

2002

Women's Heart of Sorrow: Versions of the Truyen Kieu in the Works of Duong Thu Huong and Le Ly Hayslip

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Recommended Citation

Tran, Vi, "Women's Heart of Sorrow: Versions of the Truyen Kieu in the Works of Duong Thu Huong and Le Ly Hayslip" (2002). *Masters Theses*. 1525.
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Women's Heart of Sorrow: Versions of the Truyen Kieu
in the Works of Duong Thu Huong and Le Ly Hayslip

BY

Vi Tran

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in English

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2002

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ABSTRACT

Nguyen Du's *Truyen Kieu* or *Tale of Kieu* has arguably provided a life model for Vietnamese females. The poem's influence extends in important ways to contemporary Vietnamese writers as well, including those as politically and artistically diverse as Duong Thu Huong and Le Ly Hayslip. In *Novel Without a Name, Paradise of the Blind* and *Memories of a Pure Spring*, Duong Thu Huong transforms the terms of Nguyen Du's poem to those of Vietnam during its revolutionary period and today. As an overseas Vietnamese who had earlier experienced prostitution and the moral chaos of war, Le Ly Hayslip's experience clearly has much in common with Kieu's story. Whereas Duong Thu Huong uses the *Truyen Kieu* as the ground for shaping a critique her society, Hayslip's use of the poem is nostalgic or recuperative. In both cases, however, Vietnam's national poem offers a common vocabulary and ground for contemporary Vietnamese both at home and overseas.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Contents	Page Number
Abstract	i
Introduction. <i>Women's Heart of Sorrow: Versions of the Truyen Kieu</i> <i>in the works of Duong Thu Huong and Le Ly Hayslip</i>	1
Chapter 1. The <i>Truyen Kieu</i> : Woman's Story as National Story	6
Chapter 2. Reflections of the <i>Truyen Kieu</i> in the Works of Duong Thu Huong	14
Chapter 3. Le Ly Hayslip and the <i>Truyen Kieu</i> : Personal History as Contra/diction	21
Chapter 4. <i>Kieu</i> and <i>Viet Kieu</i>	33
Bibliography	41

Introduction

*Women's Heart of Sorrow: Versions of the Truyen Kieu in the works of Duong Thu
Huong and Le Ly Hayslip*

Vietnam's national poem, Nguyen Du's *Truyen Kieu* or *Tale of Kieu* has arguably provided a life model for Vietnamese females. Beginning in childhood, they are immersed in the story as a representative, if not exemplary, life, and they come to see Kieu's story as part of their own. In a common game, girls tell their fortunes by playing Kieu. They pray to Giac Duyen, Thuy Kieu before opening the book to a random page, believing that the verses will prophesy their later life. From such beginnings, this thesis argues, Kieu's influence extends in important and unrecognized ways to contemporary Vietnamese writers as well, even to those as artistically and politically diverse as Duong Thu Huong, a dissident socialist and perhaps Vietnam's greatest living novelist and Le Ly Hayslip, a refugee from the Republican south and contemporary humanitarian.

Duong Thu Huong is perhaps Vietnam's best-known and most renowned contemporary novelist. She is also an outspoken dissident, and her unflinching honesty has led to a seven-year imprisonment, expulsion from Vietnam's communist party and censorship of her work. Huong's autobiographical *Novel Without a Name*, her *Memories*

of a Pure Spring, and *Paradise of the Blind* offer a vivid record of Vietnam during its revolutionary struggles and in the years after reunification. The novels are deeply rooted in Vietnamese history and culture, and Duong Thu Huong often makes use of imagery from the *Truyen Kieu* and of Kieu herself as a point of reference in the story of modern Vietnam. In Duong Thu Huong's work, we see the Kieu of Confucian feudalism transformed into the new woman "armed to the teeth with ideals" living in the revolutionary era. (Radio Free Asia) Themes from Nguyen Du's poem are taken up again. There is *filial piety*, which Huong's *Novel Without a Name* tries to understand as revolutionary nationalism. *Art* also figures centrally in *Memories of a Pure Spring*, where Suong has musical talent like Kieu and suffers like her antecedent. Finally, *Exile* is an important theme in the *Paradise of the Blind*, in which Hang is an exported laborer.

Le Ly Hayslip's memoirs make for a sharp contrast to Duong Thu Huong's memoirs. Huong's *Novel Without a Name* documents heroic life on the front lines and her other works present Vietnam after reunification. Hayslip offers a study of survival behind the lines in Vietnam and the life of the overseas Vietnamese. She experiences war as moral chaos. From her beginnings as a member of the Vietcong in her rural village, she is blown by the winds of fate into many roles: rape victim, child servant, unwed mother, American bargirl, wife, refugee, widow, and finally successful businesswoman and humanitarian. As we shall see, and as critics such as Nguyen (1997) and Beevi (1997) have noted, Le Ly's story resonates on many levels with Kieu's. She struggles against male dominion in various forms, including prostitution. Karma, suffering, and exile are also central themes in her story. We learn a great deal about Vietnamese culture from

Hayslip's accounts, as we do from Duong Thu Huong's, but whereas Huong's knowledge is of an historical and contemporary Vietnam, Hayslip's is of an historical moment refigured through nostalgia. Like Kieu, she cannot return to her pure beginnings. For both Huong and Hayslip, however, the *Truyen Kieu* continues to provide an index of Vietnamese values and culture.

Methodology

The following pages are divided into four chapters:

- I. The *Truyen Kieu*: Woman's Story As National Story
- II. Reflections of the *Truyen Kieu* in the Works of Duong Thu Huong
- III. Le Ly Hayslip and the *Truyen Kieu*: Personal History as Contradiction
- IV. *Kieu* and *Viet Kieu*

The first chapter will give background information about Vietnamese women in feudalism, focusing on their roles and duties according to Confucian ideals. The chapter will discuss Nguyen Du's *Truyen Kieu* as representative of Vietnamese culture's view of women, explaining why *Tale of Kieu* is so important in Vietnam national culture and literature. Because there is scarcely any critical literature about Kieu in English, I will make use of Vietnamese criticism, including: Hoai Huong's *Truyen Kieu Nhung Loi Binh* (Interpretation of Kieu) and Xuan Dieu's *Ba Thi Hao Dan Toc* (Three Great National Poets).

In the second chapter, I will discuss how Duong Thu Huong connects to Kieu in a certain way, reflecting her political ideology and disillusionment. In my approach to her literary works, I will focus on three novels: *Novel Without a Name*, *Paradise of the Blind*, and *Memories of a Pure Spring*. I will use Dr. Searle's articles: "The Spectre of the Land Reform Movement in Recent Vietnamese Fiction," and "Dissident Voices: The NVA Experience in Novels by Vietnamese" and online sources.

My third chapter will address Le Ly Hayslip's two memoirs: *Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, and *Child of War, Women of Peace*. My critical resources here will include Nguyen Viet Thanh's essay on "Representing Reconciliation," Stephens' "Distorted Reflections: Oliver Stone's *Heaven and Earth* and Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*," and Bow's "Le Ly's Hayslip's bad (Girl) Karma: Sexuality, National Allegory, and the politics of Neutrality."

My last chapter will offer a personal perspective on the situation of women in Vietnam and the overseas community. Duong Thu Huong and Le Ly's versions of the *Truyen Kieu* obviously reflect the different cultural and political circumstances of Vietnam and the diaspora community. For those who left in 1975, Vietnam is a country of memory, a country that has not changed since 1975. Memory colors their view of contemporary Vietnam. They resist the idea that things may have changed and that Vietnam today may be very different from the Vietnam they remember. I am struck by how different their sense of Vietnam is from mine. On one hand, the Viet Kieu try to uphold traditional customs and Confucian values, on the other hand, they are deeply

affected by the values of their adopted country. Conflicts are inevitable, as I have already discovered in texts such as Takaki's *Iron Cages* and *Strangers from a Different Shore*. This is also a major theme in *Hearts of Sorrow*. The combination forms new images of immigrant women, very different from their counterparts in Vietnam. I think that this thesis will help us to understand the difference.

Chapter 1

The *Truyen Kieu*: Woman's Story As National Story

Traditional Vietnamese culture is feudal, Confucian, and patriarchal. This society is based on three strict rules: people have to be loyal to the King; children have to be pious to their parents (especially the father); and wives must be submissive to their husbands. The culture esteems man highly, allowing him absolute power in the household over as many wives as he can support. An equally absolute submission is expected of women, who don't have any rights in their marriages, which are usually arranged and decided by their parents. In many circumstances, women can see their husbands for the first time only on the wedding day. Women are further expected to abide by Confucian principles of "three submissions, four virtues" (*tam tong, tu duc*). These "three submissions" are to the father when she is young and unmarried, and subsequently to her husband, and to her sons after the husband's death. The "four virtues" include domestic skills, refined manners, good speech, and morality. In traditional culture, people believe that, *Nhat nam viet huu, thap nu viet vo*: one son is priceless, but ten daughters are worth nothing. These strict regulations and unreasonable expectations placed innocent, talented women under everyday tyranny and compelled many to become concubines of wealthy and authoritarian men.

Sympathetic to the sufferings of Vietnamese women, Nguyen Du's *Tale of Kieu* relates the miserable life of a talented, noble young lady. Kieu's filial piety is remarkable

throughout the epic, but it is her adherence to the first of the “Three Submissions” that precipitates her sufferings. While trying to save her father from debt, she is tricked into becoming a prostitute. She sacrifices her freedom and happiness. Kieu poignantly expresses the misery and humiliation of her circumstances:

How sorrowful is women’s lot!’ she cried.

We all partake of woe, our common fate.¹

Since Kieu’s lamentation of woman’s role in feudal society has become proverbial of the Vietnamese woman’s destiny, she is a culture hero. Her sufferings are well known to Vietnamese of all classes and she is seen as possessing both positive and negative characteristics.

Kieu is a devoted daughter, but at the same time she is naïve and vulnerable. She is easily deceived by other men as well, including So Khanh, and Ho Ton Hien. Kieu is good-natured, but she makes sharp and sometimes harsh distinctions, showing her gratitude to benefactors and taking revenge on the enemy. She is bound forever to her first love Kim Trong, but even as an abducted and unwillingly married woman, she fulfills her obligations to be faithful, and more, to her husbands, Thuc Sinh and Tu Hai.

Kieu’s heroic endurance and strength do not correspond to the Confucian submissions and virtues. But they do point to another important dimension of Kieu’s character. Counter to the influence of Confucian thought, Vietnamese myths, legends and history have long valued strong and decisive women. They play a dominant role in Vietnamese politics, society, and family. Hai Ba Trung (the two Trung sisters) fought

¹ Huynh Sanh Thong (Trans.), *Nguyen Du, The Tale of Kieu*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983, line 7. Hereafter, references to the poem are by line number to this edition.

Chinese invasion in the 2nd century, bringing Vietnam its first period of independence. Even today, they are certainly as venerated as any male heroes. In modern times, similar honor has been given to other women who fought side by side with men in the struggle for independence, and to those who sacrificed their sons and husbands in the defense of the country. Among Vietnam's female culture heroes, we must also take note of Ho Xuan Huong, Nguyen Du's contemporary, and arguably one of the great women poets of world literature. Ho Xuan Huong uses her poetic skill to criticize a corrupt society and assert her right as a woman. She is known as "the Queen of Nom poetry," a writing system that takes Chinese characters and assigns them Vietnamese phonemic value. Significantly, her works were central to the Vietnamese canon, long before similar writing by Western women was recognized.

The Tale of Kieu has become a masterpiece thanks to Nguyen Du's talent. Nguyen Du's language is based on the beauty of folk songs, which are very rich in images, but simple and easy to remember. It is therefore understandable to see that many Vietnamese know by heart long stanzas in *The Tale of Kieu*. Indeed, many of its excerpts have become common sayings or proverbs. Furthermore, Nguyen Du's style combines classical and popular literature. He does not conceal the corruption or depravity of the current dynasty, but tries not to resort to vulgar language. Even when he describes the cruel, villainous characters, his language is still very elegant and beautiful. Because of its truthfulness and eloquence, people like to read, to recite, and to sing *The Tale of Kieu*. Intellectuals enjoy *Tale of Kieu* because of its elaborate style, artistic description of landscape and skillful usage of metaphor. Ordinary people like *Tale of Kieu* because they can find in it comfort and sympathy.

The poem is written in a form of six-eight couplets (*lục bát*), a conventional Vietnamese verse form, derived from the popular literature of folk songs and proverbs. Its particular pattern includes a series of two-sentence structures, containing six syllables in the first sentence and eight syllables in the second. The sixth syllable of the first line has to match the sixth syllable of the second line in terms of rhythms. Similarly, the eighth syllable of the second line has to match the sixth syllable in the first sentence of the following couplet and string together in such a symmetrical manner to the end of the poem. In *The Tale of Kieu* with more than 3000 sentences long, Nguyen Du has skillfully applied this structure. The whole poem naturally harmonizes from the beginning to the end. This six-eight verse attains a complete and perfect level in the poem.

The beauty of *Kieu* derives in large part from the Vietnamese language's capacity for word play and elegant variation. This linguistic dimension is often so subtle as to be impossible to translate. In Vietnamese, word-building is very complex, and writers devote their attention to morphology rather than syntax. Vietnamese (like Chinese) has classifiers, a linguistic item unknown to English. Lexical items are variously "classified" in countless ways, including "animate" (*con*), inanimate (*cai*), "book-like" (*quyen*), "picture" (*buc*), "photographic" (*tam*), "food or medicine" (*thuc*). The classifiers can be baffling to non-native speakers of Vietnamese. In addition, there are pronouns. "He," to give only one example, can variously be any of the following in Vietnamese: *no*, *anh*, *anh ay*, *anh ta*, *ga*, *y*, *ong ay*, and *ong ta*. Finally, like any other language, there are synonyms and antonyms. Knowing these dedicated differences and using them correctly in each context is very important in writing. For example, to express his sympathy with women's suffering, Nguyen Du writes: "Dau don thay phan dan ba/ Loi rang bac menh

cung la loi chung” (‘How sorrowful is women’s lot!’ she cried. /We all partake of woe, our common fate’ (7).) In Vietnamese, *phu nu* and *dan ba* convey the same meaning as women. However, “Dan ba” has more to do with hardship, suffering, submission, and inferiority, whereas “phu nu” is more common, formal and respectful. Therefore, using the word “dan ba” in this situation is obviously more suitable and meaningful.

Nguyen Du has a very compressed style. In only a few sentences or words, he can suggest both the appearance and personality of characters. He often does this by setting appearance and reality in sharp contrast. For example, Nguyen Du describes Ma Giam Sinh (a pimp who disguises himself as a gentleman) as: “Past forty, far beyond the bloom of youth/ he wore a smooth-shaved face and smart attire” (627-628). Despite his sharp clothes, the flesh-trader betrays his true nature in the next sentence: “he grabbed the best of seats and sat in state” (631). Civilized people don’t grab the best seat or pose so, and in these few words, Nguyen Du exposes this man as rude, uncivilized, and barbaric. Similarly, So Khanh “with polished image, elegant cap and robe” (1060) deceives Kieu into believing that he is an intellectual or a hero. He looks like a hero, but acts no better than of a thief or a burglar: “Parting the shutters, lo, So Khanh crept in” (1094). With only a word “crept”, the reader comes to suspect So Khanh and his dubious behavior. As we might expect, So Khanh finally proves to be a Don Juan, “a brothel cad”. This is to say, Nguyen Du reveals So Khanh with only one word.

Nguyen Du also uses the imagery associated with a character to foreshadow future events. In the poem, both Kieu and Van are beautiful, but they are beautiful and very different in illuminating ways. Van’s is “beyond compare” with: “Her face a moon, her eyebrows two full curves/Her smile a flower, her voice the song of jade/Her hair the

sheen of clouds, her skin white snow” (20-22). According to Vietnamese standards, a woman whose face resembles the moon is usually seen as kindhearted, gentle and can be expected to have a stable, happy life. In describing Van, Nguyen Du uses the words “thua” (to be defeated) and “nhuong” (give up) in “May thua nuoc toc, tuyet nhuong mau da” (Her hair sheen of clouds, her skin white snow). This sentence in Vietnamese means that a cloud is not as thick as her hair and white snow cannot compare with her skin. They admire her beauty and do not dare to compete with her. In keeping with her appearance, Van indeed has a quiet, peaceful life with family and husband. Kieu, in contrast to Van, “possesses a keener, deeper charm”: “Her eyes were autumn streams, her brows spring hills/Flowers grudged her glamour willows her fresh hue/A glance or two from her, and kingdoms rocked!” (25-27). Kieu is so beautiful that flowers have to be “ghen” (jealous), willows “hon” (angry), and kingdom “rocked”. Other than that “she had composed a song called Cruel Fate/ to mourn all women in soul-rending strains” (33-34). Her beauty and talent, as we can see, foreshadow a troubled and unhappy life. ✓

Nguyen Du’s success derives not just from his poetic skills but also the understanding and sympathy he shows for ordinary or despised people. Historically, Vietnam has suffered through many invasions, wars, and revolutions. The country’s independence is due mostly to the people’s sacrifices and efforts. Themes about the people are therefore understandably very popular in Vietnamese literature and always welcomed by the majority. Nguyen Du represents and stands for vulnerable people to express their aspiration and expectation. Reading *Tale of Kieu*, we have the opportunity to enter Vietnamese feudal society. The poem’s themes of romantic love, prostitution, political and aristocratic corruption, rebellion, false accusation, revenge, are of interest to

people of every social class, as is its concern for unhappy talent and miserable fate. To explain how a talented person who lives for ideals and has full allegiance to the king, who is beautiful, filial, loyal, talented and tolerant, and deeply moral has to suffer, Nguyen Du turns to Buddhist philosophy, with its teachings of suffering (*dukkha*), impermanence (*anicca*), and no-self (*anatta*). *Tale of Kieu* also plaintively laments *karma*—the suffering which follows imperfect actions. By definition, Karma is larger than any one person, is felt in more than one life. Dynasties and nations suffer from it. The king often calls himself as Thien Tu or God's son, and his bad karma derives from the dynasty he is part of. In Vietnam's feudal world, we see that Kieu's sufferings derive from the corruption of the merchant and Mandarin classes. Merchants include knaves, pimps, Don Juan, and the Mandarins are those like Hoan Thu and Ho Ton Hien. Merchants turn women into merchandise whereas Mandarins see them as a tool to show their power. When we observe such behavior, Nguyen Du says, “[We] watch such things as make us sick at heart (4).

The poem also introduces to us a typical character pattern often seen in classic Vietnamese literature. Since the protagonists reflect the social ideology and aesthetics of their world, they have to conform to feudal expectation in terms of morality, behavior and attitude. They must be courteous, courageous men or virtuous women. Men have to be loyal to the King and filial to their parents. Besides good knowledge and profound understanding of the world, they need to be skillful at gracious pastimes, such as playing chess, playing music, writing poems and drinking. Women have to observe the Confucian up bringing: “Gai Ngoan khong lay hai chong” (a good woman never gets

married twice). She's not only faithful when her husband is alive, but even after his death. Should she face a demand to remarry, she should kill herself rather than sacrifice her good reputation. The opposite of such ideal figures are viewed as unsavory "bitches", traitors and rebels.

Chapter 2

Reflections of the *Truyen Kieu* in the Works of Duong Thu Huong

Duong Thu Huong's autobiographical *Novel Without a Name*, her *Memories of a Pure Spring*, and *Paradise of the Blind* transform the Kieu of feudalism into the new woman. Living in the revolutionary era, Duong is neither a subordinate nor a servant, but a woman warrior "armed to the teeth with ideals" (Radio Free Asia). By looking at Thuy Kieu and Duong Thu Huong, we observe crucial differences between a Confucian woman and a revolutionary one. In *The Tale of Kieu*, Kieu upholds the Confucian system. Most of the time, she tries to do something good, but the result always leads to catastrophe. Her sufferings begin with her adherence to the Confucian values. Kieu practices filial piety (hieu) when she tries to save her father. She practices virtue (tiet) when she decides to escape with So Khanh. She observes the virtue of propriety (le) when she advises Thuc Sinh to confess to his wife, and she shows her (trung) when she advises Tu Hai to surrender. Kieu's faithfulness to the Confucian ideals brings her a world of trouble: she sacrifices her youth and happiness in order to fulfill her duty.

Whereas Kieu is a Confucian woman, Duong Thu Huong is a representative woman of the revolutionary era. Duong Thu Huong devotes her life from earliest youth to the revolution. In her novels or memoirs, whether chronicling her childhood, her subsequent life as a communist soldier or life as a postwar "exported laborer," Huong demonstrates a costly loyalty to her beliefs that parallels Kieu's. Like Kieu, she is a

singer, but she is hardly a prostitute entertaining men. Rather, she “sing[s] louder than the bomb” to exhort her country’s soldiers. In Huong’s situation, the relationship between father and daughter is no longer biological but national. The new father is national leader Ho Chi Minh, and the new daughter is the Vietnamese citizen/ woman warrior so often found in her fiction. Socialist ideology replaces Confucianism as the organizing system of both state and household.

Like Thuy Kieu, it is the dissident Duong Thu Huong’s very loyalty to her ideals (in this case the revolution) that is the source of her troubles. As a Vietnamese woman, Huong upholds the traditional undauntedness of the Trung sisters, devoting her youth and energy to fighting the foreign invasion. She recalls her motivation to join the army: “The Americans like the French, were enormous military powers, and that in the face of them we were a small, a very weak people. Those were the strong feelings that impelled me when I finished my studies in 1968 to join the fighting” (Kamm 147). Huong is eager to sacrifice for her country in hope of a better, happier life, a future in which everyone lives in peace with plenty of food, a good education and a happy family. Huong’s ideals become the victims of political incompetence and corruption. After learning of the suffering and injustice inflicted upon so many Vietnamese, she says in an interview, “I needed to write a book in which I could settle my debt to those whom I knew” (159). As a result of her criticism of the status quo, Huong was expelled from the Communist party, jailed for seven months, and prohibited from publishing her books. Despite the prohibition, Duong Thu Huong’s books are still published and translated in many different languages. Indeed, as one reviewer writes in a blurb on the cover, Huong is:

“[T]he first major woman’s voice to reach our shores from all of Asia ... [she] will take your breath away and invade your dreams.”

If Nguyen Du’s *Tale of Kieu* succeeds in criticizing the feudal regime, Duong Thu Huong’s novels gain their fame by telling the truth about Vietnam’s Communist regime. Because of their revolutionary ideas, Huong’s books are condemned and censored by authorities whose position and power are threatened. Similarly, despite its artistic and humanitarian value, Nguyen Du’s *Tale of Kieu* inevitably violates Confucian beliefs and regulations. Even though Kieu is seen as a filial daughter and faithful lover, many followers of Confucius criticize her as unchaste and unvirtuous because of her liberal engagement and humiliating career. In addition, feudalism considers the king as God’s son and the most powerful person in the nation. Ordinary people were taught to believe that “Quan xu than tu, than bat tu bat trung” (A person has to die if the king asks him to; otherwise he is accused of not being loyal). In such a society, it can be risky to create a character capable of saying, “At pleasure I stir heaven and shake earth/ I come and go, I bow my head to none”(2471-2472). King Tu Duc comments that Nguyen Du should be punished because of his rebellious character Tu Hai.

It is interesting to see how *Tale of Kieu* has great influence on Duong Thu Huong’s writing and Vietnamese writers in general. Vietnamese literature often attaches beautiful women with bad luck and cruel fate. Female characters, therefore, are often beautiful but unhappy. As Duong Thu Huong writes in *Memories of a Pure Spring*: “A beautiful woman’s fate is always tragic” (4). The character Suong in this novel is pretty and talented, but she has to deal with many difficulties and conflicts in her family. Being a Vietnamese woman, Suong tries her best to fulfill her duty as an obedient wife and

daughter, taking care of her younger brother so that he can go to school to be an intellectual as her father's wish. Her brother, however, doesn't appreciate her help and blames her for taking him out of his natural country environment. Despite every attempt, her family is still falling apart because of her husband's personal torments and inferiority complex. In a striking parallel to Kieu's story, a despairing Suong tries to drown herself by jumping into a river, but is happily rescued.

Similar Kieu-figures can be found in Duong's *Paradise of the Blind*. Hang's mother works very hard, starving herself to support for her only brother. Aunt Tam also nurtures Hang because she is the only daughter of her younger brother. These two women sacrifice their youth and happiness for the male descendents. As we can see, though they are beautiful and hardworking, they end up living lonely and sorrowful lives.

Since women are vulnerable, men are expected to be strong, supportive, and protective. They want to be the heroes in their wives' eyes. But to them, women are "nu nhi thuong tinh" (vulgar and helpless). They like to do something important, something that can bring them fame rather than being confined in domestic life with their wives and children. In *The Tale of Kieu*, Tu Hai appears as a "towering hero" who rescues Kieu from prostitution. Kieu looks up at Tu Hai as an important, venerable gentleman and sees herself as a "weed" and "lowly flower":

"It's large, your heart," she said. "One of these days,
Chin-yang shall see a dragon in the clouds.
If you care for this weed, this lowly flower,
Tomorrow may I count on your good grace?"(2195-2199)

In their conversations, it is obvious that Tu Hai is flattered by Kieu's admiration and respect: "Those eyes be praised that, keen and worldly-wise,/ Can see the hero hid in common dust!"(2201-2202). Even though Kieu sounds very humble, she is certainly very clever in her speaking. As we can see, Tu Hai's loves Kieu not just because she is beautiful, but because she makes him feel like a man who is trustworthy and reliable.

Kieu says:

I'm just a humble clinging vine
 That by good luck may flourish in your shade.
 It's only now we see it all come true,
 Yet from the first I felt it in my bones.(2279-2282)

The expectation that a woman should serve a man does not mean she does his work for him. *That* calls his power and authority into question. Tragedy can ensue when a man has to stay home whereas his wife goes to work. *Memories of a Pure Spring* depicts a romantic love affair and an unhappy family of Hung and Suong. During the war, they are militiamen, singing for the victory of their country. They overcome many difficulties, keeping to the end the struggle for independence. Ironically, it is during peacetime that their happy family is falling apart. Hung is dismissed from his theatrical unit and unemployed. Hung's internal conflict perhaps derives both from the pressure of being portrayed and abandoned by his "comrades" and at the same time from the frustration of being a helpless man, dependent on his wife, who used to be a baby in his eyes.

"Today's my first day as court jester. My wife goes off to work, provides for the family, and I, the husband, stay at home racking my brain for ways to amuse her when she comes home" (97). Being tortured by the ideas that he is superfluous and infirm, Hung tries

desperately to show his power to his wife, even insulting her in front of his good-for-nothing friends. As a result, Hung's wife turns on him and drives his family to a disaster.

Needless to say, the tragedy in Hung and Suong's family comes from Hung's weakness and corruption. Instead of going to work and helping his wife to overcome their difficulties, he spends time drinking, chatting and causing troubles. On the one hand, he wants to be a man and be respected. On the other hand, he accepts his wife's serving as something natural and unquestionable. He states: "She is Vietnamese woman, born in a land where women are ready to bear any burden, make any sacrifice. Suong can carry a heavy burden, just like my mother did" (154). This superior attitude of men is also apparent in Duong's *Paradise of the Blind*. The fictional character Chinh cruelly exploits his sister for money and service without shame. He almost enslaves her for everything. Ironically, even though women are seen as inferior, they are those who bravely confront difficulties and solve problems. In this aspect, there is common ground between Nguyen Du's poem and Duong Thu Huong's novels. As mentioned before, Vietnamese people believe that, *Nhat nam viet huu, thap nu viet vo* (one son is priceless, but ten daughters are worth nothing). Sarcastically, it is Kieu who rescues her father but not her brother. To see it in a different way, it is obvious that a man is rescued by a woman. Also in *The Tale of Kieu*, men such as Ma Giam Sinh, So Khanh, Ho Ton Hien, Bac Hanh earn their living by taking advantage of women.

This is to say that Vietnamese women are not at all weak and vulnerable as men think they are. In fact, Vietnamese women always have had a certain honorable position in Vietnamese history and literature. They are main characters, strong and decisive. Their accomplishment and talent are undeniable. Even men cannot help admiring and praising

them. While talking about his wife, Hung reveals his admiration for women: “She still hasn’t become a traditional Vietnamese woman, the warrior who watches over the clan and their territory, who raises and educates the younger generations, a flower with nerves of steel” (82).

Hung’s failure reflects the change in a Vietnamese family. If Kieu kills herself to uphold the Confucian upbringing, Suong looks for death in order to show her strong reaction to her husband, to ask for her right as a woman, a member in the family. Suong sacrifices for her family, trying her best to help Hung, but she has her reason to love another man. Being torn between the image of a traditional wife and the happiness of being loved, Suong finally makes her decision. Even though her affair with the commander hasn’t yet been accepted in Vietnamese society, it proves that women nowadays have more freedom in making their own choices.

In *Tale of Kieu*, Kieu composes *Cruel Fate*, a sorrowful song about women’s suffering; Duong Thu Huong’s novels, inspired by that epic, seem to present the *cruel fate* of Vietnamese people, with particular emphasis on female suffering, during and after the war. Studying Huong’s novels helps us to understand more about Vietnamese culture today, and to see how deeply rooted the notions of female suffering and strength are in Vietnamese culture.

Chapter 3

Le Ly Hayslip and the *Truyen Kieu*: Personal History as Contra/diction

As an overseas Vietnamese who experienced prostitution herself and finally came to reaffirm her Buddhist values, Le Ly Hayslip's connection to *Kieu* is immediately apparent. Her life is an endurance of tragic events, ranging from torture and rape to prostitution and exile in America. As Nguyen Viet Thanh, a Vietnamese writer claims: "Hayslip's own story, that of a young girl who prostitutes herself to save her family and becomes the wife of numerous men out of necessity, eventually rejecting sex in favor of a spiritual relationship, is a partial reflection of *Kieu's* story" (Nguyen 631).

Like *Kieu*, the relationship between Le Ly and her father is very close. She mentions him as a respectable person who taught her morality, love, and courage. She learns from her father the story of her distant ancestors, especially a woman warrior who fought against the Han. With this image of the female hero in mind, Le Ly joins with her friends to fight the Republican army and consequently be arrested and tortured. Her release is misinterpreted as betrayal by the Vietcong whom she used to call "comrade" and who later rape her. In her case, it is terrible to learn that she had no direction and ideals to live for. Le Ly has to struggle with the conflicting demands of Communists and Republicans. She writes:

All my life has been *caught in the middle*--between the South and the North, Americans and Vietnamese, greed and compassion, capitalism and

communism not quite peace and almost war. Now, instead of resisting that fate, I saw that *in between* was where I belonged. (329)

Obviously, Le Ly is a victim of her circumstances. It is the war that robs her of everything, including her self-respect and future. Given that women's virtue is based on virginity, Le Ly's chance to have a proper marriage is jeopardized by her having been raped. She remembers: "The War- these men – had finally ground me down to oneness with the soil, from which I could no longer be distinguished as a person. Dishonored, raped, and ruined for any decent man, my soiled little body had become its own grave" (97). The abuse foreshadows misfortunes to come. Our innocent, good-natured farm girl has to leave her hometown to come to the decadent Sai Gon where she faces additional bad karma: she is impregnated and abandoned by her master Anh. Perhaps, if Le Ly had not been raped, she would have weighed the pros and cons of her relationship with Anh more carefully. Le Ly's story is a representative of many Vietnamese farm girls going to big cities to look for jobs and end up being tricked into prostitutions or impregnated by their wealthy and spruce masters. For Le Ly, the war is cruel and violent, and she sees escape as coming only through a relationship with an American.

Like Kieu's upbringing, Le Ly's was in the Confucian model: "Among the other things my mother taught me was how to be a virtuous wife and dutiful daughter in law: How to bring myself to my husband as a virgin and how to take care of the family I would have one day" (10). What Le Ly learns from her mother is a typical lesson that a Vietnamese mother teaches and prepares for her daughter. A daughter-in-law is usually chosen and tested by her mother-in-law. Perhaps, this is another element of women's suffering. A woman in conflict with her mother-in-law may be beaten or even expelled

from the house. Sometimes, divorce can be forced upon a woman because she displeases her husband's family. As Le Ly's father tells her: "Well, we were married and my mother tested your mother severely. She not only had to cook and clean and know everything about children, but she had to be able to manage several farms and know when and how to take the extra produce to the market" (31). Therefore, people commonly see a woman's marriage as reflecting her luck or karma. Parents, for example, try to do good deeds, hoping their actions will help their daughter find a good match and a kind family. Nguyen Du describes the father's feeling in *Tale of Kieu*:

[...] Pity the father facing his young child.

Looking at her, he bled and died within:

'You raise a daughter wishing she might find
a fitting match, might wed a worthy mate.' (655-659)

Similarly, Le Ly's father is very happy to find a good husband for his daughter:

W[hen I turned thirteen] and was blessed with the woman's curse of menses, my parents betrothed me to Tung, a sixteen-year-old boy from the neighboring village of Tung Lam. My father was quite happy when he announced the marriage contract-intended to be consummated three years hence with rites, drums, gongs, and feasting with all our relatives. (103)

As was considered normal for women who live under feudalism or in traditional villages, both Kieu and Le Ly, had been scheduled for arranged marriages at sixteen. Neither Le Ly nor Kieu, however, are given the opportunity to celebrate a blissful wedding. Theirs are reluctant and doleful marriages. Kieu marries in order to save her

father, and Le Ly marries in order to escape and bring her children to America. Nguyen Du and Le Ly give us a vivid picture of a corrupted society, full of greedy and cruel mandarins in *The Tale of Kieu*, and licentious officers and soldiers in Le Ly's autobiography. Here woman's role is not only subordinate; it is degraded. In both Nguyen Du and Le Ly, we encounter forms of prostitution. Kieu is instructed in the tricks of cheating and attracting the customers. Dame Tu lectures Kieu: "The trade of love, my girl, takes care and pains, / and we who ply it must know all its tricks" (1201-1202). In such a world, virginity as a moral concept is replaced by aesthetics: "Juice from pomegranate skin and cockscomb blood / will heal it up and lend the virgin look" (837-838). The bar girls of Le Ly's world know about similar ways to transform innocent, farm girls into prostitutes who have only the appearance of innocence. Whether during the period of feudalism or the American war in Vietnam, women are always victims and the target of cruel and corrupt men. Perhaps this is what makes us "sick at heart" in *Tale of Kieu* and *Heaven and Earth*

Nguyen Du's *Kieu* and Le Ly's *Heaven and Earth* present us with remarkably similar arrays of characters. Nguyen Du's Thuc Sinh, So Khanh, and Kim Trong find their counterparts in Le Ly's Anh, Red, and Major Dan. Thuc Sinh loves Kieu but is afraid of his wealthy and powerful wife. In Le Ly's case, too, Anh is clearly dominated by his wife, but war is also part of the excuse: "I don't want you to misunderstand. I love my wife, I love my children. It's just that-this is a very bad time, eh? The War" (128). When their liaison is discovered, Le Ly is dismissed without regret even though she is carrying Anh's baby.

Bad karma returns in Le Ly's subsequent love affairs. As Kieu is seduced by So Khanh, who appears to be a gentleman and scholar, promising to rescue Kieu from her humiliating life, so Le Ly is initially enchanted by Red's politeness, gentleness and education. So Khanh then shows his true face as a debauchee and a Don Juan. Like So Khanh, Red's caring, gentle manner doesn't last very long. When Le Ly refuses to dance naked on the stage to amuse his friends, he reveals his real character: "Where do you think you are going? Damn you, woman! You aren't the only gook girl in the world! You hear me-!" (284).

Most impressive and romantic is the relationship between Le Ly and Major Dan. Their encounter and romantic love have many things in common with love between Kim Trong and Thuy Kieu. Kieu meets Kim Trong and falls in love with him at the first sight. "Beautiful girl and talented young man-/what stirred their hearts their eyes still dared not say" (11) Similarly, Le Ly meets Dan at a party, and her heart seems to belong to him at the first moment:

With his boyish grin and sparkling eyes, he was more charming than anyone I'd met in a soldier's uniform. I could almost hear my father's voice behind the wit and humor and compassion of his words. After ten minutes with this wonderful newcomer, I felt inebriated. My face flushed red and my heart pounded in my ears. My breath came so fast and shallow I thought I might pass out. I knew, too, that I was in terrible trouble. (64)

Both Thuy Kieu and Le Ly are capable of daring and strong loves. The scene in which Kieu meets and becomes engaged to Kim Trong while her parents are absent reflects Thuy Kieu's revolutionary outlook, her desire to be free for passionate and true

love. In their meeting, however, Kieu carefully preserves her chastity and advises Kim Trong to wait until marriage. Kieu's noble behavior wins Kim Trong's respect and at the same time wins the hearts and minds of Vietnamese people. They admire and love Kieu regardless of her degrading career. As Nguyen Viet Thanh writes: "In the end, despite all her travails, Kieu is seen as keeping the most important aspect of her chastity-the spiritual one of submissive duty" (630).

Partly reflecting on Thuy Kieu's image, Le Ly depicts her romantic relationship with Dan and her dangerous and difficult trip to visit him in a fierce battle. The difference is that Le Ly forgets her role as Ed's wife and as a mother, puts herself in conflict with the dutiful woman's role in patriarchal culture. According to Vietnamese convention, her action is interpreted as infidelity to Ed. It's hard to convince the reader that strong love can overcome morality and social principles.

The parallel between Le Ly's story and Kieu's story is also reflected in the epilogues of the books. After 15 years of exile, Kieu is reunited with her family, pleased that her lover and Thuy Van have been married and settled down. She ends up being Kim Trong's friend:

Of love and friendship they fulfilled both claims_

They share no bed but joys of lute and verse.

Now they sipped wine, now played a game of chess,

Admiring flowers, waiting for the moon.

Their wishes all came true since fate so willed,

And of two lovers marriage made two friends. (3221-3226)

Their friendship reflects a noble sentiment, but at the same time places Kieu in the role of an outsider, isolated from the family circle. Like Kieu, after all of her troubles, Le Ly chooses to become a humanitarian rather than binding herself to family ties. As we can see from her books, she has become an outsider both in Vietnam and the Diaspora community. When she comes back to Vietnam, she is no longer Vietnamese but Vietnamese American: “Coming back a changed person to a place whose people live differently from the way you knew is another kind of home coming” (64). Nevertheless, upon publishing her books, she is criticized by both Americans and Vietnamese immigrants:

[T]he general reception of *When Heaven* was divided in a way that fully substantiates one of its most salient themes, that she can please neither side. When the book came out Hayslip’s message of openness towards Vietnam was taken as a validation of its communist government; she was not only criticized by other Vietnamese exiles, but received death threats from within the community, hate mail from veterans, and visits from the FBI. Among reviewers, while one praised her “major forgiving perspective,” another found “the absence of judgment... in itself almost shocking.” (Bow-151)

Despite these similarities to *The Tale of Kieu*, however, Le Ly’s story is ridden with compromise and moral ambiguity. Le Ly seems not very successful in presenting herself as a Confucian woman. When she is solicited for sex by two American men, Le Ly initially reacts fiercely, repeating that “Le Ly good girl.” Eventually, though, four hundred dollars win the argument. Le Ly rationalizes: “Four hundred dollars would

support my mother, me, and Hung for over a year—a year I could use finding a better job and making connections or, as a last resort, greasing palms for a paid escape”(258).

Admittedly, Le Ly’s life is not easy. She has to confront many difficulties and troubles, which she believes, are caused by her bad karma. However, Le Ly’s bad karma and Kieu’s cruel fate are fundamentally different. Nguyen Du follows the Buddhist view that regardless of how talented and virtuous a person may be in this life, suffering is largely determined by Heaven’s will and karma. Kieu has a literally ominous dream foretelling her unhappy life and warning that not even death offers an escape. Nguyen Du concludes:

This we have learned: with Heaven rest all things.

Heaven appoints each human to a place.

If doomed to roll in dust, we’ll roll in dust;

We’ll sit on high when destined for high seats. (3241-3244)

Kieu is surely a victim of circumstance and a corrupt society. The facts are unavoidable: Kim Trong’s uncle died, her father was falsely accused and arrested, and she was cheated by So Khanh and kidnapped by Hoan Thu. Moreover, in each of these cases (and additional ones), whenever Kieu tries to do something good, suffering is the result. Kieu’s attempt to save her father lands her in a pseudo-marriage. Advising Thuc to be honest with his wife results in her enslavement. Counseling faithfulness to the King, Kieu admonishes Tu Hai to surrender, which results in his death and her victimization at the hands of Ho Ton Hien.

A similar pattern *can* be found in Le Ly's memoirs, but Le Ly arguably has more control over her situation. Le Ly wants to live in keeping with her upbringing and portrays herself as a conventional woman, a perfect daughter. She notes: "In Ky La, we girls were taught to hide our bodies and our feelings from men" (113), and, "Only when I was older did I realize how much my parents suffered during this time. I made a child's solemn oath to be a dutiful, perfect daughter. I would stay close at hand when I grew up and help them when they were old. I would let nothing prevent me from repaying their love" (5). Sadly, Le Ly has repaid her parents by becoming an unwed mother and keeps her relationship with Americans. In the setting of Vietnam during her time, it is doubly very shameful for her parents.

Le Ly's actions, like Kieu's, have negative consequences, but whereas Kieu's actions are consistently motivated by the highest ethical principles, Le Ly's are not. Le Ly's love affair with her Vietnamese master Anh may be naïve, but it is less arguably "innocent." It is extramarital and adulterous, and the girl, young as she is, knows such affairs are wrong. Le Ly then goes on to have multiple love affairs with Americans, and she decides to marry Ed even though she isn't in love. Le Ly writes: "'*Duyen no* together denotes a married couple's karma...*Duyen* means love...*no* means "debt"...In a marriage without *duyen*, which is the union I would face with Ed, there would be no passion at all--no affection beyond good manners--and nothing to look forward to but the slow chill of a contract played out through all its clauses" (344). Since it starts from *no*, Le Ly endures an unhappy life to its tragic consequence of her husband's death. Subsequently, Le Ly agrees to marry Dennis because he has helped her sister Lan. This marriage leads in turn to another catastrophe. As we can see, Le Ly's troubles and

suffering come mostly from her subjective decisions, all of which reflect her immaturity and history of abuse. In these respects, Le Ly's story is an idiosyncratic story—*her* story—rather than an emblematic one. Not all Vietnamese girls chose to be prostitutes or have multiple love affairs with Americans just to get out of Vietnam. Her failure as a traditional woman reflects the way Vietnamese people see her. Whereas Kieu's unlucky marriage touches the hearts of any Vietnamese, Le Ly's, on the contrary, evokes censure and condemnation. They call her: "Bitch! Traitor! American whore!" (353). Furthermore, when she betrayed her husband, he told her, "My second wife cheated on me," "[T]hat's why I went to Vietnam. I thought if I could find a nice Vietnamese woman everything would be fine. Asian women are supposed to be loyal, aren't they? I just can't believe it!"(92).

From time to time, Le Ly sees her troubles as bad karma. However, the term here may have a very different meaning from Nguyen Du's *Tale of Kieu*. It is one thing for an impersonal narrator such as Nguyen Du to use karma as an explanatory device, and another thing for a memoirist to use it as an exculpatory one. For example, it is unconvincing to mention women's sacrifice or Vietnamese hospitality in the following situations:

I felt like too much of something, that was for sure, but I was so happy to finally please my man in front of his friend that I forgot all the worry and labor and money it took to put on this painted face and the hurt looks my mother gave me on those few occasions when I stayed home to care for my growing boy. It was, after all, hy sinh- the things you must sacrifice for your man. (282)

Vietnamese women are praised for their silent sacrifice, working-hard and putting aside their own pleasure and entertainment for the welfare of their husband, children and parents. Many of them willingly take care of the family so that their husbands can go on pursuing their study or fighting for the country. Abandoning her son and disregarding her mother in order to satisfy a *boyfriend's* demands is hardly in keeping with the true meaning of “sacrifice”. Moreover, given the proverbial Vietnamese expression, “*Nam nu tho tho bat than*” (women and men shouldn’t get too close), her hospitality in itself is not in keeping with Confucian morality, and inviting a stranger to share her bed is downright scandalous.

“Here _I’ll sleep here on the floor,” he said, and I believe he meant it.

“Don’t be silly,” I said in small voice. “It would be disrespectful of me to allow that. You may share the bed with me, like a good Vietnamese family, eh? I know there is room for two”. (332)

I agree in part with the comment of one *New York Times* reviewer:

This is one of those stories that defeat moral attitudes; to read it is to look at both the vibrantly alive face of ‘the other side’ and the deadly heart of war. All one can do is gaze, and perhaps bow one’s heart at the terrible sorrow and pity of it all.

Reading the book can indeed make us feel sympathy for Le Ly. However, it is hard to see how Le Ly’s story “defeat[s] moral attitudes,” as one reviewer put it. In Nguyen Du’s *Tale of Kieu*, we see Kieu *defeat* or overcome Confucian strictures when she promises herself to Kim Trong without her parents’ permission. Her action

represents young people's aspiration for freedom in love. Le Ly's situation, however, is quite different. She does not triumph over moral strictures so much as survive in the face a collapse of the moral systems around her.

Nguyen Du's Kieu is a victim of feudalism, which is at least a coherent moral system. Duong Thu Huong's world is at least informed by the socialist *ideal*, though its followers are often very flawed individuals. In Huong's work, Kieu is transformed into the new national woman. Le Ly, however, lives in a morally equivocal world. She is tortured by the Republican regime and then raped by the Vietcong. She makes her accommodation with incoherent social and political circumstances, but finally is in the position of mourning a lost world. For her, Kieu belongs to the realm of nostalgia.

Chapter 4

Kieu and Viet Kieu

Duong Thu Huong's and Le Ly Hayslip's versions of Kieu obviously reflect the different cultural and political circumstances of Vietnam and the Diaspora community. Duong Thu Huong renovates her feudal predecessor Kieu as the new socialist woman. Her female characters are those who fight for communism, achieve the victory and subsequently faced with hardship, shortage and poverty, question that ideology. Their struggle here is the conflict between their ideology and disillusion and the adjustment to their new role as women. As Huong points out, women have proved to be as strong and important as men in their contribution for independence and reconstruction of the country. They are no longer inferiors to men. Women go to work and show their skill as soldiers, laborers and writers. Despite their strength and achievement, they correspond to Vietnamese culture as faithful and graceful in their behavior with husbands and parents. It is the willing submission and silent sacrifice for their beloved that frame the Vietnamese woman's image.

In parallel with Duong Thu Huong's novels, Le Ly and the Vietnamese immigrant in general present another side of the war. They write mostly about life under the Republican regime, childhood and the experience of exile. Theirs is the bitterness of defeat, the experience of reeducation camps and the motivation to escape from Vietnam.

Although they find a new life, they also bear the burden of memory. Memories, especially those of the old way of life, are deep and full of sorrow. For those who were born and grew up with paddies, banyan trees, and local markets, the culture of their Vietnamese homeland is absolutely different from America's, and urban Vietnamese, too, learned about the countryside as part of their culture and lifestyle. Family was very important because grandparents, parents, and children lived together. Children grew up with childish games such as cricket fighting, hide-and-seek, fishing and swimming. Their lives were very close to nature and other people. These pastimes are very simple and humble in contrast with video games, movies, and other American luxuries, but they are the source of memories that accompany people throughout their lives. Such memories are part of the Vietnamese immigrant's struggle to adjust to American life in Takaki's "iron cages." A representative immigrant comments on this sense of loss in *Hearts of Sorrow*:

My wife often feels so lonely here in America because she cannot walk near her home, for she is afraid that people will shout at her. She has friends around here, but if she wishes to visit them, she asks me to accompany her. So her behavior in America is quite different from how she lived in Vietnam, where she'd leave the house alone two, three, or four times a day, visiting the market, her parents, and her friends. She used to walk a lot and enjoyed it very much; now she fears to do it. (378)

Another respondent commented:

'In our country', they said, 'when we return home from work, we have friends, neighbors, sentimentality, the family, the environment: we feel

secure, we feel relaxed physically and emotionally. In Vietnam, you work, but you can also take off a couple of days. If you do that in America, you will be fired. Here you have to work, have to eat, have to run; you must, you have no choice' (392).

Village people are not alone in feeling such social isolation. Mai Elliot's more comfortable circumstances did not protect her from such feelings. In *The Sacred Willow*, she writes that: "American society seemed to me so difficult to penetrate. People were always polite and pleasant, but there was a gap that I didn't know how to bridge" (284).

In addition to obstacles presented by American English, fast-food, and racial prejudice, Vietnamese feel their culture threatened by lenient American attitudes toward child-rearing and the "generation gap." Immigrants worry about their children having too much freedom, and they are troubled by what they view as undisciplined American schools, environments that foster irresponsibility in children, and child protection laws that do not allow parents to discipline their young. Immigrant parents complain that their children don't listen to them any more. "In America it is not the same way. Here you are very free; children choose their own spouse. They don't care about agreement or disagreement of their parents"(51).

Because of these difficulties and differences, Vietnamese immigrants become nostalgic for their home country with its thousand years of culture and civilization. They try to reassert traditional customs and Confucian values. One immigrant woman from Freeman's *Hearts of Sorrow* reports that "Here in America, I just remain. I don't change

my traditional ways; I still keep them” (372). They long for a world they remember, in which wives are faithful and submissive to husbands, and girls are kept under control of their parents until they get married. They think of a happy and united family in which people care for each other. Memories are of the past, however, and the immigrants’ nostalgia is for a Vietnam that no longer exists and perhaps never did.

Here it is important to remember that Vietnam had endured war for almost thirty years before 1975. Any image of an idyllic Vietnam at that time must be in good part fantasy. Le Ly’s dream of Vietnam has something in common with this: “As much as I hated the war, I began to miss Vietnam very much--not for the dangerous and depressing life I used to live, but for the home and family I remembered as a child.” (Le Ly-27)

Le Ly has romanticized her memory of Vietnam over time, and she offers both nostalgia and desire for a Utopia, a wonderful but non-existent place. Immigrants often have insight into such utopian longings. Loan Vo Le, who left Sai Gon in 1975, says: “I would like to go back. I miss my family so much. But we couldn’t stay. I’m afraid we are too spoiled by life here, the conveniences, the opportunities, the education and the freedom...I feel like a Vietnamese American, but inside I’m still Vietnamese. (Takaki-455-456). Loan’s longing for Vietnam has something in common with a man’s emotion in *Heart of Sorrow*: “On the outside, I am like an American, I drive to work in my car. I eat hamburgers at lunch. But on the inside, I am Vietnamese; I cannot forget my mother, hungry in Vietnam, while I have it easy here” (19).

Obviously, these people have an American life style. Even though they see themselves as Vietnamese, they were no longer simply Vietnamese but Vietnamese-

American. The hyphenation is problematic. Most of the immigrants have taken American names in addition to their Vietnamese; *Doan* may become Don or even George in American circles, though he remains Doan at home. Although many families try to maintain Vietnamese customs, tradition in its deepest sense is threatened because the children inevitably speak English and eat American food. Big Macs replace Cha gio, and French fries the wide range of Vietnam vegetables. American food, like American culture is “fast”. Americans do not spend much time in the kitchen cooking, and families spend less time sharing meals. That means generations interact less and traditional skills (such as how to make a spring roll) do not get passed on. Big American houses (where children have private bedrooms), fixed-price department stores, and superhighways are also culturally meaningful. Needless to say, what the Vietnamese immigrants experience in the United State is totally alien to their counterparts in Vietnam. As Le Ly writes:

I think about my old girlfriend Bich--how she tried to explain the miracles of Sai Gon to that simple Ky La-farm girl--and wonder how I myself would go about explaining San Diego and the interstate highway system and shopping malls and desktop computers and fast-food chains and automated teller machines to these people-or to my family.(135)

This is to say that Vietnamese immigrants are deeply affected by the values of their adopted country. Life in America requires both the man and woman of a household be employed. The working environment, education’s opportunity and the equality in the family allow women to bring their capacity into play and at the same time change their role as well. Vietnamese-American mothers send their children to daycare rather than spend time with them. Higher living standards also allow women to take care of their

appearance. Their western style hair and make up play an important part in contributing to their change. Furthermore, a mother's teaching and expectations to their children are also very different. In Vietnam, a mother teaches her daughter to prepare for married life and be a good daughter-in-law. Similarly, she expects her son to listen to her and has great influence in choosing her daughter-in-law. Obviously, this does not work in America. "In America, girls will select their own husbands" (Freeman 366). As we can see, such concern as being skillful in housework and domestic issues does not seem to be a problem in America. American parents pay more attention to their children's social relationship. In a discussion in Young Adult Literature class, female American students said they are taught not to go home late, not to call boy first, to study hard and to make good friends.

Unlike Vietnam where a husband is the primary breadwinner, a Vietnamese immigrant wife can earn as much money as her husband. This financial independence sometime brings conflicts to a Vietnamese family. According to Vietnamese convention, it is always frustrating and shameful for a man to be inferior to his wife. Vietnamese see it as gender reversal if a man has to stay at home when his wife goes to work. The following story related by a nun shows how the role of women changes, and it sometime causes trouble for the family members:

I heard today about a lady who had come to the United States with her child while her husband remained in Vietnam. He just arrived in America to find that his wife went to work every day, drove the car, took the child to the baby-sister, and he simply stayed home, feeling neglected that his wife not pay attention to him. Sometimes she returns home in a bad mood, so he suffers a lot.

When she comes home with an unpleasant attitude, he suspects that she has a boyfriend. He lives in hell, and he wants to leave for another country. (Freeman 404)

For those who left in 1975, that was not simply a journey from one country to another but a problem of life and death. Many refugees lost their lives in storms at sea, or at the hands of pirates. Those who survived look back at those years sorrowfully because they had to leave their families, sometimes witnessing the death of a spouse or children. Vietnamese refugees left their country reluctantly because of the war and the consequence after the war. Experiencing the hardship and lack of freedom under communism, many immigrants who left Vietnam after the war think of Vietnam as a devastated and very poor country: “The country as a whole was torn apart, morally, physically, and financially devastated. The country was in ruin after the war, and the people were poorer than ever before”. (244-Nghia M. Vo) These people have forgotten that twenty-five years separate the Vietnam of their memory from the country today. Memory colors their view of contemporary Vietnam. For example, although my experience is that Vietnamese are by and large free to practice their religions (Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestant Christianity, Cao Dai and Hoa Hao) news outlets such as The Free Vietnam Alliance suggest that religious expression is strenuously suppressed in Vietnam. In the article published in Thursday, 17 May 2001, the Free Vietnam Alliance appealed to readers: “To prevent Hanoi from repressing peaceful voices without consequences, the Free Vietnam Alliance also calls upon the media, individuals, and organizations to bring this flagrant violation to the attention of the international community and to exert pressures on Hanoi to cease its repression of peaceful expression

and of human rights in general.” Also in the Vnnews issued in July 20th 2001, there was a headline about Buddhist monks holding silent demonstration on Capitol Hill for Religious Freedom and Human Rights in Vietnam. In fact, Vietnam has changed in post-war years. It is on the path of economic development. More and more foreign tourists travel to Vietnam every year. There are also many study tours to Vietnam to do research on religion and agriculture. Hopefully these people will return to tell the truth about Vietnam. Certainly there are hopeful indications that this will happen. When General Secretary Manh recently told Colin Powel that, “[T]here were ‘many sad chapters in our History with the United States, but now we are in a new era with new chapters.’ The American responded: ‘and new chapters to be written. Chapters that don't talk about war but talk about peace, talk about economic cooperation, talk about helping the people of Vietnam.’” (Vnnews, July 26, 2001, Thursday)

Nguyen Du's *The Tale of Kieu* is not only popular in Vietnam but also in the Vietnamese community in the United States. Many writers mention it in their literary work. They frequently liken their own experience to the heartbreak and suffering epitomized in Nguyen Du's narrative poem. Not all Vietnamese females identify in the same way with the poetic tragedy of the heroine Thuy Kieu. Vietnamese youngsters, who have not grown up with *The Tale of Kieu*, show less interest in the poem and its outlook than do their parents. But for those whose formative years were spent in Vietnam, *The Tale of Kieu*, their national treasure, is part of their soul.

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