot commit the shameful act themselves, they have it performed by their underlings. To escape, the young girl uses her wit. Boldly she asserts that she is married and a mother. She still hopes that the respect due to married women and particularly to mothers will stop the sinful passion of the lustful old man. But my word, is she an innocent. Would the cat disdain a piece of bacon because it is half consumed ? And in spite of her cries, she is forcibly dragged to the palace of the respectable “father and mother of the people” (phụ mẫu chi dân), a disciple of the Great Master Confucius.

Now let's go to the tales in prose, and take as a typical example Number 54, the tale of the castrated rooster. Its plot is completely unexpected. Is there a perspicacious reader who can guess that the Chief Eunuch would find dishonour in his very triumph? Quỳnh, the king of hoaxers, had nevertheless hypocritically forewarned him: “Your cock is invincible, and mine will be beaten hollow “. Not satisfied with this avowal of inferiority, the arrogant eunuch wanted a complete triumph in due form, in front of witnesses. He was to incur this scathing raillery: “My poor castrated thing, you wanted to show pride, and this is the fate that is in store for you “.

Could our modern story-tellers do better?

## 2. Sociological Interest.

It was pointed out in the foreword that the scholar, an aristocrat immersed in his philosophical meditations, did not like to give prosaic details of his daily life. As an illustration, we could glance again at the masterpieces of our ancient classical literature, and, up to Nguyễn Khuyến and Trần Tế Xương, we are forced to recognize that nowhere can we find information on the actual conditions of life in the olden days. As to how love, friendship, filial piety, patriotism, religion, etc . . ., were viewed, there is ample information. How one ate, dwelt, worked, earned money, mum's the word. These subjects are too prosaic to draw the attention of our proud scholars. Nguyễn Khuyến and Trần Tế Xương by handing down the splendid portrait gallery of Vietnamese society at the end of 19th century, are blessed exceptions. As a matter of fact,

though, they lived in a time that was no longer part of the ancient Vietnam, an epoch that had already tolled the knell of the golden age of the scholars. Thus, their exceptional case confirmed rather than denied the scholarly literature's insufficiency in the sociological field. And yet how useful such information would be for shedding light on our people's psychology. It is a fundamental truth that the thoughts and feelings of a person are heavily conditioned by his ways of living and working, entertaining and interacting with his fellow-men. Fortunately, if the scholarly literature failed, this gap has been bridged by the folk literature, at least in part. For the tales, songs and especially the so very concise proverbs, can evoke only to a slight extent the customs, occupations, rites, beliefs, ideas and feelings of these bygone times; they cannot give us an elaborate description as a sociological investigation would do. The study of the folk literature would have served the purpose. However, such a study would require research beyond the scope of this work. A pleasant stroll through the domain of sociology by humming softly some songs and proverbs is our purpose, not a serious and scientific study. Within this limited framework, the reader will find an outline of the Vietnamese life in the old days, not too old besides, for they remained almost unchanged until the start of this century.

**a/ The economic life.**

Vietnam is a country which depends mainly on agriculture, maybe even monoculture. When there is plenty of rice, everything goes well: social security, political stability, arts, literature, festivals, marriages, all these matters depend on the results of the harvest. Therefore, our peasants take great care in ploughing, harrowing, manuring, sowing, transplanting, harvesting:

***Tấc đất tấc vàng.***

*An inch of land is an ounce of gold.*

***Người đẹp vì lụa***

***Lúa tốt vì phân.***

*People are beautiful thanks to silk clothes*

*Rice plants grow well thanks to manure.*

**Ăn kỹ no lâu  
Cày sâu tốt lúa.**

*From careful chewing, one stays full for a long time  
From deep ploughing, rice plants grow well.*

**Cày đồng đương buổi đang trưa  
Mồ hôi thánh thót như mưa ruộng cày.**

*While we till the fields at midday,  
Sweat runs down our bodies as if it were raining.*

**Rủ nhau đi cấy đi cày  
Bây giờ khó nhọc có ngày phong lưu  
Trên đồng cạn, dưới đồng sâu,  
Chồng cày, vợ cấy, con trâu đi bừa.**

*Let's go ploughing and transplanting;  
The hard work now will bring us riches some day.  
Everywhere, in dry or flooded ricefields,  
The husband is tilling, the wife is transplanting, while the buffalo is  
ploughing.*

To those seasonal labours are added irrigation in drought time and dike-warding in flood time. But, when the harvest is good, what a pleasure:

**Bao giờ cho đến tháng năm  
Thối nôi cơm nếp vừa nằm vừa ăn.**

**Bao giờ cho đến tháng mười  
Thối nôi cơm nếp vừa cười vừa ăn.**

**Bao giờ đồng ruộng thành thoi  
Nằm trâu thối sáo vui đời Thuần Nghiêu.**

*When comes the fifth month,  
We will cook sticky rice that we will eat, nonchalantly lying on the bed.*

*When comes the tenth month  
We will cook sticky rice that we eat while laughing.*

*When the labour in the fields is done,  
Then, lying on the buffalo, we will play the flute,  
and enjoy the happy times of Emperors Thuần and Nghiêu.*

Agriculture controls Vietnamese life to such an extent that our calendar is above all an agricultural one:

*Tháng chạp là tháng trồng khoai  
Tháng giêng trồng đậu, tháng hai trồng cà  
Tháng ba cấy vỡ ruộng ra  
Tháng tư làm mạ, mưa sa đầy đồng.  
Ai ai cũng vợ cũng chồng  
Chồng cấy vợ cấy trong lòng vui thay.  
Tháng năm gặt hái đã xong  
Nhờ trời một mẫu năm nong thóc đầy.  
In the twelfth month we plant potatoes,  
Beans in the first month, and aubergines in the second.  
In the third month we till the land  
Anh we transplant the young rice-plants in the fourth,  
While the rain causes general flood  
In all families, husbands and wives work together,  
to till and transplant joyfully.  
In the fifth month, the harvest done,  
Thanks to Heaven, every acre gives five winnowing-baskets  
full of paddy.*

Many proverbs and songs are intended as weather forecasts that greatly help agricultural works:

*Mồng chín tháng chín có mưa Mẹ  
con đi sớm về trưa mặc lòng  
Mồng chín tháng chín không mưa  
Mẹ con bán cả cây bừa mà ăn.  
If it rains on the ninth day of the ninth month,  
Mothers and children may stroll heedlessly.  
But if no rain falls on the ninth day of the ninth month,  
Mothers and children must sell their plough and harrow to get  
something to eat.*

Agricultural work dominates the life of the Vietnamese people; yet, it is not the sole activity, for agricultural labours are by nature seasonal and leave a lot of inactive days in the year. How are these days filled?

First, by the breeding, not of cattle, for in our deltas land is too precious to be used as grazing ground, but of poultry and fish:

***Thứ nhất thả cá***

***Thứ nhì gá bạc.***

*Most advantageous is fish breeding  
More so than managing a gambling house.*

***Gà nâu chân thấp mình to***

***Để nhiều trứng lớn con vừa khéo nuôi.***

*The brown feathered hen, with short feet and a large body  
Lays many eggs that she hatches well.*

Fishing is not much in favour, except along rivers and flooded rice-fields, for the Vietnamese is basically home-loving and does not like venturing far from the shores.

For the same reason, he is reluctant to do trade:

***Bìm bịp kêu nước lớn anh ơi !***

***Buôn bán không lời, chèo chống mãi mê.***

*O my friend, the birds are advising us that the tide is flowing  
Alas ! Trade brings in nothing, and we get tired of rowing endlessly.*

Whence comes to the Vietnamese this disdain of trade to such an extent that he relegates tradesmen to the lowest level of society, beneath scholars, farmers and craftsmen? Maybe our ancestors, like the physiocrats, saw agriculture as the only truly productive work, and the profit of trade as illicit. But surely they saw that trade was based chiefly on bargaining skills which are rather loathsome. Unlike trade, one may without derogation carry on handicraft professions such as: ironwork, carpentry, masonry, pottery, shoemaking . . ., except some reserved for women: spinning, weaving, silk-worm breeding, gathering of tea leaves or mulberry leaves:

***Em đi hái dâu***

***Lá dâu xanh xanh***

***Nuôi tầm dệt áo dăng anh chờ ngày.***

*I am going to gather mulberry leaves  
All resplendently green*

*To breed silkworms, weave silk, and offer you a robe when comes our  
wedding day.*

***Sáng trăng trải chiếu hai hàng***

***Bên anh đọc sách, bên nàng quay tơ.***

*In the moonlight, two mats are spread facing each other.*

*On the one, he reads his books; on the other, she spins her silk.*

Concerning handicrafts, two features hold our attention:

1. It was almost exclusively a family business, at least before French domination. There were no shops with daily or jobbing workers. The craftsman worked for himself, in his spare time, with his own rudimentary tools, and sold himself what he had made. As a result, his work was extremely searching, his cleverness taking the place of the aesthetic science he could not obtain. Who has never had the opportunity of admiring a wonderful side-board, altar, or cabinet of Vietnamese workmanship?

Although handicraft was essentially a family business, some projects required the team work of several craftsmen. These were in the area of public interest: the construction of pagodas, village temples, and the making of religious objects such as statues of Buddha, deities or sacred animals, steles, and so on. Speaking of steles of tortoise and cranes, we have the following song:

***Thương thay thân phật con rùa***

***Trên đỉnh hạc cưỡi, dưới chùa đội bia.***

*Pitiable is the tortoise*

*Carrying on its back a crane in temples, or a stele in pagodas.*

The stele is generally in stone, of rectangular shape but with a round top. It may be used for many purposes: as tombstones, in commemoration of the erection or restoration of historic buildings, as inscriptions set in Confucius' temples to bear the names of the laureates in literary competitions; and finally as "Dismount" signals inviting the riders to dismount before pagodas, temples and other hallowed places. The stele consisting of a monolith is often held up by a stone tortoise which, in Sino-Vietnamese mythology, is well-known for its longevity.

Thus the group stele-tortoise means that the stele will last for several years. As to the crane, its handsome shape symbolizes the purity of the soul and detachment from worldly futilities. It is accepted as favourite mount for deities.

2. Although handicraft was a family business spread throughout Vietnam, the best nonetheless was centralized and specialized in some villages. So it is with the bean-sauce from Bần Yên Nhân, the fish sauce from Vạn Vân, the paper from An Thái, and the bricks made in Bát Tràng:

*Dưa La, cà Láng, tương Bần  
Nước mắm Vạn Vân, cá rô đầm Sét.  
Exquisite for their flavour  
Are the salted vegetables of La, the eggplant of Láng,  
the bean sauce of Bần,  
The fish sauce of Vạn Vân and the anabos of Sét marsh.*

*Ước gì anh lấy được nàng  
Để anh mua gạch Bát tràng về xây.  
I wish I could marry you  
Then buy Bát Tràng bricks to build . . .*

This handicraft regionalism was partly due to difficulties in transportation of raw materials, but mainly because the techniques of manufacture were jealously kept secret. Every profession had its patron saint, and was organized in very exclusive corporation, at least with regard to other villages' inhabitants. The most typical example of this kind of activity was the traditional medicine. Every physician has his family remedy formulas, never to be publicly divulged. A great-uncle of mine was a famous physician in Hanoi, a specialist of smallpox, an illness very dangerous in those days. He happened to cure of this illness a prefect's daughter, and this noble young lady became my aunt in gratitude, although my uncle was actually a little more than a mere waster.

**b/ Social life.**

With progress in modern science, the world has become quite small. Ships, railways, cars, airplanes, then radio and television have overcome space and time, so that everyone, whether he likes it or not, partakes of the life of the whole planet. The same did not hold true in earlier times when each village was a world unto itself. One did not do much traveling, only in case of urgent need, to attend to a lawsuit or to participate in a literary examination. Many people spent all their lives without leaving their native province, even their sub-prefecture. For really they did not need to. They lived on the products of their lands, governed themselves, married among themselves, found friendship and assistance in their family or neighbourhood. All their needs, economic, sentimental, and social, could be met locally. Self-sufficiency was in all domains.

And this autonomy was not merely symbolic, but was actually put into concrete form by the village which had its own ricefields, administration, ways and customs, guardian deity, temple, pagoda, and of course its own inhabitants. A marriage with someone from another village was called a “marriage abroad”. People who came to settle in a village were considered foreigners or immigrants, and did not enjoy the indigenous inhabitants’ rights and privileges until they got the village citizenship granted to them under hard conditions and sometimes after several generations.

In summary, let’s recall some proverbs asserting the importance of the village in ancient Vietnam:

***Chợ có lệ***

***Quê có thói.***

*The city has its regulations,*

*So does the village.*

***Phép vua thua lệ làng.***

*The king’s laws give way to the village customs.*

***Một miếng giữa làng***

***Bằng một sàng xó bép.***

*A morsel of meat obtained in the village banquet*

*Is worth a basketful eaten in the corner of your kitchen.*

One point is worth considering: the peasant restricts his ambitions to acquiring an honourable position in his village, and therefore takes no further interest in the nation's problems. Elsewhere, I have assumed that the autonomy of the Vietnamese village was a vestige of the feudal social structure under the Hùng kings, when each tribe had its chief and recognized only the nominal authority of the sovereign. Perhaps it could be assumed that it was the Machiavellian idea of the Trần emperor who, by transforming each village into a small state with its mandarins, its court of justice, its public realty, wanted thereby to confine the ambitions of the people within these narrow boundaries.

Whatever, it is obvious that the whole political and social life of the peasant was almost exclusively within the bamboo hedge. Did he find there sufficient scope for his activities? For us who are daily beset by all kinds of preoccupations: political, fiscal, sporting, artistic, not to mention the distressing problems of professional competition among colleagues, it might be assumed that we would have found that enclosed life rather colorless. Well, not at all. Our fathers knew how to fill their lives with a lot of events, the delicate flavour of which we can no longer appreciate.

There are first the solemn moments in every person's life: birth, schooling, marriage, anniversaries, the consecration of a mandarin degree, or of a "village venerable" title, and finally death. All these events, save death, gave rise to rejoicings which went on, depending on the concerned person's fortune, from one to several days. Cows, pigs, poultry were sacrificed to organize Pentagrueian feasts to which nearly all the village inhabitants were invited: musicians and theatre artists worked in shifts to entertain the guests, between two gambling sessions or opium sprees. Even death was not exactly gloomy. Of course, the defunct's children shed copious tears, very noisily and even too loudly to show their filial piety. In this case, there were neither singing girls nor theatre artists, but the prayers of the monks and the faithful, accompanied by deafening music, took a primordial place. And naturally, the Pantagrueian feasts could not be done without, nor the

opium, nor the gambling. That is because, in the Vietnamese view, life is only a transitory sojourn whereas death is going back to the real home. If this view is adhered to, one will not be scandalized that ancient Vietnamese funerals were a display more entertaining than morose. While grieving over the distress of separation, the living acted as if it were an apotheosis to the dead who had at last acquired the right to enjoy supreme bliss in Buddha's kingdom.

Besides these family festivals, there were a lot of public ones that might be grouped into two categories: the national and the village festivals. The first included the seasonal festivals: New Year, Mid-Autumn, New Rice at the end of each good harvest. Then came the religious festivals: All Souls' Day, Buddha's nativity. His Enlightenment's day, the pilgrimage to Hương Tích where the Bodhisattva Kwannon was worshipped, the pilgrimage to Phủ Giầy dedicated to goddess Liễu Hạnh. . . And finally, there were patriotic festivals to commemorate the national heroes: Phù Đổng, the Trung sisters, Trần Hưng Đạo, Lê Lợi, Quang Trung. . .

The village festivals were no less important. Aimed at celebrating the anniversary of the village's Guardian Deity, they gave rise to the imposing festivities with parades, ceremonies, theatrical performances, singing contests, wrestling matches, cock fights, games of chess, boat races. . . Some of the village festivals, like the ones of my native village in Hà Đông province, went for a whole week, and visitors came to watch them from many miles around. Of course, notabilities from the neighbouring villages were invited; the guests followed one another endlessly, and consumed a prodigious quantity of cows, pigs, hens and ducks. For these occasions to be really special, it was agreed that the festivals were to be organized only every ten years. Every cent was put away to collect an important sum of money which would then be spent lavishly in a week.

But the festival of festivals was indisputably the New Year. Everyone got actively ready for it at least a month in advance. The walls were whitewashed, the copper objects of cult were polished, parallel sentences and pictures were hung on the walls. And as the New Year

came closer, the pantry was stocked with heaps of food. In a word, everyone wanted to enjoy the New Year as luxuriously as possible. The rich made lavish expenditures, and the poor ruined themselves. Whence the proverb:

***Tết đến sau lưng***  
***Ông vui thì mừng con cháu thì lo.***  
*When the New Year is approaching*  
*Ancestors are glad, but their descendants are anxious.*

When then was the New Year to the Vietnamese that they celebrated it with so much fervour: First, it was the festivals of Spring, when people communicated with Nature, felt a new lease on life after the long winter torpor. Sadness and misfortunes of the past year, all was forgotten; one hoped the coming time would allow sun to replace rain, happiness to replace calamity, good luck to replace misfortune. The New Year was the despairing fatalism driven away by the comforting optimism, an act of faith of the suffering mankind in a better future.

The New Year was also a family festival in which the living communicated with the dead. It is known that in Vietnam death never completely and definitely cuts the ties uniting the dead to the living. At each great event of his life: birth of a child, marriage, school success, death of a near relative. . . the Vietnamese has to inform his ancestors at once, so that they might share his happiness or sympathize with the grief. How then could he forget them in the great cheerfulness of the New Year? He had to perform this pious duty to his own ancestors, to his wife's ancestors, and finally to his teacher's ancestors:

***Mông một thì ở nhà cha***  
***Mông hai nhà vợ, mông ba nhà thầy.***  
*On the first day of the year, remain in your father's home,*  
*Call on your parents-in-law on the second,*  
*and your teacher on the third.*

The life of the Vietnamese was not devoid of all amusements, as one might assume. Today we think we enjoy cocktail parties, rock concerts, movies, but it is a fact that we are trying vainly to drown our incurable boredom under a disorderly agitation, whereas our fathers

knew how to enjoy life. How many among our contemporaries dare proudly declare:

***Tháng giêng ăn Tết ở nhà***

***Tháng hai cờ bạc, tháng ba hội hè.***

*In the first month, I enjoy the New Year celebration at home,*

*Gambling in the second month, and festivities in the third.*

Once again, we can only have a superficial glimpse at the Vietnamese life of old because this work is not a complete sociological research with information taken from all sources, but a simple survey in folk literature. This source, moreover, paints a very sketchy portrait. All the same, we will try to sum up its lessons.

The first to command our attention is the feeling that the old time Vietnamese, in order to provide for his wants, had to struggle unceasingly against the forces of nature. With the exception of the South, a new territory where fishes were abundant and rice plants shot up without any need of care, Vietnam was enclosed in narrow and overpopulated deltas subject to a most irregular rain regime. If this repellent fate sometimes led to fatalism, it also gave our people their main qualities: endurance, courage, moderate passion, love of their native land, cleverness. Basically this imperative struggle for life accustomed them to a special philosophy - to live at all costs - essentially realistic but on the verge of becoming quite selfish in their social behaviour, and preventing them from exalted flights in their philosophical musings and religious beliefs.

The study of the folk literature from the sociological point of view gives us a second insight: From a confederation of several autonomous tribes spread over the Middle Region and the North Delta, Vietnam has progressively expanded to its present borders, and adopted the absolute monarchy system. Nevertheless, its historic evolution did not much influence its social evolution which remained in the stage of the ancient city-state. Outwardly, it was village autonomy in regard to the State. Inwardly, the recluse life within the village remained a universe sufficient unto itself from any point of view: administration, jurisdiction, economy and social structure. And this state of things inevitably results

in lack of the adventurous spirit, strength of the family spirit, traditionalism, with in contrast this essential feature of the Vietnamese social structure: a comforting atmosphere of democratic freedom instead of the oppressive tyranny forged by the Confucianist morals and the absolute monarchy.

We will see whether the folk literature, investigated from the psychological point of view, will confirm these inferences.

### **3. Psychological Interest.**

If the art of our folk literature offers a nosegay of wild but fresh flowers when compared to the scholarly literature's refined and somewhat artificial flowers, how much more interesting it is when we scan its immense supply of ideas, beliefs and feelings. And an inference at once asserts itself: whereas the scholarly literature represents a people hardly differentiated from the Chinese people, the folk literature keeps in store unexpected surprises peculiar to the people of Vietnam. By studying it, we get to know a people certainly imbued with Chinese ideas about Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, but in whom an ebullient spirit totally irrelevant to the mind of the Chinese people seems to come from the stormy vastness of the ocean. Indeed, in reading the scholarly "Complaint of the Warrior's Wife" or the "New Heart-Rending Novel", one might think they are expressing the mind of a peasant of the Yellow River or of the Blue River valleys, but in reading our songs and tales, one irresistibly thinks of the Polynesian tribes who could have landed on the Indochinese peninsula in prehistoric times, and left there the relics of their gods and of their mystic and primitive mentality.

Perhaps this point can explain one of the most disturbing riddles of Vietnamese history: Why was our country, after a thousand years of Chinese domination, able to regain its independence and safeguard its individuality? Why had it not been integrated into the Chinese empire, in spite of an overwhelming disproportion between the military forces and cultural levels of the two countries? On the one hand, there is an immense empire, with its several hundred of millions of inhabitants

having reached a very advanced level of civilization. On the other hand, there is a pretty small country, smaller and less populated than a single Chinese province, and still immersed in relative barbarism. Obviously this tiny country would appear doomed to disappear in the immense Chinese crucible as did the peoples of Southern China, the Việt. But among the Việts, which have become the Chinese provinces of Kwang Tong and Kwang Tsi, only Việt Nam has been able to escape the formidable Chinese wave breaking from the Yellow River and then from the Blue River.

Why? Many explanations have been offered: our mountainous land, our unhealthy climate, our distance from the Chinese bases of operations and so on. These reasons may be valid, and in any case I have not the competence to discuss them. I would rather believe that the Chinese giant has been powerless to devour Vietnam because, at least in part, of the essential originality of the Vietnamese mind which was not easily assimilated, and which actively withstood any assimilation, either by force when circumstances were favourable, or always by literature, customs, rites, ways of thinking and feeling. In the ceaseless struggle against the Chinese grip, the common man undeniably played the most important part. The scholars led the political and military combat, but in the cultural struggle they were rather disposed to admit too easily their adversary's superiority. Not so with the common man, and this difference of opinion shows clearly as we compare the two forms of Vietnamese literature.

The scholar was a product of mixed Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. So was the common man, but with some perceptible nuances. therefore, the best way to study the Vietnamese psychology would be to throw light on the differences between the common man and the scholar in their particular conception of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism.

**a/ Confucianism.**

In his "Kinh Thi Việt Nam", Trương Tửu correctly summarizes the Confucianist dogmas in five points:

- 1/ The prince's authority over his subjects;

- 2/ The father's authority over his children;
- 3/ The husband's authority over his wife;
- 4/ Inequality between men and women and taboos imposed on their relations.
- 5/ Priority of reason over feeling and instinct.

What does the common man think about these dogmas? Does he accept them docilely or oppose them violently? Once again, There is no radical difference between the scholar and the common man, just nuances - sometimes slight, but quite pronounced at times.

1. About the prince's authority. There is no question of any scholar rejecting this basic principle of Confucianism. The scholars might struggle against one another because they served different princes or opposing dynasties, but no one dared exhort revolt against the monarchical principle. Throughout the ancient written literature, I have noticed only two slightly differing tendencies, one of Nguyễn Du and the other of Tôn Thọ Tường. Concerning the first one, I have given a pretty long explanation in my previous work, from which I quote these lines:

*“ . . . It is beyond all question that the whole pessimistic and disillusioned literature of former times came from this sole origin: the feudal structure of the ancient society. Our poet (Nguyễn Du) had the stray impulse of breaking away from the ancient frames by inventing his hero Từ Hải, but he had not the boldness to go to the ultimate end of his revolutionary logic. The Confucianist social structure led to a dead-end: Maintaining it was also maintaining the feudal system with the social injustices it sanctioned. But what was to replace it? The time had not come for Nguyễn Du and his contemporaries to find a solution. And our poet had been compelled to sacrifice his Từ Hải, with much regret and deference:*

***Khí thiêng khi đã về thần***

***Nhơn nhơn còn đứng chôn chân giữa vòng.***

*His lofty soul had taken flight to the heavenly sojourn*

*But his corpse stood firmly still amid the battlefield.*

*And, discouraged, our poet, an impulsive revolutionary, returned to poetry and music to pour balm upon his wounded heart. Even when he*

*was on a special commission to China, he did not miss the opportunity of a musical evening which was being attended by an old, once famous singer, Miss Guitar. And the account of this meeting allows us to better understand the divine poet, sonorous echo of the gloomy fall of a dynasty and of a society.”*

Thus Nguyễn Du has tried to praise the rebellious chief Từ Hải, to make an attractive hero of him, but in the end he sacrificed him because Confucianist logic does not admit the rebellion of the subject against the prince. Disheartened by the feudal society resulting from Confucius, the great poet had had revolutionary impulses which he dared not bring to their logical conclusions, and had in the end come back repentant to Confucianism after repudiating it for a short time.

Tôn Thọ Tường's attitude was entirely different. We saw him boldly justifying his collaboration with the French Protectorate. While most of his friends were taking up arms to guard the Nguyễn's throne, he devoted himself to make common cause with the foreign invader. Why? Because, by laying himself open to scorn from those who did not understand him, he was trying to alleviate the people's sufferings rather than to gain a vain glory by uselessly shedding his compatriots' blood. His dishonour so explained is not entirely lacking in nobility:

*Tai ngơ mắt lấp buôi tan tành  
Nghĩ việc đời thêm hổ việc mình.  
Nghĩ ngút tro tàn nhà đạo nghĩa  
Lờ mờ bụi đóng cửa trâm anh.  
Hai bên vai gánh ba giềng nặng  
Trăm tạ chuông treo một sợi mảnh.  
Trâu ngựa dẫu kêu, kêu cũng chịu,  
Thân còn chẳng kể, kể chi danh.*

*Closing my ears and eyes while the world is falling apart,  
I blush for shame as I think of my country and of myself.*

*Thick twirls of smoke rise from the ashes of the temple of Moral  
Principles*

*And dust settles in hazy layers on the doors of aristocratic residences.  
On my two shoulders weigh heavily the three pillars of the society  
Like a hundredweight bell hung on a thin thread.*

*If I am called a buffalo or a horse, I willingly subscribe to it.  
Having offered my life in sacrifice, I do not care about my honour.*

Analysed in depth, Tôn Thọ Tường's attitude appears related to Confucianism, not to scholastic teaching of the Song, but to the forward-looking teaching of Mencius. Has not this impetuous disciple of Confucius said:

***Dân vi quý, Xã tắc thứ chi, quân vi khinh?***  
*The first to be taken into consideration is the people's interests,  
the dynasty's come after, and last of all the prince's.*

Thus, whether the scholar was Nguyễn Du, Tôn Thọ Tường or even Cao Bá Quát and with greater reason Nguyễn Công Trứ, he always scrupulously accepted the Confucianist dogma of loyalty to the prince, or to the dynasty, or to the people. In these three cases, we find the same self-effacement on behalf of a mystically higher principle.

In the folk literature, are we going to find the same attitude? Instead of blind devotion to a cause, we see a superb and disturbing individualism:

***Ở đời muôn sự của chung,  
Hơn nhau một tiếng anh hùng mà thôi.***  
*The world's wealth belongs to everyone,  
And one distinguishes oneself by heroism.*

***Đây ta như cây giữa rừng  
Ai lay chẳng chuyển, ai rung chẳng rời.***  
*I am like a forest tree  
Which stands firm, however shaken.*

***Làm trai chí quyết tang bồng  
Sao cho tỏ mặt anh hùng mới cam.***  
*Every man is to seek adventure with a bow and arrows  
Unless he distinguishes himself as a hero, he won't fulfill his life.*

***Rộng đồng mặc sức chim bay  
Biển hồ lai láng mặc tình cá đua.***

*The bird freely flies above immense fields  
And the fish swims in lakes and seas to its heart's content.*

It is also worth noting that Vietnam, in contrast to China, never knew slavery, apart from the serfs living in the feudal society of the prehistoric Hồng Bàng dynasty, and the Chăm prisoners-of-war under the Lý dynasty. Since the independence, all citizens were equal before the law, except of course for members of the imperial family. Apart from this, there was no hereditary nobility in Vietnam where the son of the humblest peasant, if he passed the literary competition or performed heroic deeds in war, could have access to the highest offices and achieve nobility. Therefore, we find in many proverbs the proud assertion of equality:

***Đáy vàng, đáy cũng đồng đen  
Đáy hoa thiên lý, đáy sen nhị hồ.***  
*If you are gold, I am bronze;  
If you are a plumb flower, I am lotus flower.*

***Màn treo, chiếu rách cũng treo, Hương  
xông nghi ngút, củi rêu cũng xông.***  
*You have mosquito nets, my torn mats are of the same use;  
You fumigate with incense, so do I with wet wood.*

And so we understood why many shameful mandarins have been tied up by the people under their administration, and brought back to their superiors, because the people did not trust them:

***Làm trên ở chẳng chính ngôi  
Khiến cho kẻ dưới chúng tôi hỗn hào.***  
*If you, our chiefs, behave badly  
Do not surprised to see your subordinates being impolite to you.*

Let's now turn to the tales, where the king and even the Heavenly Sovereign - that is to say the king of kings - is not as respected as he usually is in the scholarly literature. Does not the toad, Heaven's uncle (tale No. 8) prefigure the peasant who successfully rebels against the Holy Emperor? Is not king An Dương (tale No. 36) irreverently described as a foolhardy and corrupted ruler? And are not the nasty

tricks of Nguyễn Quỳnh (tale No. 53-54) an indirect instigation to revolt as much as were the philosophical tales of Voltaire and the impertinent comedies of Beaumarchais?

Yet, let's not exaggerate. Generally the Vietnamese peasant wants only to live peacefully behind the bamboo hedge of his village. He is no more willing to rebel against the king than to sacrifice his life for him. His concern with the public wealth is assested in the following proverb:

*Thành đổ đã có chúa xây  
Việc gì gái góa lo ngày lo đêm?  
It's the prince's duty to rebuild a fallen citadel  
No need for the widow to worry about it day and night.*

How should this attitude be explained? Well, by the same reasons that incited Nguyễn Du, Phạm Thái, Hồ Xuân Hương to utter their cries of despair. The absolute part as the people's protector against the tyrannical regional princes, got bogged down in court etiquette, sank into debauchery, grew weaker and discreditable among opposing princes and Court upheavals. Whereas the scholars, the leading class of the nation were distressed about it or tried to restore public order at the risk of their lives, the common man, so long as he could live peacefully within his village, let things slide philosophically or merely selfishly.

**2, 3.** About the father's and the husband's authority. Confucianism has always recommanded the husband's authority over his wife:

*Xuất giá tòng phu  
The married woman must obey her husband.*

On the other hand, in the ancient Chinese society, the father could dispose of his children's life, as this precept asserts:

*Phụ xử tử vong, tử bất vong bất hiếu.  
If a child is comdemned to death by his father,  
he cannot live without becoming impious.*

That barbarous custom did not exist in Vietnam, fortunately. Yet, in the scholars' families, the father was held in awe like a deity. Nobody

dared contradict him or even discuss his orders. When he had a fit of dissatisfaction or merely of sadness, the whole family, wife and children, remained silent in anxious waiting. Not because of economic reasons, not because the father was necessarily the bread-winner. Whether he was a high official, or a hanger-on living at the expense of his wife, he was always the chief, the uncontested master. As far as I could judge, my maternal grandfather did nothing in his whole life but write fine poems. He went up for many literary examinations, but always failed them pitifully. And after each failure, he went to drown his shame with the singing girls of Nam Định (where examinations were held for North Vietnam), and remained there one month, two months, until my poor grandmother came to repay his debts and bring him home. My grandmother was a little richer than Mrs. Tú Xương, for she had a rather successful sugar shop in Hanoi. The poem dedicated by the poet of *Vị Xuyên* to his wife could have been offered to her by my grandfather if he had the graciousness to do it. But he had not, or if he had, he did not show it. On the other hand, my grandmother loved her husband passionately, he who was very smart with his cheerful eyes, his black beard his finger nails curved like orchid leaves. As far as I could remember, for he died when I was only seven or eight years old, he spent all his time in the largest room of the house, sitting on a camp-bed, and leaning on a heap of pillows. By him was a small table put on the bed, where there were a minute teapot, no bigger than my tiny fist, a tea cup and four other thimble-sized cups. To those implements were added a hookah-pipe whose flexible tube, at least one meter long, excited my admiration and a night light kept lit night and day. My grandfather would interrupt his endless reading only to drink a cup of tea, or draw a thick cloud of smoke from his narghileh.

Sometimes a friend of his called on him, and the two spent a whole day, or several days, chatting about literature. Without uttering a word, my grandmother docilely waited on them with lavish meals consisting of fine drink, pork, chicken or duck. Sometimes also, my grandfather went away from home for many days running, even one or two months, to visit friends. In those old days, hospitality was not a hollow word.

Let's now get back to the relations between husband and wife, parents and children in the peasants' families. We must recognize that they were closer and more affectionate than in the scholars' families. In the peasant household, all worked together in the fields, the father, the mother, the girls and the boys. And this common life rendered virtually impossible the myth of an unapproachable and rigid pater familias like a deity. Some familiarity, some good-heartedness was inevitable. Nevertheless, the children preferred their mother, more sensitive to their cajoleries, to their father, bound as he was to more caution. When strokes of rattan stick were to be given to the disobedient scamps, it was always the father's duty. The mother did it only when she became a widow. Let's listen to this youngster trying to divert his mother's righteous anger with an engaging trick:

*Mẹ ơi đừng đánh con đau  
Để con hát bội làm đả má coi.*

*Mummy, do not beat me severely*

*And let me play comedy for you.*

and to this young woman, married far from her childhood home, who thought of her mother remaining lonely at home:

*Chiều chiều ra đứng ngõ xuôi  
Ngó không thấy mẹ ngồi nhớ thương.*

*Evening after evening, I go to the door that looks out toward my  
mother's home*

*But I do not see my mother, and my heart fills up with sadness.*

Things begin to spoil only with the advent of a person outside the family circle: the stepmother. In this case, the home, so harmonious before, becomes hell for the stepchildren. Many are the songs relating this martyrdom:

*Mẹ gà con vịt chắt chiu  
Mấy đời mẹ ghẻ nâng niu con chồng  
Mấy đời bánh đúc có xương  
Mấy đời dì ghẻ mà thương con chồng.*

*O mother hen may carefully brood ducklings  
But one never sees a stepmother cherish her step-children.*

*Never does a rice cake have fish bone,  
Never does a step mother love her husband's children.*

*Gió đưa bụi trúc ngã quì  
Thương cha phải chịu lụy dì, dì ơi !  
As the bambo-bush must bend before the wind,  
So must I stoop before you, o stepmother, because of my father !*

The tale of Tâm (No. 26) is similar to that of Jack by Alphonse Daudet and to David Copperfield by Dickens. But instead of martyred children of remarried mothers, Tâm's story is that of a little orphan ill-treated by her stepmother. West and East meet on this bridge of sufferings.

Let's now consider the relations between husband and wife. If the common man beats his wife more frequently than the scholar, he is also the more easy-going. There was once a scholar who, because his wife had answered his mother with some disrespect, had completely ignored her afterward. And the poor woman had died of sorrow, without having her obstinate husband's forgiveness. In the common people's families, blows and insults are easily exchanged but are also quickly forgotten. Generally, the beating comes from the husband who has behaved badly toward his wife. Led astray by his friends, he takes to drink and, more dangerously, to gambling. He loses his savings, and goes as far as possible to wrest money from his wife. As a good housewife, she tries to hold on to their savings. The husband becomes furious and resorts to violence. Sometimes also, the discouraged wife lets go of her last coin for the sake of peace:

*Chồng em nó chả ra gì  
Tổ tôm sóc đĩa nó thì chơi hoang.  
Nói ra xấu thiếp hổ chàng  
Nó giận nó phá tan hoang cửa nhà.  
My husband is a wastrel  
Who gives himself up to gambling.  
If I tell him that he is covering us both with shame, He  
gets angry and demolishes everything in the house.*

Another frequent cause for quarrels is the husband's desire to get a concubine. Here, the wife resists more strongly despite to anger of her

husband who does not always get his own way. This is because female jealousy is fierce, even in the gentle land of Vietnam:

**Ớt nào là ớt chẳng cay,  
Gái nào là gái chẳng hay ghen chồng?  
Vôi nào là vôi chẳng nồng,  
Gái nào là gái có chồng chẳng ghen?**

*Which pimento is not hot?*

*Which girl is not jealous?*

*Which lime is not acrid?*

*And which wife does not want to keep her husband's love  
for herself alone?*

Exceptional cases sometimes exist where some women carry their duty to the extreme; they anticipate their husbands' desires, and offer a concubine which the husband dares not yet ask for:

**Chồng giận thì vợ làm lành,  
Miệng cười hớn hở rằng anh giận gì?  
Thưa anh, anh giận em chi?**

**Muốn lấy vợ bé em thì lấy cho !**

*When the husband gets angry, his wife quiets him  
By merrily smiling and asking: What's the matter?*

*Darling, what's the use of losing your temper?*

*If you want a second wife, I'll give her to you !*

Perhaps is it only a cunning way to find out her husband's intention. Once confessed, it would be ferociously opposed to. Also, in most peasant households, it is usually the wife who wears the pants and the husband who merely acquiesces to all family affairs. The folk wisdom puts it in this way:

**Lệnh ông không bằng cồng bà**  
*Master 's orders are not worth the gong of Madame.*

The gong of Madame is her shrill voice which so frightens the pusillanimous husband. The folk tales (No. 42, 43) do make a satire of this situation. What is the reason for this strange attitude? More often than not, simply because the wife holds the purse strings. Generally the husband takes no part in the family budget. He writes poems if he is a

scholar or he enjoys cock fights, nightingale fights, fishing, hunting. . . , if he is a peasant. In Vietnam, the male sex is thoroughly out of place in business, especially in trade which is, up to now, almost entirely in the hands of women.

In any case, these domestic quarrels are of no great importance among the common people. A bottle and a good meal are enough to reconcile conflicting husband and wife. For the inequality between male and female ordered by the learned philosophers is not strictly observed by the peasant husband and wife who love each other according to their instinct alone. That does not mean that it is a merely physical, animal instinct. In fact, there is much nobility in the passionate love of this wife for her husband:

*Nửa đêm ân ái cùng chồng  
Nửa đêm về sáng gánh gồng ra đi.  
Before midnight she enjoys love with her husband,  
From midnight till morning she gets ready to go to the market.*

And aren't the following verses as moving as the most pathetic duets of love? The husband, on seeing his wife weeping silently after he has unjustly scolded her, begs for her pardon with sweet words:

*Đêm nằm nghe trống sang canh  
Nghe sư gõ mõ, nghe anh dỗ nàng.  
In the quiet night, amidst the strokes of the drum telling the time  
And the monk's hand rattles, can be heard the husband's loving  
apologies.*

The wife asks for nothing more than to be consoled. After she has furtively wiped her tears, she answers passionately:

*Yêu anh cốt rũ xương mòn  
Yêu anh đến thác vẫn còn yêu anh.  
I will love you until my bones turn to dust,  
Beyond my death I will still love you, darling.*

To sum up, we may say that if the father's and the husband's authorities are generally observed by the common people as well as by the scholars, they are much moderated among the common people by

lesser submission to the Confucianist dogmas or, in other words, by a greater propensity to live according to one's feelings and instincts.

4. About the inequality between male and female, and the taboos imposed on their relations.

a. The dogma of male superiority is based upon the ancestor worship which could be performed only by the male descendants. The sociologists are in a better position to analyse the foundations of such a belief; we only acknowledge the facts here:

- A boy's birth is preferred to a girl's birth:

*Một trai là có  
Mười gái là không.  
One son is of value  
Ten girls are worthless.*

- The female is in a subservient position for life:

*Tại gia tông phụ  
Xuất giá tông phu  
Phu tử tông tử.  
In her childhood, she should obey her father  
Married, she should obey her husband  
Once a widow, she should obey her son.*

- Unequal partition of the paternal heritage where sons are given advantage. That is a judicial matter that does not concern us.

- Subordination of the wife to her husband.

- Acceptance of polygamy, originally required when the first wife is childless, but later broadened without major reasons for the benefit of the wealthy people.

- Nice tolerance with regard to male adultery, whereas female adultery is harshly condemned.

- A widower may always marry again, and is even encouraged to do so if there is a need for a female person in his household. But a widow always marries again under universal reprobation, and only in case she risks starvation without a man's help. Let's quote this stern precept of a Chinese philosopher about widows marrying again: "Starving is of minor concern; safeguarding one's virtue is much more important."

The families of scholars comply quite strictly with these social laws. The peasants and especially their women, do not do so readily, however. They oppose, sometimes violently, those laws dictated by male selfishness. The following are some songs that express this mentality, maybe to laugh at, but at the same time to recognize it as an undeniable social fact:

- Against male superiority:

*Ba đồng một mớ đàn ông  
Đem về mà bỏ vào lồng cho kiến nó tha.  
Ba trăm một mụ đàn bà  
Đem về mà trải chiếu hoa cho ngồi.  
Three pennies are enough to buy a lot of men  
Who are left in a cage where ants will take them away  
But three hundred pennies are needed to buy a woman  
Who is invited to sit down on a flower mat.*

- Against men's claim to have the monopoly of several wives or lovers:

*Có chồng càng dễ chơi ngang  
Đẻ ra con thiếp, con chàng, con ai?  
I am married, you say? It's easier for me to have lovers  
For if I give birth to a child, who will be his father if not my husband?*

**b.** Men and women are forbidden to have any contact with each other, except for those specifically allowed by the rites. Whence comes this taboo, found only in the East and unknown in the West? From male selfishness, or from some metaphysical principle? Here again, sociologists would know better. We can only state the facts:

- As soon as they can walk, the girls are not allowed into their father's or brothers' room.
- Girls are not admitted to schools reserved for boys. In the aristocratic families, the father or a brother, or a tutor gives them lessons at home. And such lessons are given only until they are able to read and write, for they cannot compete for any literary examination nor for any public office.
- No contact is allowed between young girls and their male cousins, and for greater reason with male strangers.
- During the family gatherings and feasts, for instance on the occasion of an anniversary, men and women are to be seated on different mats.
- A man calls on his friends without his wife. Similarly, a woman calls on hers friends without her husband. The tale of Lưu Bình and Dương Lễ seems to depart from this rule, but it's a folk tale, not a scholarly work. The taboo imposed on the relations between men and women is pushed to such an extent that a Chinese philosopher, asked whether a man may rescue his sister-in-law from drowning, sternly answers: No.

But all these social laws were observed strictly only in China. In Vietnam, even in the well-educated families, they were largely softened, at least with regard to relations between brothers and sisters-in-law, cousins, friends' wives and husbands. The taboo stands compulsory only where people outside the family are concerned.

In the peasant families, this last barrier is, if not entirely abolished, at least easily gotten around. As a matter of fact, declarations of love are used only by the common people, whereas in the aristocratic families even the fiancés are not allowed to talk with one another, and most of them can see their husband or wife closely only on the wedding night. However, in the country, the agricultural labors give many opportunities for meeting, and between girls and boys, songs are exchanged to alleviate the hardships of work, but may also lead to love and marriage. Let's recall here some of the songs that clearly show the lack of taboo among the country people:

*Gặp nhau ăn một miếng trầu  
Gọi rằng nghĩa cử về sau mà chào.*

*Since we chance to meet here, please accept a quid of betel*

*So that we may greet one another later on.*

*Thiên duyên kỳ ngộ gặp chàng  
Khác gì như thể phượng hoàng gặp nhau.  
Tiện đây ăn một miếng trầu  
Hỏi thăm quê quán ở đâu chẳng là.  
Xin chàng quá bước về nhà  
Trước là trò chuyện sau là nghỉ chân.  
Fate has allowed me to meet you  
As the female phoenix meets the male phoenix.  
Would you mind accepting this quid of betel  
And telling me where you live?  
By the way, please come to my house  
So that we may talk and you have a rest.*

The two last verses might surprise us. Why, how dare a young girl invite a young man she has just met to call on her? Would her parents greet this stranger their daughter took home? Yes, how odd this may seem; in some regions of North Vietnam, especially in Bắc Ninh province, this custom is commonly adopted: a girl may flirt with anyone she likes. Moreover, in the village festivals, a married woman may take part in the singing contests. And if she finds her partner a worthy singer, eloquent, well-mannered, she may invite him to her house to entertain him. And her husband, far from being shocked, displays pride in having a wife whose musical talent has been appreciated by a stranger. How far we are from the taboos imposed on the relations between men and women. In a society so rigidly confined within the harsh Confucianist discipline, the free flirt of Bắc Ninh is well and truly an anomaly which can only be explained by ancestral customs lost in the mists of time. Maybe a Polynesian or Aryan tribe once settled there, and left its morals and customs that the Chinese culture did not succeed in destroying entirely?

5. About the conflict between reason and instinct. Here breaks out in the most spectacular way the revolt of the Vietnamese spirit against the moral tyranny imposed by the Chinese culture. The Chinese philosophers preach the ideal of the sage who masters completely his

heart's and senses' impetuosity to obey only his cool reason. His eyes refuse to look at a beauty that is not his, his ears refuse to listen to wrong words, his heart refuses to be affected by a guilty passion, and as regard to his senses, he tries to behave as if they do not exist. Continually he remembers these words of the Great Sage: "Do not sit down on a mat placed in the wrong way, do not eat a piece of meat carved in the wrong way."

In their behaviour, our scholars try to yield sincerely to these rigorous constraints, but they involuntarily escape from them in their literary works, by the release of Freudian inhibitions, would say the modern psychoanalyst. The most typical example of this sexual inhibition is shown in the famous poems of Hồ Xuân Hương, who had been ill-married, and after being twice a concubine and a widow, poured out in her poems the overflow of her poetic talent and of her unappeased ardour. Apart from Hồ Xuân Hương, many other poets, among them the most solemn ones, have followed the same tendency. Our national and unrivalled poet Nguyễn Du has given in his immortal masterpiece some rather suggestive descriptions. The "Large Compilation of Wonderful Tales" by Nguyễn TỰ describes a world entirely left to instinct, where immodest ghosts and adorable flowers' spirits live shamelessly. The famous versified novel Phan Trần is but the scandalous story of a scholar extravagantly fond of a nun to such an extent that he managed to get into her room by night. Nevertheless, we must honestly recognize that all this licentious literature is only verbal excesses from scholars normally living virtuous lives. Among them, one and only one, Nguyễn Công Trứ, dared venture a lewd act (cf. our previous work. p.263), but it was a lordly joke.

The common man has no such inhibitions. Devoid of false decency, he lets his feelings and instincts express themselves freely. From the huge treasure of our folk songs, there are some which would make the boldest jokes pale in comparison. As an exceptional measure, we will quote only the following song:

*Chị em rủ nhau đi tắm đằm.  
- Cửa em thì trắng, chị thâm thế này?  
- Chị thâm bởi tại anh mà,*

***Khi xưa chị cũng hạt chay đỏ lòm.***

*Two sisters invite one another to go bathing in a pond.*

*- Mine is white, why is yours so black?*

*- Mine is black because of your brother,*

*Previously it was as rosy as a seed of peony.*

Not only legitimate love is praised, adultery also claims its rights.  
Could anything be more cynical than this song of the adulterous wife:

***Anh đánh thì tôi chịu đòn***

***Tánh tôi hoa nguyệt mười con chẳng chừa.***

***Đánh tôi thì tôi chịu đau,***

***Tánh tôi hoa nguyệt chẳng chừa được đâu.***

*Beat me, I agree with your beating me,*

*But eager for love as I am, I cannot abstain from it even after having ten children.*

*Beat me, I'll endure your painful blows,*

*But eager for love as I am, I cannot abstain from it because of them.*

And could anything be more comical than this song of the widow going in search of a second husband:

***Hỡi thằng cu lớn, hỡi thằng cu bé***

***Cu tí, cu tị, cu tử, cu từ ời !***

***Con đây con Ăn con ở với bà***

***Để mẹ đi kiếm một vài con thêm.***

***Cha con chết đi trong bụng mẹ nó hãy còn thềm,***

***Mẹ xem quẻ bói, vẫn còn đàn em trong bụng này.***

***Con ra gọi chú vào đây***

***Để mẹ giao trả cái cơ nghiệp này mẹ bước đi.***

*Hallo. My eldest son, my second,*

*My third, my fourth, my fifth, my sixth darling, Wake up,*

*and henceforth go live with your grandmother To let me*

*go and fetch some more children.*

*Your father is dead, but my belly is not tired of bearing children. A fortune-teller told me that many of your brothers and sisters are waiting in my belly.*

*Go and call in your uncle*

*With whom I'll entrust your heritage before I go away.*

That is with regard to the sexual instinct. Self-interest or selfishness is also more powerful in the common man's mind than it is in the scholar's. If the latter is sometimes inclined to behave badly, he always tries to control it, whether heroically or hypocritically. The common man is less cautious; he exposes frankly or cynically his true thoughts that are not always praiseworthy, far from it. So we can find him selfish:

***Cháy nhà hàng xóm***

***Bằng chân như vại***

*If there is a fire at your neighbour's house*

*Remain quietly at home.*

lazy:

***Lắm thóc nhọc xay***

*Much paddy, much tiresome grinding*

opportunist:

***Gió chiều nào che chiều ấy***

*Take shelter according to the wind's direction*

cynical:

***Ai cười hở mười cái răng***

*He who laughs has ten teeth shown*

unscrupulous in work:

***Cơm nhà chúa***

***Múa tối ngày***

*They eat the boss' rice*

*And dance night and day.*

apathetic to state affairs:

***Thành đổ đã có chúa xây***

***Việc gì gái góa lo ngày lo đêm?***

*If the citadel has fallen down, the king has to restore it;*

*Silly is the widow who worries about it day and night.*

This cynical display of human failings would horrify the scholar. Still the scholar and the common man are both of the same race. What hence differentiated them? The answer is quite obvious: While the scholar, always leaning over his books, blends in with the world of ideas, the common man who does not live in this beneficial but stuffy

atmosphere, takes life according to his instincts and feelings, instead of restraining himself according to the dictates of Reason.

**(b). Buddhism and Taoism.**

We know that except for the Lý period, Buddhism has been deeply perverted even among the scholars, particularly under the Lê dynasty. The great religion of self-liberation by mastering all desires - a basically active attitude - has become instead a refuge for people who, hurt by the hardships of life, turn to it to allay their pains, an essentially passive attitude.

On the other hand, Taoism, a philosophical doctrine of non-activity, has become either a hazy yearning for immortality by means of esoteric practices, or a lust for enjoying life's pleasures while dismissing all responsibilities. On this latter point, Buddhism and Taoism united in a common concept of turning away from life and its worries. To that distorted concept were added many superstitions entirely irrelevant to the true Buddhist and Taoist doctrines, e.g., fatalism, sooth-saying, belief in the reality of immortals and ghosts. . . To illustrate this observation, it will be sufficient to quote some lines from our best poets.

Here fatalism is shown:

*Kìa thể tục như in giấc mộng Máý  
huyền vi mở đống khôn lường. Về  
chi ăn uống sự thường,  
Cũng còn tiền định khá thương, lạ là.  
(Cung Oán)*

*Life is like a dream, Unforeseeable is the power that drives it.  
Even the most trivial acts such as eating and drinking  
Are determined by an inexorable destiny, alas.*

(From A Plaintive Ballad of an Imperial Maid)

In the following verses, Buddhism and Taoism are blurred in the same concept of evasion from life:

*Lấy gió mát trăng thanh kết nghĩa  
Mượn hoa đàm đước tuê làm duyên*

***Thoát trần một gót thiên nhiên Cái  
thân ngoại vật là tiên trên đời.***

(Cung Oán)

*Let's make friends with the fresh air and the serene moon  
And work out our salvation with the flowers and the torches of wisdom.  
Thus at a natural pace we will get rid of the human condition.  
Blessful are those who escape from the illusion of the world.*

***Chết về Tiên Bụt cho xong kiếp,  
Đù ỏ trần gian ! Sống mãi chi?***

(Phạm Thái)

*May I die soon, to return to the land of Buddha and Immortals.  
Damned be this world, wherein I do not know why I am living.*

Nguyễn Du, an eminent scholar, was also well versed in the Buddhist doctrine. In his “New Heart-Rending Novel”, he explained clearly his heroine’s misadventures as a consequence of her murky karma. It is because Thúy Kiều is born with a karma of unhappy fate caused by faults she had committed in her previous lives that misfortunes pounce on her present life:

***Vậy nên những chốn thong dong  
Ở không yên ổn, ngồi không vững vàng.  
Ma đưa lối, quỷ đưa đường,  
Lại tìm những chốn đoạn trường mà đi.***  
*Therefore, even in the most favourable situations,  
She cannot remain peaceful, nor sit down firmly.  
Ghosts lead her, devils push her  
To venture in the thorny paths.*

This passage needs some elucidation. If Kim Trọng had not been away from home at the very moment that a dreadful event occurred in Thúy Kiều’s family, the young lady would not have had to sell herself to save her father. Instead of being sold to some honest townsman, she fell into the hands of the owner of a brothel. She might have lived happily with Thúc Sinh, but he was a pusillanimous husband whose ferociously jealous wife forced her to an awful slavery. She might have lived peacefully in a pagoda with the kind nun Giác Duyên; her karma once

again immersed her into the corrupt life of prostitution through Bạc Hà. She might have lived gloriously with the rebellious chief Từ Hải; her karma caused him to be tricked and killed by Hồ Tôn Hiến. But in reaching this highest point of her misfortunes, Thúy Kiều has at last wholly discharged the debt of her faults in previous lives. And henceforth released, she meets happiness again with her regained family, and with Kim Trọng whom she had loved from their first meeting.

This accurate account of the Buddhist doctrine is unfortunately tainted with some less orthodox views. For instance, Thúy Kiều's dreams foretelling her wretched life, the revelations of a wizard concerning her alleged death whereas she had actually been kidnapped by Hoạn Thư's slaves; Tam Hợp the priest's predictions. . .

Nguyễn Du also believed in ghosts. In his wonderful prayer for the salvation of the wandering souls, he evoked them in a Dantesque vision which gives us a shudder of terror:

*Mênh mông góc bể bên trời  
Năm xương vô chủ biết nơi chốn nào?  
Trời xâm xẩm mưa gào gió thét  
Khi âm huyền mờ mịt trước sau.*

*In the immensity of seashores and skylines  
Abandoned bones lie scattered in unknown places. Beneath the  
gloomy sky, the soaring rain and the howling wind Fill the  
universe with the myterious aura of death.*

*Bóng phần tử xa chùng hương khúc  
Bãi tha ma kẻ dọc, người ngang.  
Cô hồn nhờ gửi tha hương  
Gió trăng hiu hắt, lửa hương lạnh lùng.  
Far away from the trees of the native village  
Lies the graveyard where tombs rise up in disorder.  
The lonely souls who dwell in this alien spot  
Are exposed to the cold wind and the wan moon,  
Without any fire or incense to warm them.*

*Dãi dãi trong mấy muôn năm  
Thở than dưới đất ăn nằm trên sương.  
Nghe gà gáy kiếm đường lánh ẩn  
Lặn mặt trời lặn thân tìm ra. For  
thousands and thousands of years They  
ail underground and lie on the mist. At  
cock-crow they hasten to steal off  
To reappear furtively only after sunset.*

In this haunting prayer for the salvation of the wandering souls, we find the heart-breaking sadness of the scholar in the face of the calamities of his era, far more than the firm faith of a Buddhist. prompted by the bad weather of the seventh lunar month:

*Tiết tháng bảy, mưa dầm sùi sụt,  
Toát hơi may, lạnh buốt xương khô.  
Nã người thay, buổi chiều thu !  
Ngàn lau nhuộm bạc, lá ngô rụng vàng.  
In the seventh month, the rain sobs endlessly,  
And its chill penetrates to the dried bones.  
How heart-breaking is this Fall afternoon  
With its fading reeds and its yellowing maple leaves that fall ceaselessly.*

the too impressionable poet becomes mentally deranged and sees everywhere awful ghosts instead of the radiant and merciful image of the Perfectly Enlightened One.

Taoism has also diverged from Lao-Tzu's teachings. In the scholar's conception of Taoism, an Immortal is merely a human being, or even an animal or vegetable who, by studying the laws of the cosmos, succeeds in knowing its secrets and by controlling his thoughts, succeeds in freeing himself from the petty feelings that worry the mortals. So mastering both matter and mind, he overcomes the relative laws of the universe to live in the Absolute.

Such are the scholar's conceptions about Buddhism and Taoism. How are they altered in the mind of the common man? The most noteworthy differences are:

- The common man's concept of Immortals;
- The role of rewarding good and punishing evil conceded to all deities indiscriminately;
- The folk belief in ghosts and demons.

(1) What are the differences between the scholar's and the common man's concepts of Immortals?

Two tales, "The Man who married a Toad" and "The Water-Carrier who married an Immortal", will help us discern the successive degrees of distortion of Taoism from Lao-Tzu to the common people after passing through the scholars. The philosopher freed from all worries, as recommended by Lao-Tzu, has changed among the scholars into a superior being who succeeds, by research and virtue, in mastering Space and Time. Among the common people, this superior being, after becoming supernatural, keeps all the human frailties, except that he can take flight into the sky, and this with a mechanical means: wings, like birds. So is the Immortal who married a water-carrier. She spends her time singing and dancing; then, tired of the pleasures of Paradise, she feels one day the morbid desire to go down to the profane world of mankind. After she has lost her wings, she knows the fear of a common mortal, and submits to marrying a poor water-carrier. On the other hand, she does not feel the conjugal and maternal love that ordinary mortals usually do. As soon as her wings are recuperated, she hastens to go back selfishly to her Paradise, without the least thought for her husband and child left behind in the valley of tears. Untouched by their distress, she sends them back to Earth when they are found too vulgar to live among the Immortals.

The Toad is another Immortal; she has been sent into exile on Earth in this ugly form, probably for some misdemeanor perpetrated in Paradise, breaking a cup of jade for instance, or upsetting a bottle of ambrosia while waiting at the table of the gods and goddesses. She is

gentle and sincerely loves her husband, the scholar. Let's hope she will stay on Earth with him for many years, before returning to Paradise.

(2) From the lofty doctrine of self-liberation, the common man retains only this one belief: that Buddha is infinitely merciful, ready to help the unfortunate, and appearing most often as Bodhisattwa Kwannon, the most popular goddess of the Buddhist mythology, a close equivalent to the Blessed Virgin of Christianity. Thus, Buddha or the Bodhisattwa appear to Tấm the Cinderella ill-treated by her stepmother, to the young farm-hand abused by his employer, or to the water-carrier forsaken by his wife. . . But Buddha is not only merciful, he punishes the wicked people as he rewards the good ones. He changes a rich but badly depraved valley into a lake, he turns inhospitable misers into monkeys...

The role of justice dispenser is also played by the Heavenly Sovereign, the deities and Immortals, in the simplistic mind of the common man who asks for help of all divinities when he is in trying circumstances, or thanks them when he is happy. In some tales, we see some deity or Immortal instead of Buddha, appearing to the unfortunate: Ngọc Tâm mourning his wife's death, motherless prince Tiết Liễu . . .

In short, from the lofty Buddhist and Taoist philosophies, already slightly distorted by the scholars, the common man appeals to powerful divinities who, he hopes, will restore social justice. To call on their help, his assumed best means is to pray fervently in pagodas and temples. Whence the crowd of faithful on holy days of Buddha or deities, and especially on the fifteenth day of the first month, according to the following proverb:

*Đi lễ quanh năm  
Không bằng ngày rằm tháng giêng.*

*Prayers made all through the year*

*Are not worth those made on the fifteenth day of the first month.*

(3) Whence also the profusion of temples dedicated to all kinds of deities. In every house, there is the altar of ancestors, natural protectors of their descendants. In every village, there is the temple of the Guardian Deity, who is either a high mandarin granted a posthumous royal

warrant of genie, or anyone who died at a sacred hour and who has made publicly known by epidemics, fires, floods. . .) his desire to be worshipped by villagers in the neighbourhood.

Throughout the homeland, in historic or legendary places, one finds the temples of the national heroes (the Trưng sisters at Đồng Nhân, prince Hưng Đạo at Kiếp Bạc, princess Liễu Hạnh at Sông Sơn. . .). In addition to these temples, there are innumerable altars set almost everywhere, and chiefly at the foot of century-old trees for worshipping the spirits who have performed miracles there. As a curiosity, I quote below a passage from the historical novel by Nguyễn Triệu Luật “Four Demons and Two scholars” concerning four demons, all female, who held sway over the minds of the inhabitants of Thăng Long (present Hanoi) at the end of the Lê dynasty (18th century), to such an extent that their fame has been recorded in the following song:

*Long thành có bốn yêu tinh:*

*Yêu hồ trước Giám, yêu đình Đồng Xuân ,*

*Yêu cây bàng giữa hàng Cân*

*Yêu gốc cây liễu trước sân chùa Tàu.*

*The Dragon City has four demons:*

*One at the lake before the University, another at Đồng Xuân market,*

*The third at the tree standing in the middle of Scales street,*

*And the fourth at the willow inside the Chinese pagoda.*

*“ . . . In front of Confucius’ temple (where the University was also built ) we still can see a small lake. In the middle of the lake, there is a grassy islet where stands a small chapel. In the end of the Lê dynasty, this lake was much larger. Then, to enlarge Hanoi, it was gradually filled in. Cao Đắc Minh street which nowadays runs along the left side of Confucius’ temple was before just a small path, large enough to let two horses pass. The end of Saint Antoine street was also a low ricefield. On both sides of the temple, in front and at the back, there was a waste land overgrown with wild plants. But inside the temple, from the Literature Star pavilion to the Heavenly Light pond, everything was perfectly clean. Nowadays, in contrast, the temple’s surroundings have become prosperous streets, whereas the temple itself is now deserted.*

. . . The female demon of the lake dwelt in the lonely surroundings of the temple, but never dared go inside it. As a matter of fact, she was not naughty, and during the 80 years of her reign she never harmed anybody. She only enjoyed teasing the irresponsible scholars. It has been noticed that those she talked to would become important officials, those she laughed at would die a violent death, and those she turned her back on were wicked people. Her predictions on the outcomes of examinations were always true, so that the scholars who had had the opportunity to talk with her could anticipate whether they would pass or fail the exam. She appeared frequently to the scholars, seldom to the tradesmen and farmers. It is inferred that she must have been, in her former life, a literate woman or a scholar's wife.

. . . The *Đông Xuân* district included the present Sugar, Rice, Paper, Potatoes, Beans and Jules Ferry streets. In the middle of this district stood a pavilion, and beside it was a gigantic fig tree, whose trunk two men could not encircle with their outstretched arms, and whose shadow spread over the whole yard of the pavilion. There dwelt the female demon of *Đông Xuân*. She appeared at one time in the pavilion, at another under the fig tree. On quiet nights, under the pale moonlight, the temple's guard often saw her sitting at the foot of the fig tree and reciting poems. Like her colleagues of Confucius's temple, she took an interest only in the scholars, and enjoyed teasing people harmlessly. Nevertheless, she differed in that she lashed mercilessly at people and showed no difference to anyone. If she turned her back on someone, the person would succeed in all his businesses. But if she smiled at someone, the person would soon suffer a reverse of fortune. She seemed to despise the fortunate people and felt drawn to the unlucky ones. Whence the common saying which arose among the folk of that epoch:

***Yêu Đông Xuân cứ khinh***

***Tớ nhẹ đường công danh.***

***Yêu Đông Xuân mà trọng***

***Trăm việc làm trăm hỏng.***

*If the Đông Xuân demon despises me  
I will easily walk in the way of honours.*

*If she respects me,  
I will fail in everything I undertake.*

. . . At the junction of the Little Lake and Francis Garnier street, there was formerly the hamlet of An Trườg. The present location of the gateway to the Electric works looks out on the path leading to the hamlet. And at the end of this path, by the present Town Hall, could be seen the portico of the Chinese pagoda. This was built by the Chinese to commemorate the service of Phan, a high mandarin who lived under the Lê dynasty. Formerly, foreigners had been allowed to dwell only at Phố Hiến (near Hưng Yên). A Chinese immigrant named Phan became a naturalized Vietnamese, passed his Doctorate in Literature examination and was appointed High Imperial Counsellor. Thanks to his position, the members of his family members received the privilege of settling in the Capital. This privilege was later extended to all Chinese who, to express their gratitude, built for their benefactor a temple wrongly named the Chinese pagoda.

There was an old willow tree in the yard of the temple. There dwelt a female demon, much more wicked than her two colleagues at the Confucius's temple and at the Đòg Xuân market. One day, a passer-by mistaking her for a pretty country girl, teased her and held her hands. On his return, his hands swelled painfully. He only recovered six months later. Another joker imprudently put his arms around her. At once, he shook with fever. When he was in delirium, a sorcerer was called in. But the unfortunate man, possessed as he was of the demon, cried out:  
- He dared hug me. Since he wanted to hug me. I'll drag him down to Hell.

Then he died after vomiting a flood of blood. One assumed that the female demon had been a virgin who had died from rape. And because of this offence, she was to keep beyond her death a strong aversion for men; and it is true that she never harmed any woman.

. . . The female demon of Scales street was the nicest of the four. She did more good than evil. Anyone who had lost something had only to pray before the tree where she dwelt, and the next day he would find the lost article set down at the foot of the tree, and could retake it. But if some covetous person dared take what was not his own, he would be at

*once punished with an illness the severity of which varied in proportion with the value of the stolen object. “*

Such is the story of the four demons who reigned over the mind of the Thăng Long inhabitants towards the end of the Lê dynasty. I could quote a lot of analogous stories. Ghosts and devils and demons are part of our mystic heritage as much as ghosts are for the Scottish people.

(4) From the Taoist doctrine we still find the belief in the mysterious power of tombs. Innumerable tales credit it. (Tả Ao, and the legends about the birth of some historic heroes).

And finally, the Epicurean conception of life adopted by the scholars, is found among the common people as well. It is only a deviation from the Taoist doctrine of non-action. Here are some instances:

*Lắm thóc nhọc xay  
Much paddy, much tiresome grinding.*

*Trời sinh voi, trời sinh cỏ.  
Heaven who creates elephants, also creates grass.*

*Ai ơi chơi lấy kéo già  
Mãng mọc có lúa, người ta có thì.  
Chơi xuân kéo hết xuân đi  
Cái già sông sộc nó thì theo sau.  
Have a good time before old age comes  
Because the growth of bamboo-shoots  
and of people occurs only in an instant.  
Enjoy Spring before it ends,  
Before old age suddenly catches up with you.*

In short, it is a fact that the Vietnamese common people fervently greet all religions without being really religious. And one would have to be very subtle to assert whether he is monotheist or polytheist, Buddhist or Taoist. He is certain only to be theistic. He abhors atheism that shocks

his innate sense of justice. The wicked must be punished and the good rewarded.

Indeed, the common man believed in religion without being really religious. As evidence of the fact, he did not have for the monks who did not behave properly the mystic deference that many people vow to the representatives of the God they worship. He jeered at the bad monks and readily wrote satirical songs about them:

*Ba cô đội gạo lên chùa  
Một cô yếm thắm bỏ bùa cho sư  
Sư về, sư ốm tương tư,  
Oám lẩn, ốm lóc cho sư trọc đầu.  
Ai làm cho dạ sư sầu  
Cho ruột sư héo như bầu đứt giây.*

*Three young ladies carried rice to the pagoda  
And the one with a bright red breast-supporter cast a spell on the monk.*

*Ever since, the monk is love-sick,  
So sick that he becomes bald-headed.*

*How cruel you are, fair maiden, to make the monk so sick,  
And his bowels are as withered as a gourd ready to fall down.*

The tales, too, did not fail to tear to pieces the alleged virtue of some monks or the alleged learnedness of some social hangers-on (the Lime spot, the Sorcerer ).

## CONCLUSION

This book aims at fixing the elusive portrait of the Vietnamese people at a given time in their history. Since people keep on changing to adapt themselves to new experiences and conditions, an accurate portrait yesterday may not be true today, no more than a portrait good today would be good tomorrow. In my previous work, I have tried to portray the scholar in ancient times, when there were Chinese writings, palanquins, imperial sumptuousness, and dynastic struggles. In the present work, I set forth the common man of the same epoch, the plebeians behind the aristocracy, the crowd behind the leader. We have seen that though cast both from the same mould, they had nevertheless slightly different ways of understanding, feeling and thinking. Whereas the aristocrat was deeply influenced by the Chinese culture, the plebeian kept a stronger originality of the national spirit, its virtues as well as its weaknesses. We might say that the lower classes of the nation, less by their greater number than by their spiritual “heresy” with regard to the great official doctrines, were the true image of the Vietnam of old.

Our country is now living through one of the most painful hours of its history. It has gone through a crucial period, from 1884-1945, when the French intervention acquainted it with the modern world. But whether by political or another motive, France opened the doors very diffidently. At least nominally, the monarchical principle went on in force. Practically, the authoritative institutions always subsisted with no freedom of speech, of assembly, and no true representation of people in national assemblies.

The time we are now living in, from the psychological and sociological point of views, shows a far more decisive stage of evolution. Before long, if not already, the contemporary Vietnamese will differ radically from the Vietnamese of old. Ten years of resistance against the French, twenty years of civil war with the communist regime in the North and political upheavals in the South, innumerable mournings and devastations, the mass immigration to the South of one

million refugees from the North, the modern and fast-paced American way of living being introduced into our society, inflation, the countryside deserted and the towns overcrowded, the birth of a new elite of businessmen, then the fall of the South to the North communists and an exodus to foreign lands never encountered before in our history. Even though it should prove to be of only retrospective interest, I thought it useful to set down the elusive portrait of the ancestor of the 1800's and of the grandfather of the 1930's, before the younger generations lose them in the sea of memories.

The last hundred years have not been kind to the Vietnamese people. Unending conflicts and sufferings have been their lot. From this tumultuous era, a large number of characters has sprung to life. It is therefore an almost impossible task to discern the common Vietnamese at present. He is like a mountain that is seen differently depending on whether one looks at it at sunrise or at sunset, on a sunny day or a rainy one, in the Fall when it is lying bare or in the Spring when it becomes green again. All the same, there is always through the fleeting changes something permanent that allows the observer to distinguish it from other mountains. Likewise it is with people.

The troubled waters of our time will clear one day, and the true and eternal characteristics of the Vietnamese people will emerge again. They must be looked for in our juicy proverbs, moving songs and humorous tales revealing a fine intelligence and a natural tendency for everything that is beautiful and good: poetry, art, friendship, peace; for that alone, this work would have not been done in vain.

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Note: This bibliography was compiled in Vietnam in 1967, when the book was first written in French. Some dates of the reference publication are missing.

