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## Some Things Poetry Can Tell Us about the Process of Social Change in Vietnam

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### Abstract

The renovation process in Vietnam has been described as a dialogic process involving extensive negotiation. This paper explores the proposition that there may be a distinctly if not uniquely Vietnamese character to this dialogic process, significantly involving the way semantic gaps are intentionally left in messages so that various recipients can fill them in by selecting from multiple possible interpretations of meanings one that best suits their own situation and unique life experience. Some eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poetry is examined to reveal how such mutual involvement of author and reader produced effective social commentary using ambiguity. Other examples from recent times demonstrate how Vietnamese continue to use ambiguity not just in poetry but also in fiction, urban folklore, and scientific and government documents as a means of commenting on and influencing the nature of social change in contemporary Vietnam.

It is suggested that more attention should be paid to how Vietnamese talk to and about each other, employing ambiguity in ways that are culturally specific, historically conditioned, and extremely sensitive to context. Understanding renovation requires us to attend to gaps in meaning, to what is not said as well as to what is. In daily life, in literature, and in the process of social change, in Vietnam it is often the second or third meaning, collaboratively produced by the originator and recipients of a message, that is ultimately the most important.

### Introduction

Vietnam is currently, not for the first time in its long history, undergoing a period of great social change. The nature of Vietnamese culture and society, and the relative strength of the various worldviews and moral imperatives at issue, have been contested, negotiated, and the subject of dialogue for centuries. Looking at the cultural history of such discourse may help us see more clearly the nature of current social processes in Vietnam.

In their writing about different aspects of the current “renovation” (*đổi mới*) process from different perspectives, a number of close observers of late twentieth-century Vietnam (e.g., Beresford, Fforde, Luong, Malarney) have shown us various ways in which renovation emerged out of more or less isolated efforts by a variety of actors to change ways of working and acting within the existing system in an attempt to solve specific and immediate problems. The policy of renovation issued by the Communist Party in late 1986 in large part simply legitimated a process of change that was already well underway.

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The word “negotiation” often appears in the writing that describes how elements of renovation came into being and evolved. At least two writers [Luong 1994; Kerkvliet 1999] have used the term “dialogic” to describe the process they studied, Luong in reference to the “restructuration of culture” and Kerkvliet with regard to “law-making and implementation in Vietnam.” Much that one might say about this dialogic process in Vietnam will inevitably sound a lot like what has been observed and reported elsewhere.

But is there a particular dimension of “Vietnameseness” to this dialogic process that merits more attention and elaboration, especially as it relates to the process of social change in Vietnam? To answer this question requires more work on several fronts.

One important task would be to relate what is going on in Vietnam today to various relevant theoretical frameworks from the social sciences and humanities to see how well they can account for the Vietnamese experience. The writings of Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin, Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz, and dozens of others offer a variety of theoretical approaches for analyzing the case of Vietnam.

Another important task would be to compare the case of Vietnam with other countries, especially with some other countries in East and Southeast Asia and with other socialist countries. Mainland China would be an especially fruitful comparison. The rich body of literature on mainland China, the long period of cultural interaction between the two countries, and the shared experience of efforts to modernize within a socialist framework, should make this comparison especially productive.

In this paper, I do not even try to perform either of these tasks, at least not explicitly. I concentrate on providing a range of examples that illustrate some of the ways that Vietnamese can and do use language and symbols to open up semantic space and put it to strategic use. These examples are drawn from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Vietnamese poetry, from twentieth-century Vietnamese fiction, from the writings of Vietnamese and foreign scholars, from Western journalists, and from my own field notes and experience. These examples do no more than scratch the surface of the rich subject matter, and they serve only to suggest some possible links to larger social issues and processes.

This topic is not only under-theorized (or, perhaps more accurately, is not yet in my opinion appropriately theorized), it is also under-described (although many more good descriptions are beginning to appear). I wish to explore the proposition that the ways in which Vietnamese negotiate and mediate change are intimately bound up with the ways they talk to and about each other, and that these in turn are to some significant degree culturally specific and historically conditioned.

With this in mind, a look at the nature of some difficulties in translating some poems written over 150 years ago might provide us with clues for understanding what is going on in Vietnam today. Linking these two quite different processes may at first seem quite a leap, and indeed the bridge I hope to see built between the two is still under construction. But a translators’ note by Dana Sachs and Bac Hoai Tran [1997: xix] accompanying their translation of a book of short fiction by Le Minh Khue [1997] phrases what may be an important aspect of

the link between them. They observe that:

English is a language that calls for precision. But . . . Vietnamese offers as many possibilities as certainties, and refuses to be pinned down . . . . Unlike English, *Vietnamese demands the active participation of listeners or readers in pulling together the meaning implied by the words.* [Emphasis added.]

One of their chief tasks as translators, they concluded, was “filling in the blanks” left by ambiguities in the original text.

Ambiguity and wordplay are to be found in all languages. Over the past several decades it has become increasingly understood that the participation of readers in the construction of meaning is an inherent part of literature in general and of poetry in particular. I posit that different languages tend to be ambiguous in different ways and that some languages are more ambiguous than others. I further posit that because of cultural, historical, and situational factors, different groups of people use ambiguity of various kinds in different ways and with greater or lesser degrees of frequency and greater or lesser degrees of effect.

I here adopt the position that in Vietnam discourse and meanings are embedded in a dialogic process that is distinctly — if not in all ways uniquely — Vietnamese and which to some considerable degree transcends genres and historical periods in Vietnam. I suggest that, at least in Vietnam, this process transcends literature and characterizes many kinds of communicative acts, including the writing of much expository prose, even policy statements and legal documents, and is in fact an important part of everyday social life.

A basic factor in this process is the nature of the Vietnamese language. It is uninflected. There is no necessity to distinguish tense or number or gender, subject from object, and so on. Each syllable is written separately and usually (but not always) has its own meaning, so Vietnamese seems to be, and is often called, a monosyllabic language. But although “each Vietnamese morpheme always coincides with a separately written syllable, a morpheme or monosyllable does not always constitute a syntactic word” [Nguyen Dinh Hoa 1995: vii]. Compound and pseudo-compound words are fairly common.

Vietnamese is also a tonal language, with six distinct tones in the north, and five in the south. As John Balaban [2000: 11] notes, this is often significant, especially in certain kinds of poetry, most particularly in the poetry of Ho Xuan Huong that he has translated, because:

like-sounding words [differing only in tone] can mean vastly different things, a whole world of double meanings also is possible in any poem. These second meanings, and phrase reversals, or *nói lái*, are usually obscene. Take, as examples, “The Lustful Monk” [which I present later under the title of “The Monk Driven Out of the Village”] and “Buddhist Nun.” In the former, *đeo* means “to carry” or “bear,” but its tonal echo, *đéo*, means “to copulate.” In the same poem, *lộn lèo* means “to turn about,” “to be confused,” even “twisted rigging,” but *lẹo lồn*, with different tones, means “to copulate.” (Actually, it’s more graphic.) Similarly, in “Buddhist Nun,” *xuất thế* means “abandon the world,” a proper sentiment, but *xuất thế* means “abandon a wife.” In some poems . . . this kind of tonal play and echo is often the very heart of the poem, making translation almost impossible. In fact, one of many dangers for a translator of Ho Xuan Huong is driving any poem too far toward one pole of meaning.

It is not just that the Vietnamese language often refuses to be pinned down. It is that many Vietnamese prize indirection and ambiguity and employ these qualities as useful strategic ploys; not just in writing poetry, but in all kinds of writing and in ordinary conversation and in daily life. They do this in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. I emphasize that this is not simply a question of language or of genre, but that culture and context influence the ways in which, the extent to which, and the purposes to which the open-endedness of dialogic communication is employed in on-going multidimensional social processes.

“Filling in the blanks” is an expected and essential part of the communication process in Vietnam, especially if the message is unpleasant or unwelcome, if there is a potential for conflict, or if there is danger that someone might lose face. With Vietnam’s recurring tendency toward ideological authoritarianism and sometimes arbitrary bureaucratic decision-making, this technique also provides a basis for deniability. Murray Hiebert, a perceptive journalist who spent over ten years in Vietnam, recounts one of the ways he had to learn to fill in the blanks to function effectively in Hanoi. As a foreign reporter, Hiebert needed to request permission for “most interviews and all travel outside of Hanoi.” He writes that:

[My] “handlers” would never directly refuse any of my requests. Instead I would be told that a certain visit was “not convenient at that time” or they “still haven’t heard back” from the person I had asked to interview . . . After a few weeks of vague replies, *I was supposed to understand that a request was being rejected.* [Hiebert 1996: 47; emphasis added]

Vietnamese life and literature are full of examples of the need for and importance of this and other kinds of active participation expected from listeners and readers. Poetry has always relied heavily upon reader participation, and some poems reveal with particular clarity how subtle and sophisticated this sort of communication can become. But these ways of talking and writing, of listening and reading, are also part of daily life; and they can play a significant role in shaping the course of larger events in Vietnam.

Following the provision of some relevant historical and cultural background, the paper presents translations and some discussion of about a dozen poems written by women in late-eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Vietnam. Obviously influenced by the cultural circumstances of their time, two women “Ho Xuan Huong and Madam Thanh Quan District (Ba Huyen Thanh Quan)” have produced some very high-quality poetry that provides preeminent exemplars of the Vietnamese capacity for subtlety and indirection in a process of dialogic communication with both a strong cultural component and potentially powerful social impact.

Most of these poems cannot possibly be adequately understood or appreciated apart from the ideological tensions and social and political conditions obtaining at the time of their writing. They compel us to confront simultaneously both the nature of the time and place in which they were written and the ludic and semantic possibilities of the Vietnamese language. And surely it is no coincidence that both of these poets were women, and that they were writing such powerful poetry at that particular time and place. But although gender is a

major trope in this article, and gender relations have long been and remain important and controversial in Vietnam, this paper is not only, nor even primarily, about gender. Discourse, especially poetic discourse, revolving around gender serves to illustrate some important but seldom highlighted dimensions of the larger, ongoing process of social change, in which poetry itself has long played an important and sometimes perhaps decisive role.

Most of the poems presented in this paper have been translated into English and other languages by other translators [most notably Nguyen Ngoc Bich 1975; Huynh Sanh Thong 1979; Balaban 2000]. I do not aspire to surpass or replace these existing translations; indeed, I hope some readers will be encouraged to seek them out, or perhaps to revisit them. Many of the poems are wonderful in the original, and we can never have too many translations of them. But I have provided my own translations to reflect my own readings of these poems, to illustrate some of the ways poetry has been used as an ideological vehicle, and, most importantly, to reveal as clearly as possible the extent to which, and some of the ways in which, Vietnamese poetry is often open-ended, requiring the audience to participate in the production of meaning(s) to what seems to me to be an exceptional degree.

In the final section I examine some of the many ways in which intentional ambiguity or open-endedness of language is used strategically in the dialogic process of mediating conflict, negotiating meaning, and shaping social change in Vietnam today. This includes historical anecdotes, short stories, novels, and political humor spread by word of mouth. Even various policies, laws, and regulations related to renovation, and the dialogues that surround them, are often — like some old poems — open-ended. Their meaning is destined to be completed through a process of interaction and negotiation in the course of their implementation.

### **Some Underpinnings of Vietnamese Culture and Society**

#### *Historical Influences*

Vietnam stands between the great cultural traditions and climatic zones of East and Southeast Asia. Early inhabitants of what is now Vietnam possessed many distinctively Southeast Asian traits, but Chinese influence began over 2,000 years ago and Vietnam was under Chinese rule for over 1,000 years (111 BCE–939 CE). Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism poured into Vietnam freely to exert a significant influence upon the worldview of the population [Ho Tai Hue Tam 1985: 26–27; Rambo 1982: 407]. One received a Chinese education, or none at all. Chinese was the official language, and the only writing system, in the land.

Buddhism (of the East Asian Mahayana variety, with a strong Zen influence) was a powerful force when Vietnam regained its independence and remained so for several centuries thereafter, but by the thirteenth century Confucianism was regaining equal footing as part of the state ideology. Chinese was used as the official language by all Vietnamese dynasties, and social advancement lay in mastering the Chinese classics. Traditional Vietnamese religion or worldview, as it developed in its mature form and persisted into the twentieth century, was a syncretic system composed of Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian elements combined with

indigenous animism and spirit cults.

Beginning in the fifteenth century under the reign of the great king Le Thanh Thong (1460–93), Neo-Confucianism assumed a position of structural dominance. Neo-Confucianism in China arose partly in reaction to Buddhism. It was, therefore, by intention, an all-encompassing cosmological scheme. Systematizing and integrating numerous elements in Chinese culture, Sung dynasty philosophers based their cosmology upon the two primordial forces, *yin* and *yang*. The manifold nature of the universe arose from the workings of and interplay between these two forces. The “nature of things” consisted of the relationship between *yin* and *yang*. This view of the world, which was equated with “reason” (*lý* in Vietnamese; *li* in Chinese), encompassed all of nature, Heaven and humanity, the animal and physical worlds. Since the structure of reality was bi-polar, “reason,” as manifested in the diversity of the “natural” world order, was to be found in the operation of paired opposites that worked together.

#### *The Social Order*

Neo-Confucianism focused attention upon relationships, specifically upon the proper form of relationships. This characteristic structure of the universe was, within this framework, inevitably “natural” and unalterable. Therefore, conformity to this order was an indispensable ingredient of a wholesome and stable society. Thus, for example, women (*yin*) were inherently inferior to and should be subordinated to men (*yang*). Younger brothers should defer to older brothers. Those of lower rank should defer to those of higher rank, and so on. The first and foremost value, the paradigmatic relationship in society, was filial piety, the obligation to obey, honor, and repay intrinsic moral debt to one’s parents.

The ultimate morality consisted of proper behavior in social relationships. This was the essence of “righteousness” (*nhĩa* in Vietnamese; *i* in Chinese). If relationships take their proper form, balance is maintained in systems (i.e., society) and sub-systems (i.e., the family), producing harmony and felicitous outcomes.

Good thoughts, good behavior, and good luck were intimately related. Improper behavior injured not only the individual, but the groups in which the individual was imbedded. Thus families, villages, and nations were corporately responsible for the behavior of their members. Deviant behavior, and individualism, were disapproved of and punished.

#### *The Place of Women in the Social Order*

The Le legal code, in force from the fifteenth century until early in the nineteenth century, consisted of a compromise between indigenous custom and Neo-Confucian morality outlined above. Women were assigned an inferior position in Vietnamese society, yet they enjoyed significantly greater rights and somewhat higher status than did women in China. Vietnamese women had equal rights to inheritance and substantial equality in property rights. In general, Vietnamese women were granted equality in civil law, but were treated differently in criminal law.

Sometimes women were treated more leniently, sometimes more harshly. In family law

matters, women were explicitly assigned an inferior and subordinate status, although they had some rights not granted to women in China. (See Ta Van Tai [1988: 110–132] on traditional Vietnamese law and women.) Even when women were treated more leniently under law than men, in a sense this was often merely a benign recognition of their inferiority. Children, too, had special protections and privileges. (For more discussion on “women” or gender issues in Vietnam, see Coughlin [1950], Hickey [1964], Le Thi [1999] and especially Rydstrom [1998], who provides an extensive bibliography as well as a great deal of relevant field data.)

It was in the family context that women’s subordination was most strikingly apparent, although women have long been known as keepers of the family purse strings, the “Minister of the Interior.” Women could be punished for wrongs committed by their husbands, while the husband would not be punished for the same wrong committed by his wife. And an offense committed by a wife against her husband was always punished more severely than the same act committed by the husband against the wife. This was because offenses committed against one of higher status were always deemed to be especially serious, and the wife was the subordinate in marriage.

A woman engaged in adultery risked horrible humiliation, and even death, if she were caught. Her husband might cut off her hair and smear her with lime, tie her out in the sun, or parade her through the village streets for public vilification and abuse. He could divorce her and cast her out of the house. Or, harshest of all, he could submit her to the authorities for punishment. This could result in her being lashed to a raft of banana plants that would be pushed out into the nearest river. If such a raft came ashore downstream, it would normally be pushed back into the current. Such punishment often amounted to a lengthy, painful, and ignominious execution. Women who acted flirtatiously were often referred to as “crow bait,” alluding to their probable future fate aboard such a raft [Toan Anh 1968: 60–61].

The Vietnamese often appear to be prudes of the first order by the standards of most Western and many other Asian cultures. They were also second to none in having a double standard for judging the sexual behavior of men and women. But the entire constellation of beliefs and attitudes regarding sexual behavior was intimately related to the overriding concept of family and enforced by the concept of filial piety.

The greatest single obligation of filial piety was to provide continuity to the family, i.e., to provide descendants through the male line to perpetuate the cult of ritual sacrifices to the ancestors. Anything less than total certainty as to the actual paternity of one’s children, then, was a source of intolerable anxiety. Motherhood, of course, could never be in doubt, but the maternal line was not important in any event. The sexual double standard in traditional Vietnam arose ineluctably from structural differences in the relationships between a man and his family and a woman and her two families, one hers by birth and the other by marriage. The needs of the family bent both men and women to serve as required, but the requirements were quite different for the two sexes.



*A Period of Social Upheaval*

Le Thanh Tong firmly imposed the stamp of Neo-Confucianism upon Vietnamese society in the late fifteenth century, but following his death the golden age disintegrated during the early decades of the sixteenth century. A “usurper” seized power from the Le dynasty in 1527, but by the 1540s his sons had been driven into the highlands by “loyalists” to the Le dynasty. The Le dynasty was restored to the throne, but the powerful families who put it there retained effective power in their own hands and then split among themselves. The Trinh family ruled the northern half; the Nguyen, the south.

As the Le kings sat in impotent glory upon their grandiose dragon throne, the seventeenth century provided the Vietnamese people with a tragic tumult of civil wars, famines, oppressive taxation, peasant rebellions, court intrigues, and the initial penetration of Christian missionaries and traders from the rapidly expanding market economy. While the veneer of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy remained unchallenged, change was fermenting beneath the surface of society. In the eighteenth century the rate and extent of change increased, and this process was expressed in and stimulated by Vietnamese literature.

*Literature and Social Change in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*

During the middle of the eighteenth century Vietnamese literature became more complex and much more lively. A resurgence of Taoism and Buddhism challenged the sterility and acceptance of the status quo into which Neo-Confucianism had fallen. Development in the printing industry also facilitated the spread of non-official and potentially unorthodox messages throughout the population. The quality of printing in Vietnam was quite impressive by Southeast Asian standards [Woodside 1971: 186]. Population pressure, the intrusion of the international market economy, and increased contact with the outside world may all have played some role in this literary revival.

One important element in this development of literature was surely the expansion and greater standardization of the writing system used for transcribing the Vietnamese language. The demotic script used for this purpose, *Nôm*, basically utilized fundamental units, or “radicals,” of Chinese ideographs to represent Vietnamese morphemes. The development of *Nôm* had been impeded by the dominant use of Chinese. The smallness of the body of literature written in *Nôm* and the fact that it largely consisted of unofficial, handwritten manuscripts limited both the potential for a rapid standardization of the characters and their diffusion among a significant number of people. In the middle decades of the eighteenth century both the printing industry and literature written in *Nôm* underwent vigorous development.

The emergence of a vigorous commercialized Vietnamese-language press was seen as a threat to the ideological foundations of the political system. An edict of 1789, for instance, announced that:

Only books with educational value may be printed and distributed. Recently some unscrupulous scoundrels have been gathering ballads and stories in the national language, without distinguishing between what is appropriate and what is not, and printing them for commercial distribution. From now on, anyone in possession of such printing blocks must declare them with the authorities, who must confiscate them and see to it that they are destroyed. [Pham Van Dieu 1960: 589–590; Pham The Ngu 1963: 297]

### Poetry as Social Commentary

The most outstanding genre of the upsurge in Nôm literature was the “novel-in-verse” (*truyen*). One of the first and most famous of these was *The Lament of a Warrior's Wife* (*Chinh Phũ Ngâm*). While the original text was written in Chinese circa 1741 by a man, it became extremely popular only after being translated into Nôm by a woman, Doan Thi Diem (1705–48), whose exquisite translation evoked poignant feelings in readers who lived in a society that had been wracked by over two centuries of turmoil, a century of intermittent civil war, and numerous peasant rebellions in recent decades. And of course the Nôm version was accessible to a much wider audience who could understand it when it was read aloud by village scholars or recited by traveling story tellers.

In this work the suffering of war is noted at the outset of the poem and immediately followed by the question: “who shall we blame?” The plight of the women left behind when men go off to war is eloquently evoked.

Several decades after Doan Thi Diem's translation of *The Lament of a Warrior's Wife*, another famous novel-in-verse appeared that again, although widely believed to have been written by a man, spoke through a female character. *The Sorrows of an Abandoned Concubine*, generally believed to have been written by Nguyen Gia Thieu (1741–98), presents a vivid if not altogether convincing portrait of a young woman who is taken by the king to be a concubine and then ignored. The putative author himself was believed by many Vietnamese to have been voicing indirectly his own disillusionment. Having been raised and educated in the palace and having enjoyed a successful career as a young man, Nguyen Gia Thieu fell into disfavor and was assigned to an unimportant post in a remote mountain area in 1782. Vietnamese have been quick to believe that it was his own feelings of rancor and regret that infused this verse novel with powerful emotion. The woman's complaints are heartfelt and moving. But, clearly, she is lamenting her own “privileges now lost.” Like the warrior's wife, the royal concubine does not so much decry the system as her own abandonment.

Rural unrest continued to scourge the land. By 1773 entire provinces were in rebellion under the leadership of three brothers from a village in central Vietnam called Tay Son. The Tay Son rebellion, as it came to be known, swept the entire country by 1786, deposing both the northern Trinh and southern Nguyen regimes. Chinese troops, who had been called into the capital to help protect the status quo, were driven out of the country by Tay Son forces. In 1787 the impotent Le emperor was deposed. One of the Tay Son brothers assumed the throne as Emperor Quang Trung.

The Tay Son leaders briefly held power as reincarnations of autochthonous traditions that preceded the dominant paradigm. These were xenophobic and iconoclastic rebels against the tidy, highly intellectualized worldview dominated by the precepts of “reason” and “righteousness” and the bureaucratic, educational, and symbolic structures that perpetuated it. Nôm was made the official writing system of the land and the civil service literati were treated as clerks and errand boys. The Trung sisters were revitalized as national heroes of the first order, overshadowing the Sinicized male heroes of more recent history.

The entire Tay Son era expressed grave doubts about the authoritarian claims of the dominant Neo-Confucian ideology. But in 1802 the Nguyen dynasty was founded by Nguyen Phuc Anh, descendant of the deposed Nguyen lord, who took the title of Emperor Gia Long and established the capital of the country in Hue. All living members of the families of the Tay Son rulers and their generals were executed in 1802. The construction of Buddhist temples was forbidden and permission was required even to repair existing pagodas [Woodside 1971: 28]. Under the Nguyen dynasty Neo-Confucianism aspired in many ways to become a more dominant force than ever before.

The new regime cracked down on all opposition, and it took a particularly hard line in the north, where it had received little support. Emperor Gia Long was always more highly regarded in the south than in the north. And the Hanoi regime to this day regards Emperor Quang Trung as a national hero of the first order, a brilliant anti-feudal revolutionary leader and defender of the nation against Chinese territorial ambitions.

#### *Ho Xuan Huong: The Mistress of Multiple Meanings*

The most outstanding representative of the literature associated with this Tay Son period, when ideological authoritarianism was so vigorously challenged, was a woman: Ho Xuan Huong. The exact years of Ho Xuan Huong's birth and death are not known. But it is generally accepted that she lived in the latter half of the eighteenth century and probably into the nineteenth century. In fact, it is not at all certain how many poems she wrote, nor what they were. According to John Balaban [2000: 13], “some limit her oeuvre to a mere twenty-five, others claim as many as 148.” Her work was not published during her lifetime nor for many years after her death. Her poetry was transmitted through oral tradition, and copied and recopied many times over the years, before being collected. Thus many of the poems in question, whatever their provenance, exist in several different versions.

To complicate matters even further, each of several versions might sometimes be understood in several different ways. In effect, the translator must virtually become a co-author in the process of selecting, interpreting, and reproducing a text in a different language. Few poets present more possibilities, or demand more translator or reader participation, than Ho Xuan Huong. It is often impossible for any single translation to capture more than a fraction of the possibilities inherent in the original text. As Tan Da, the great poet of early twentieth-century Vietnam, once remarked of Xuan Huong: “There are ghosts in her poetry” [Nguyen Van Hanh 1970: 11]. Some of these “ghosts” were the tonal play and echoes

mentioned by Balaban.

Ho Xuan Huong wrote in Nôm and her language and syntax appear to be extraordinarily natural and straightforward. Echoes of folksongs drown out conventional literary expressions. In vivid contrast to the poetry of her male contemporaries, use of Chinese or Sino-Vietnamese terms and classical allusions is rare in her work. She produced poetry that seems at first reading to be remarkably simple. The images are all familiar scenes and objects of daily life. Yet the poetry is chock-full of ambiguity and veiled allusions, brimming with double- and even triple-entendres, often based upon one or more of several kinds of word play.

What at first glance may appear to be the simplest and most prosaic of lines can at second or third reading impress upon the alert reader several different levels of meaning by use of homonym and metaphor that are impossible even to suggest in English translation. One good example of this talent at work is the short four-line poem called “The Rice Cake” (“Bánh Trôi”).

In an effort to provide some simple and intelligible account of this process of interaction between the reader and Ho Xuan Huong’s sly layering of suggested meanings, with the most innocent being the most obvious, I will present a Vietnamese version of the text [*ibid.*: 84] in Romanized transliteration of the original Nôm characters along with approximate common meanings in English.

Thân	em	thì	trắng	phần	em	tròn
[body]	[my]	[is]	[white]	[shape]	[my]	[round]
Bảy	nổi	ba	chìm	với	nước	non
[seven]	[ups]	[three]	[sink]	[with]	[water]	[mountain]
Lớn	nhỏ	mặc	đù	tay	kẻ	nặn
[big]	[small]	[according to]		[hand]	[person]	[knead]
Mà	em	vẫn	giữ	tắm	lòng	son
[but]	[I]	[still]	[keep]	[a]	[heart]	[red]

This particular kind of rice cake is a dumpling made of white rice flower with a piece of rock sugar, or a bean and sugar mixture, often colored red, in the center. The dumpling is dropped in boiling water to be cooked.

Thus, the first, most literal, and most obvious reading of the poem would be something like this:

My body is white, my shape is round,  
 Bobbing up and down in the boiling water.  
 Large or small, according to the baker’s hand,  
 But always retaining my pure red heart.

But in Vietnamese the word for “water” also means “nation.” *Non* means “mountain” and “waters and mountains” (*nước non*) is a familiar way of saying “country.” “White” is a symbol of purity and also of mourning. And the word for “round” (*tròn*) also means “to fulfill” (in the

sense of “complete the circle”). The word which context at first forced us to read as “shape” (*phân*) also means “fate” or “plight.” It is also part of a compound word meaning “duty” (*bổn phận*). Thus, a moment’s reflection produces another possible reading of these four lines.

I am unsullied, my duty fulfilled,  
As I have my ups and downs with the nation.  
Great or petty, according to the hand that shapes it,  
Still I am always loyal in my heart.

These are appropriate and indeed fairly standard sentiments in the context of turmoil and civil strife that characterized the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Vietnam. And to convey so apposite an underlying message so pithily through homonym and metaphor is quite an achievement. But once freed from the original descriptive level, and always alert for multiple levels of meaning, yet another reading emerges. To a Vietnamese audience, who would likely know that this rice cake was often thought to resemble female genitalia, the third level of interpretation might readily jump to mind. A deeper, more powerful, and quite revolutionary reading of the poem is now possible.

My body is white and curvy,  
Bouncing up and down, boiling,  
Under some fellows hand to do with as he pleases,  
But only my body, and not my heart.

Such poetry defies translation, but it forcefully expresses some of the value conflicts that seethed beneath the surface for centuries in pre-modern Vietnam. The pervasive strain of male dominance in Vietnamese society under which Ho Xuan Huong chafed so sorely was, this poem can be understood to assert, merely formal, not substantive. The quintessential Vietnamese woman was, like a rice cake, like Ho Xuan Huong herself, soft and malleable on the outside, but inside tough as rock. Vietnamese women possessed an inner psychological strength that remained untouched by the male chauvinism that characterized the dominant ideology of society.

The underlying tension between patriarchal ideals and the actual behavior of men and women in traditional Vietnam can be detected over long centuries of history. But the ideal itself was rarely challenged, at least not publicly, and certainly not by the male bureaucratic literati who formed the primary expressive mechanism of the dominant elite ideology and provided Vietnam with most of its great poetry. Discrepancies between the normative ideal and actual practice were quietly ignored.

It was the genius of Ho Xuan Huong to seize upon such hidden tensions or double standards in society and satirize them in poetry of the highest aesthetic order. Her poetry is great precisely because of the subtlety and indirection with which she expressed herself. This virtue was particularly prized by the ideological elite, which was male. Her poetry (or at least one reading of it) made explicit the discrepancy between ideals and practice in the society these

men dominated. This is the essence of bad taste in any social group, but it is also an accurate description of a negative feedback system, a prerequisite for learning and self-corrective behavior.

Alexander Woodside [1971: 47] has observed of Ho Xuan Huong that:

She wrote poetry which, for all its playfulness, may have been the darkest assault upon Confucian ethics ever delivered by a literate scholar of a classical East Asian society.

Ho Xuan Huong was a literary genius, yet because she was a woman she could hold no office or title, although she saw many offices and titles awarded to men whom she deemed to be her inferiors. Upon visiting a shrine erected in memory of a Chinese district chief killed fighting the Tay Son, she wrote:

Oh, if only I could have become a man,  
What a heroic career I'll have made for myself!  
[Nguyen Van Hanh 1970: 86]

One may well admire the spunk and self-confidence of Ho Xuan Huong here. But as Nguyen Van Hoan [1999: 227] has remarked, if this is indeed a poem by Ho Xuan Huong, it suggests at one level an approval of, an acceptance of, the feudal order. Like the warrior's wife and the royal concubine, she can be understood in these lines to be more intent upon the shortcomings of her position in the system than she is with the inequities of the system itself. But I think the four-line poem can be understood in other ways.

Under Neo-Confucian morality, a widow was doomed to disrepute if she looked at another man. A "good" Vietnamese woman knew only one man in her entire life, and her life was supposed to be dedicated to him even after his death. Yet a man could have any number of wives, and the higher his social status the more wives he was likely to have. If he had a mistress or two on the side it was no great disgrace to him, but the mistress was "no good," a "fallen woman." This hypocritical double standard regarding sex was one of Ho Xuan Huong's favorite themes, perhaps because it made so many men so uncomfortable.

Having herself experienced being a second wife, she attacked the institution of polygamy in the poem "On Being a Second Wife."

While one snuggles under a quilt, the other freezes.  
Oh boy! What a life it is to share a husband!  
It's rare, but that's how it goes,  
A couple times a month, or sometimes not at all.  
Trying to choke down leftover rice,  
Why, it's like being a worker without wages.  
If I had known it would be like this,  
I'll rather just have stayed at home. [*ibid.*: 115]

In an even more daring assault upon one of the basic canons of traditional morality, Xuan

Huong wrote a poem about “The Unwed Mother.” Vietnamese society was self-consciously prudish, and punishment for deviant sexual behavior often took exceptionally harsh forms. And women were judged much more severely than men. To this day chastity in a bride is highly valued by many people, while young men are generally allowed much more freedom. Ho Xuan Huong challenged the male-based double standard in “illegitimate” sex with bold thrusts.

This, too, is a particularly difficult poem to translate. My reading of the poem is something like this.

Stranded, out of being too considerate —  
 Would you know that feeling, young man?  
 The marriage never quite took place;  
 How then did the child come to be formed?  
 You, young man, can carry all the guilt.  
 She is the one to bear all the love.  
 And those words of ridicule hurt.  
 A mother without a husband is the best girl of all. [*ibid.*: 118]

This rendering of the poem suffers grievously from the attempt to convey the meaning of the poem at the expense of rhyme and meter. Yet it remains very far short indeed of a literal translation. The choices for a translator are all difficult ones. Lines three and four, for example, might more literally have been rendered as:

The vertical cap had not yet jutted above the sign of Heaven.  
 How then had the horizontal stroke sprung across the willow?

The meaning of line three derives from the fact that the Chinese character for “husband” is distinguished from the character for “heaven” only by the extension of the vertical stroke above the horizontal line. Thus “heaven” (天) becomes “husband” (夫) when the “vertical cap” juts above it. Similarly, in line four, when a horizontal stroke is added to the character for “willow” (了), it becomes the character that means “child” (子). Balaban [2000: 121] calls such lines “visual puns.”

But if a translator continuously presented such explanations it would soon become unbearably tedious for all but the specialists, for whom they are not required. So “the vertical cap had not yet jutted above the sign of Heaven” becomes “the marriage never quite took place.” And “how then had the horizontal stroke sprung across the willow?” becomes “how did the child then come to be formed?” But so much music, wit, and subtlety of meaning is lost in such translation. Is not a “horizontal stroke” springing across a “willow” suggestive of the tragedy of pregnancy coming suddenly into the life of an unmarried woman, abruptly altering the form and meaning of her life? The word “willow” itself suggests a woman and is also associated with love. Thus in translation is the poetic essence sacrificed in service of prosaic meaning. But it is important to remember that through the superb quality of her poetry Ho Xuan Huong compelled her audience to participate quite actively in the construction

of meaning.

Much of the poetry of Ho Xuan Huong is sexually suggestive to an extent that is unique for anything written in Vietnamese that deserves to be called poetry. The sexual content in many poems, though veiled, is unmistakable. As we discovered above in “The Rice Cake,” Ho Xuan Huong’s poems can have sexual meanings that are unmistakable, and yet the first and most literal meaning of the poem is an innocent description of some familiar scene or object or activity, and the second, not so innocent meaning, must be (re)created by the audience.

Spring was a time of festivals in Vietnam, and swings were often erected, and used by young couples, facing each other. This provided young people with a rare opportunity for courtship. Boys and girls, especially in the upper circles of rural society, were normally kept segregated. Watching a young man and woman sharing a swing, Ho Xuan Huong describes the scene literally, while suggesting what was on her mind, and doubtless on the minds of the young couple as well. The reader, however, would have to provide the second reading from his or her own imagination, perhaps stimulated by some awareness that, as Balaban [2000: 122] observes, the word for “swing” and the word for “copulate” differ only in tone, introducing yet another bawdy ghost into Xuan Huong’s poetry.

Whoever planted those poles so well deserves a word of praise.  
One person rises and pushes, the other sits to gaze.  
The boy retracts his crane-like knees, twisting them until they crack.  
The girl tilts over her waspish waist until her heart is on its back.  
Four red pant legs flutter in the air.  
Side by side jade legs spread out, two parallel pair.  
But all the while you enjoy the spring, spring is taking its toll.  
And now the stake is pulled out, leaving an empty hole.  
[Nguyen Van Hanh 1970: 95]

Another descriptive poem with sexual innuendo lurking directly behind innocent description is “The Jackfruit.” People sometimes tried to speed up the ripening of a jackfruit by driving a bamboo stake into the tough outer rind.

My body is like a jackfruit on the tree,  
With rough skin and lots of pulp.  
If a man likes it, he should poke in a stake.  
Don’t squeeze! You’ll get juice all over your hands.  
[*ibid.*: 81]

But Xuan Huong was not always satisfied to introduce sexual innuendo into innocent topics, nor to express her sympathy for the plight of victims of the patriarchal bias in society, like second wives or unwed mothers. She reveled in tweaking men for their contradictory attitudes toward sex: disapproval and obsessive desire. In a vivid description of a famous scenic spot along the central coast, she speaks forcefully of passion and sexuality, arguing that no one, neither saint nor gentleman, is exempt from their call.



A pass, a pass, and then another pass.  
What a landscape has been carved out!  
Here the foolish earth is covered with a lush green roof of grass.  
There the timid, rough rock is covered by a moldy moss.  
Pine branches are shaken by a fierce wind.  
The leaves of the willow are damp with drops of dew.  
Saint or gentleman, no matter who they are.  
With aching knees and tired feet, they still all want to make the climb.  
[*ibid.*: 110]

The pine tree is a symbol of the male, as the willow is of the woman. But, again, the tasks of matching the topographical features with human anatomy and correlating natural phenomena and human activity were left to the ingenuity of the reader. But the dig at “saints and gentlemen” was unmistakable to all but the densest readers. Xuan Huong was quick to sniff hypocrisy when such men preached morality.

Xuan Huong’s contemptuous dismissal of traditional scholarship, which was still firmly in the mold cast by Chu Hsi in eleventh century China, is revealed in a poem she is said to have spontaneously composed in response to a couple of young scholars who were teasing her in the street.

Don’t rush off, young masters, wait! First,  
Let big sister show you how to make up verse.  
Itchy young bees pierce dead flowers with their stingers.  
Pitiful little goats butt their heads against sparse hedges.  
[*ibid.*: 112; Hoa Bang 1950: 77]

In both scholarly and sexual terms, Xuan Huong asserted, these arrogant young men flattered themselves. She had her doubts about their competence in more ways than one. But Neo-Confucian ethics, pompously mediocre officials, and ambitious young scholars were not her only targets. Her formidable wit struck out at myriad forms of hypocrisy, cant, insincerity, and hollow pretensions she perceived around her.

Buddhist monks came in for their fair share of ridicule in the poetry of Ho Xuan Huong. She twitted the Buddhist clergy with the same impudent humor she directed against Confucian moralists. She derisively portrayed “The Monk” (“Nhà Sư”) as:

Not really Chinese, nor really one of us.  
Head shaved bald, in a robe without a flap;  
Holding a few cones of rice out in front for offerings,  
While seven or eight nuns lurk behind his back.  
First it’s cymbals, then a bell, then some kind of gong,  
With hee’s and ho’s and ha-hee-ha’s.  
After a long time he may become a head monk,  
And get to perch up on that lotus seat.  
[Nguyen Van Hanh 1970: 112]

Ho Xuan Huong also wrote a poem of mock compassion for “The Monk Driven Out of the Village” (“Sư Bị Làng Đuối”).

The burden of religious life is heavy as a stone,  
Just a teensy little mistake was all it took.  
And the Ship of Salvation, bound for Paradise,  
Met a contrary wind and went awry. [*ibid.*: 91]

Nor was she impressed by the bustle of activity and piety she observed at “The Ancient Pagoda” (“Chùa Xưa”).

Master and servant stroll around the temple,  
A sack half full of poems, a flask half full of wine.  
Fish in the stream, gills flopping, hearken to the prayers.  
Mountain birds bob their necks to the rhythm of the chants.  
The Gate to Salvation is crammed with a jostling mob.  
Sticks of incense burn in supplication, crowding every pot.  
His Reverence softly inquires of the monk:  
“With all this sanctity, how many sweethearts have you got?”  
[*ibid.*: 107]

For all her scathing ridicule of miscreant monks, Ho Xuan Huong never attacked Buddhism itself the way she did some basic Confucian tenets. To some Neo-Confucian ideologues and their followers Ho Xuan Huong was a monster. The heterodoxy and rebelliousness of spirit for which she spoke were anathema to them. But she had many admirers and her verses continued to spread by word of mouth and hand-written copies.

*Madam Thanh Quan District: More Multiple Meanings*

The Nguyen dynasty dealt somewhat leniently with the southern third of Vietnam and was well established in the central region. But to many northerners, perhaps half the population of Vietnam at the time, the new dynasty was an alien, occupying force and the new officials who ruled in their name were boorish upstarts. The old court in Rising Dragon (Thang Long, now Hanoi) was regarded with nostalgia.

Women in the Red River delta continued to wear skirts in the traditional Vietnamese manner, while Vietnamese women elsewhere had adopted the Chinese custom of wearing pants. In the north, people preferred the old coins of the Le dynasty to the new coins of the Nguyen [Woodside 1971: 75]. Vietnam became more like China, and the new legal code set forth by the Nguyen was a replica of the Chinese code, and women had fewer rights than they had had under the old Le code.

Many northern intellectuals resented the Nguyen. Some served the new regime, but grudgingly, at ranks beneath those they felt they deserved, and with pangs of remorse. Many Vietnamese have believed that Vietnam’s great literary masterpiece, *The Tale of Kieu*, by Nguyen Du, is a product of these feelings, that Nguyen Du, who attained high rank under the

Nguyen, felt like a prostitute. But one of the most eloquent voices to articulate this muted discontent was a woman. It reveals a great deal about Vietnamese society of the time that we do not know her date of birth and many details of her life are murky, although considerable biographical data are available for both her father (who was born in 1755) and her husband. Her family had strong ties to the old regime.

Because she married an official who passed his examination to become a mandarin in 1821 and subsequently served as chief of Thanh Quan district in Thai Binh province, posterity knows her as “The Lady of Thanh Quan,” or “Madam Thanh Quan District (Bà Huyện Thanh Quan).” Even so distinguished a poet as she was known and addressed by her husband’s title. Madam Thanh Quan District was born and raised in and around Rising Dragon (Thăng Long), the northern capital now known as Hanoi. She wrote gently sad, highly musical poetry that incisively evidenced profound disenchantment with what evidently appeared to her and her family, friends, and circle of acquaintances as sweeping but largely unwelcome social change overtaking them, ineptly orchestrated, as they saw it, by the remote court in Hue. In one of her better known poems, she wrote poignantly of “Thang Long Nostalgia.”

Why should the creator have staged such a scene?  
The fleeting years have raced into the past.  
Weeds now conceal the carriage tracks of antiquity.  
Twilight envelops palatial old foundations.  
Only the stones have endured time unchanged.  
The mirror of a thousand years reflects both past and present.  
One stands distraught before it all, bowels torn with pain.  
[Phan Van Dieu 1960: 117–119]

During the reign of King Tu Duc (1848–83) she was summoned to become a tutor in the royal harem. The Lady of Thanh Quan had to leave her beloved northern milieu and travel to join the forces that dominated her nation from Hue. With great subtlety and indirection she conveyed the poignant and complex emotions that she and many other members of the traditional northern elite experienced during much of the nineteenth century. Ngang Pass, which straddles the boundary between Ha Tinh and Quang Binh provinces, runs athwart an outcrop of the Truong Son range (formerly called the Annamite Cordillera) that blocked north-south movement along the upper portion of the long central coastal plain.

This spot had particular symbolic value as the sole passageway into the southern half of Vietnam, the newer part, long associated with the Nguyen overlords who now ruled all of Vietnam. In “Crossing Ngang Pass” (“Qua Đèo Ngang”), Madam Thanh Quan District was symbolically taking leave of old ways and old loyalties, going from a familiar and cherished past into present realities of dubious value.

I approach Ngang Pass in the day’s final hours;  
Shrubs brush against rocks, leaves jostle flowers.  
Scattered along the riverside: several rustic shacks.  
There’s the moorhen: a homesick lullaby.

There's the partridge: a homesick lonely cry.  
I stop and stand here: sky, clouds, sea.  
Very private feelings, just myself and me.  
[*loc. cit.*]

The nature of her “very private feelings” may be deduced from the resonance of alternative phrases clustered in the fifth and sixth lines of the poem.

Nhớ	nước	đau	lòng	con	quốc	quốc
[Miss/Remember]	[water/nation]	[hurt/pain]	[heart]	[animal]	[nation/moorhen]	
Thương	nhà	mỏi	miệng	cái	gia	gia.
[Love]	[home]	[tired]	[mouth]	[classifier]	[family/partridge]	

“*Con quốc quốc*” is a name for a moorhen. A “*gia gia*” is a name for a partridge. But “*quốc gia*” is a common term for nation.

Is it too fanciful, then, to think that some contemporaries would have a sense of the phrase “mourning over the homeland” (*thương nhớ nước nhà*), even though these words are not contiguous in the poem? Is it only a coincidence that one can so easily find the phrase “agonizing over the nation” (*đau lòng quốc gia*) [Pham Van Dieu 1961: 120–121]? I think not. This assumption is all the more plausible because, as Balaban [2000: 12] points out, Ho Xuan Huong herself, writing some decades earlier, sometimes created “small subtexts with anagram-like constructions if words are read up and down as well as left to right.”

Many readers and listeners would surely have been alert to the possible existence of such subtexts and quick to reconstruct them. With awareness of the social context in which the poem was written, everyone who heard or read this poem would have actively (re)created their own version of it, with each individual understanding shaped by a unique set of personal experiences and specific inter-textual resonance with prior reading. As Jerome Bruner [1976: 72–73] has observed, each person who confronts a text “will bring to it a matrix of life that is uniquely his own.” Thus, in a sense, while at one level the author’s intentions will be “understood,” no two people will read a poem like this in exactly the same way. But it is thereby enabled to be applied to a very wide expanse of the human condition.

Such veiled meanings as I have tried to extract from the poetry of Ho Xuan Huong and the Lady of Thanh Quan (aided and encouraged by numerous books, articles and comments by Vietnamese) can surely not successfully be poured onto a *tabula rasa*. These subversive or obscene or derogatory or secondary meanings are jointly constructed by writers of poetry and an audience that to some extent already shares the sentiments from which the meaning emerges. Precisely because the “political” or “culturally subversive” or “revolutionary” meaning is a secondary interpretation of a work, it can be created only through an active collaboration between poet and audience, not by the poet alone. Poetry does not, cannot, create discontent. It articulates and crystallizes and (re)organizes elements of discontent that already exist in the minds of those who read it or hear it. Or, possibly, it stimulates them to see familiar situations in new ways.

### The Link between Poetry and Social Change

To speak of poetry and its relationship to social change is to raise issues of legitimacy, moral imperatives, and the nature of power in society, once considered as elements of “The Mandate of Heaven.” There are many different vocabularies for talking about this, but the most appropriate phrase for examining this question in traditional Vietnam is what is most commonly translated into English as the “just cause” (*chính nghĩa* in Vietnamese; *ch’ing i* in Chinese).

“Just cause” is a very inadequate translation of this East Asian term. “*Nghĩa*” is what I have called “righteousness” earlier in this paper. This word has for centuries summarized the burdens of filial piety; moral debt; generalized mutual obligation within a hierarchical framework in which an individual was embedded (such as that between older and younger brother); and loyalty to one’s sovereign. “Righteousness” implied social obligation in its fullest possible sense. It was the proper way to live, the path to follow, the essence of being a decent human being, the primary requirement for self-respect. The word “*chính*” means “primary,” “legitimate,” “proper.” The phrase “*chính nghĩa*,” or “just cause,” conveyed the idea of the transcending, true, proper, legitimate claim of society upon one’s devotion. It was a cultural imperative for choosing properly, morally, among competing ends and means of social action.

In traditional terms, as taught and reinforced in hundreds of classical texts and school primers and proverbs and folk tales, if one pursued the “just cause” one was in accord with powerful natural and supernatural, social and psychological forces. Victory in battle, the mandate of Heaven, abundant harvests, and the hearts and minds of the people were a seamless whole that flowed from the just cause as naturally and inevitably as daybreak follows night. Going with the just cause, with righteousness, brought moral and ideological power that would transcend and generate all other forms of power: military, political, and administrative.

But the just cause (*chính nghĩa*) was not to be determined by individual conviction. Nothing in the traditional system was legitimately so determined. The just cause was expressed as a body of public opinion, primarily literati opinion. In his “Introduction” to Gerald C. Hickey’s classic ethnography, *Village in Vietnam*, Paul Mus wrote of the Diem regime’s attempts to capture

... an unspoken ... intangible ... the center of which is everywhere, the contour that would permit taking hold of it, nowhere; for ... it is neither a circle of things nor of people but an elusive and tenacious ... body of opinion. [Mus 1964: xxi]

Phrasing it another way, Mus wrote of Vietnamese village life that:

The major premise presents itself ... as the balanced total of opinions professed on the things that matter by the persons who count in the eyes of the community as a whole. [*ibid.*: xix]

The just cause, the dominant moral imperative, was, in other words, primarily a “current of thought.” The moral basis for legitimate political power and for individual and group responses to political power was ultimately reduced to being a socially — not individually —

determined judgment as to what was right and proper. In traditional times, both in Vietnam and in China, “just cause” sentiments were broadcast by whatever means were available to the literati. “Ordinary conversation, letters, poetry, and even ballads and decorative scrolls” served as media of (*chính nghĩa*) messages [Eastman 1967: 19].

Examples of this spreading of “just cause” sentiments through skilled indirection, or the generation of second meanings that must be produced through the active participation of the recipient, extend into the twentieth century. I will now present several examples to demonstrate the extreme subtlety with which such messages may be transmitted in Vietnam, the extreme sensitivity with which Vietnamese detect, them and the strong emotional reactions they can provoke in both the originators and recipients and in observers as well.

Several anecdotes concerning Nguyen Van Tam, an unpopular Prime Minister in the latter days of French rule, illustrate the way Vietnamese continued to play upon words as a vehicle for social influence. These particular stories may well be apocryphal, but since they circulated among and were accepted by a Vietnamese audience, they are no less valuable as examples.

In one of these stories, during a visit by Prime Minister Tam to southern Vietnam (then known as Cochinchina), a group of notables presented him with a beautifully inscribed gold lamé scroll to celebrate the coming of Tet. Inscribed upon the scroll were four Chinese characters that could be understood to mean something like “all the world experiences nostalgia” (in Sino-Vietnamese: *Hồ Hải Qui Tâm*). The alert and well-read observer, however, might have recognized an allusion to a statement by an ancient Vietnamese Zen master: “Hồ Hải Tích Ác Đồng Quy Vu Tâm.” In its original context, this saying might be translated to mean something like “all the crimes in the world can be traced back to our own hearts.” But the word for “heart” (*tâm*) was homophonous with the Prime Minister’s name. So, for those in on the joke, the scroll could be read as “all the crimes in the world can be traced back to Mr. Tam.” This delicious piece of vituperation was rendered all the more enjoyable (and effective!) because the Prime Minister himself failed to perceive the joke. He had, people said, already hung the scroll and expressed his appreciation of it before some explained to him that he had been insulted [Toan Anh 1972: 85].

On another occasion, Prime Minister Tam traveled to northern Vietnam and was greeted on his tour by a huge banner that read “*Đại Điểm Quần Thần*.” Mr. Tam and many other people understood this banner to signify praise for himself as one who was “outstanding among all officials.”

But “*đại điểm*,” which could literally be understood as “great point” or “outstanding feature,” was a Sino-Vietnamese expression. A straightforward translation of this term into vernacular Vietnamese would be “*chấm to*.” If one then took one more step and used what might be called a Vietnamese version of pig Latin, this phrase could be inverted (*nói lái*) to become “*chó tâm*.” Since “*chó*” means “dog” and “*tâm*” was the Prime Minister’s name, this could then mean “the dog Tam.” Similarly, the remaining two words could be translated into vernacular Vietnamese as “*bầy tôi*,” which inverts to become “*bồi tây*.” “*Bồi*” means “boy” or “houseboy.” “*Tây*” means “west” and is often used to refer to the French. Thus, while

outwardly heaping effusive praise upon the Prime Minister and watching him glow with self-satisfaction, these northern wits thrilled to the sight of this powerful official sitting beneath a banner which they read as “Tam is a dog who serves the French” [*loc. cit.*].

Another variation of such indirect, symbolic aggression can be found in a short story by Nam Cao, one of Vietnam’s premier writers of fiction, best known as the author of “Chi Pheo.” In the early 1940s he wrote a short story entitled “Taking Revenge” (“Rủi Hòn”). In this tale, a village chief grossly exploited a poor young married couple trying to get a birth certificate for their new-born child. The old rascal then squandered the money he squeezed from them by inviting some village notables to a bout of eating and drinking. A few days later an anonymous written exposé (*về*) appeared on the door of the village hall.

The exposé concluded:

One woman gave birth and several oafs had their bellies filled.  
If anyone’s going back, take along a sheaf of leaves;  
If Village Chief Nhung lacks one, let him use it.  
Village Chief Nhung! Oh, Village Chief Nhung!  
We thought you a “mister,” and you turn out to be an eater of filth.  
[Nam Cao 1972: 66–67].

“In just three or four days,” we are told, “these verses had traveled by word of mouth to every wench in the village. Village Chief Nhung paled.”

Village Chief Nhung was naturally mortified and enraged. He mistakenly attributed the authorship of the exposé to the village schoolteacher. The two became involved in a feud that rocked the village and entailed lawsuits and counter-suits. In the end Village Chief Nhung lost, and it was a bitter defeat. He didn’t dare show his face in the village. His shrewd opponent worked behind the scenes to get a nephew of his installed as the new village chief.

On the day when his nephew’s promotion was being celebrated, [the schoolteacher] thought of an extraordinarily cruel ploy. He sent someone to the former village chief bearing a branch of areca nuts and an invitation to join the celebration feast.

Naturally the former village chief understood at once. His face turned red. He choked until he was speechless. Not until after [the bearer of the invitation] had departed was he able to utter a single word. Then he cursed obscenely. He gritted his teeth and continued to shout obscenities. His eyes blazed. Spittle appeared at the corner of his mouth. He shook with anger. He slumped across his bed like a felled tree. He was livid with rage. His eyes were hot with tears. [*ibid.*: 70–71]

The schoolteacher’s “extraordinarily cruel ploy” had denied the former village chief any opportunity of retaining the least vestige of face in the village. But what made this so cruel? A branch of areca containing a cluster of nuts was a familiar symbol of ritual hospitality in Vietnam. On the surface, it was a very generous and gracious gesture to send the former village chief a branch of areca nuts and to invite him to the celebration feast of his successor. But as former Village Chief Nhung (and all Vietnamese readers of the story!) so readily perceived, the intended symbolism, the second meaning of the gesture, lay not in the nuts but

in the leaves.

First of all, an oblique reference was being made to the original exposé: “take along a sheaf of leaves; if Village Chief Nhung lacks one, let him use it.” This line was a metaphorical reference to the village chief’s shame. The exposé stripped him of the cloak of propriety that normally permitted him to exist in the village in the comfortable “civil inattention” of his fellow villagers [Goffman 1963: 84]. The offer of leaves to attend the celebration symbolized his vulnerability and reminded him that metaphorically speaking the eyes of the village were upon his social nakedness, staring in disapproval. No Vietnamese could have kept from reeling under such a blow.

By 1944–45, literary production in Vietnam fell off dramatically due to extreme shortages of food, newsprint, ink, and just about everything else. There was some complex, relatively high quality literature, especially poetry, produced in the southern half of the country between 1955 and 1975, and in the years of 1956–57 in the north a body of literature with subversive second meanings appeared in Hanoi. But from 1957 in the north and 1975 in the south socialist realism achieved almost total domination of published literature. Occasional dissident writings appeared that, although sometimes powerful, lacked the artful indirection of earlier writing. They were rather direct in their attack. There were also a few satirical verses appearing that were amusing to disaffected literati but scarcely qualify as sophisticated literary statements; what I have seen of these I would call clever doggerel.

But then, in the years immediately following the inauguration of the official policy of renovation in late 1986, an astonishing surge of vital literature appeared almost overnight. The years of 1987, 1988, and 1989 were productive of more really first-rate literature than Vietnam had seen in years. A new generation of writers leapt to the forefront of the Vietnamese literary scene as Nguyen Huy Thiep, Ho Anh Thai, Pham Thi Hoai, Duong Thu Huong, Bao Ninh and other writers, most of whom were born between 1945 and 1960, infused Vietnamese fiction with excitement and fresh perspectives.

One of the first, one of the most controversial, and quite possibly the best of these writers was Nguyen Huy Thiep. Peter Zinoman [1994] has explicated some of the ways in which Thiep exploited ambiguity and used double meanings with great creativity, pushing reader participation to its limits, impelling his audience to transform (re-construct) a confused tale set in the early nineteenth century, roughly the time when Ho Xuan Huong and Madam Thanh Quan District were alive, into a trenchant critique of contemporary Vietnamese society and politics.

The story “Fired Gold” (“Vàng Lửa”), published in 1987, is cunningly complex in its narrative structure. It employs multiple narrative voices, with inconsistencies between them that subvert the authority of each voice as a reliable witness and reporter. Complex and distinctly unorthodox views of Emperor Gia Long are presented, not in the narrator’s voice of the author but through the diary of a European advisor. Then, to add to the complexity, Thiep offers his audience three different, equally plausible (or implausible) endings, “so that each reader can select the one which he or she feels is most suitable” [Nguyen Huy Thiep 1994: 24].



For our purposes, it is valuable to take note of Zinoman's demonstration of how Nguyen Huy Thiep was able in one sentence to send his readers hurtling back and forth between the early nineteenth and late twentieth century. That sentence reads: "It (Europe) begins to understand that the beauty and glory of a people are based neither on war or revolution nor on ideologists or emperors" [*ibid.*: 25; Zinoman 1994: 40]. In Zinoman's words:

Vietnamese who have lived under the Hanoi regime will immediately recognize that the phrase "beauty and glory of a people" (*vẻ đẹp và vinh quang một dân tộc*) comes directly from a familiar style of official rhetoric typically found in communist party speeches, campaigns or slogans. The insertion of the stylized language of the modern state into this early nineteenth century scene will have an effect on the reader analogous to that produced if a temperance advocate in a film on American prohibition earnestly urged a bootlegger to "just say no." The focus, in other words, will be immediately reoriented toward the present day. [Zinoman 1994: 40–41]

In another apposite passage, Zinoman unearths the artful way in which the author reactivates the tension between past and present as opposing candidates for referents of the entire text in what is literally the — apparently quite innocent — very last word in the story: *lăng*. The final two sentences of the text may be read as "the Nguyen Dynasty set up by King Gia Long was a horrific dynasty. Please pay attention, dear readers, for this dynasty left many *lăng*."

The significance of this ending for the alert reader is, again in Zinoman's words, that:

In Vietnamese, the word *lăng* connotes two related entities. It can mean a royal tomb such as the dozen-odd royal tombs built by the Nguyen monarchs which today dot the landscape [around] Hue, the old royal capital. Or *lăng* can mean mausoleum, in the specific sense of the somber architectural monuments which house the corpses of Lenin, Mao, and Ho Chi Minh. While the preceding sentence signifies that the *lăng* being referred to is of the nineteenth century variety, the word's modern connotation, and thus the sentence's implicit attack on modern "depraved" *lăng* builders, cannot be avoided.

Much of the work of Nguyen Huy Thiep repays close reading and rereading. As in the poems of Ho Xuan Huong, there are various kinds of "ghosts" in Thiep's writing, and one will eventually discover many more blanks to be filled in than may be apparent at first or even second reading. Like Madam Thanh Quan District, Thiep only implies, but never quite makes explicit, his "very private feelings." Exactly what his writing means, Thiep would probably argue, is up to his readers. His job, his primary responsibility, is only to write well, to write in a way that will engage his readers [Jamieson 1995].

Another recent example of a complex web of indirect meanings in Vietnamese fiction comes from a novel written by Ho Anh Thai in 1988 which was published in English language translation in 2000. This novel, *The Women on the Island* (*Đàn Bà Trên Đảo*), demonstrates the continuing cultural relevance of several aspects of the discussion to this point, involving both content and style. At the very outset of the novel, in what Wayne Karlin calls in his "Introduction" to the English-language edition [Karlin 2000: xi] "a brilliant coda for the novel," Ho Anh Thai orients his readers for what will follow.

Three members of a small guerrilla band fighting the French are executed by their commander for raping a young woman. The remaining guerrillas “continued to suffer hunger and cold, and tried desperately to stifle the normal sexual desires of young men” [Ho Anh Thai 2000: 4]. Soon thereafter, the band encountered an old man on his way to pick bamboo shoots, carrying a large bag, which he offered to them as he passed. When one of them looked inside the bag, he shouted “Betrayed! Betrayed!”

The bag contained two jackfruit and a bamboo shoot. “They signify the male organ, sir,” the man explained to his commander.

It is said that the roar that burst from [the commander’s] throat echoed among the trees and shook their branches. He ordered his men to chase down the old man. [And they soon] caught him . . . . Without a word, [the commander] drew his sword and struck through the old man’s neck as easily as if he were slashing at the wind. [*ibid.*: 5]

The bamboo shoot and the two jackfruit were tossed down a bank. Yet the men’s frustration and anger needed even further outlet.

Boiling with anger and humiliation, pushed by their own stifled, thwarted desires, the men rushed upon the fruit and the bamboo and chopped and tore into them, smashing them, slicing open the jackfruit and tearing out its seeds, which were strewn all over the lakeshore like coins. [*ibid.*: 5]

But these scattered jackfruit seeds germinated and grew to form a forest that, like the story about them, served as a background to the contemporary social drama that constitutes the rest of the novel.

Had these young soldiers ever heard the poem about the jackfruit by Ho Xuan Huong? Was the bamboo shoot a reminder of “the stake” to be driven into it/her? Did the old man intend to insult them, or was this an accidental encounter turned to tragedy by the guerrillas’ hypersensitivity and frustration? Did they, like Village Chief Nhung, jump to a hasty conclusion? The author leaves readers to make up their own minds about such questions. They can fill in the blanks according to their own experience and preferences. But in the act of doing so, a trail of associations will have been opened that will float outward throughout the entire novel, echoing the concerns raised by many poems translated and discussed in the previous section. Normal sexual desires and the cultural imperative to have children (bear fruit) are pitted against the demands of war and duty, further complicated by the occasional caprice and pettiness, or the excessive idealism, of those in authority.

As Karlin [2000: x] observes:

Sexuality becomes in the novel a symbol of all the messy complications of the human personality, the human needs which can’t be conveniently defined, controlled, subordinated, simplified to a pure ideal, whether that ideal be revolution, war, social justice, or business success.

Much in this novel echoes with the anguish of the royal concubine, with the sorrow and sacrifice of the warrior’s wife, with the mix of bemusement and anger with which Ho Xuan

Huong confronted the hypocritical moralizing around her, with Madam Thanh Quan District's muted disenchantment. It seems that many characters in many stories published in Vietnam in the past 15 or 20 years, like Ho Xuan Huong's "The Monk Driven Out of the Village," were "bound for Paradise," but "met a contrary wind, and went awry." They are now collectively engaged in the process of untangling their lines and charting a new course.

### Vietnamese Society Talking about Itself

*We human beings are all and always sophisticated, capable of laughter at our own institutions, inventing our lives collectively as we go along.*

Victor Turner [quoted in Ashley 1990]

Our glimpse at the writings of Ho Xuan Huong and Madam Thanh Quan District has demonstrated the importance of audience participation in the construction of meaning in Vietnam two hundred years ago, and in poetry. Our glimpse of the writings of Nguyen Huy Thiep and Ho Anh Thai has demonstrated its continuing importance in the current period, and in fiction. In this concluding section I hope to indicate how this kind of dialogic communication may have an importance in Vietnamese society that extends far beyond an artistic elite, far beyond literature. The ways Vietnamese talk and write to and about each other may be highly significant. To different degrees and in a variety of ways all of society might be considered to be involved in current efforts to renovate Vietnam to a greater extent than most of our models for looking at such things would suggest.

Throughout society people not infrequently resort to playful language and carefully contrived ambiguity. They routinely engage in veiled social commentary that relies on second meanings. They actively monitor, filter, select, and (re)interpret the messages they receive. However restrained and indirect their communication may be, it is never passive and rarely careless. If everything written, read, uttered, heard, is a potential contribution to or influence upon those currents of thought that shape social attitudes and behaviors — "the balanced opinions professed on the things that matter by the persons who count in the eyes of the community as a whole" — then the current process of renovation may be viewed as every bit as socially determined as the "just cause" was thought to be in earlier centuries. Larger meanings are produced by the accretion of many small creative acts as Vietnamese use language in special ways within specific contexts, jointly constructing meta-messages.

One example of how the suppleness of the Vietnamese language is used by ordinary people to convey a second meaning that serves as social commentary comes from the fledgling airline industry in pre-renovation Vietnam (and is not to be understood to apply to much-improved Vietnam Airlines as it exists today).

The sole airline, owned and operated by the socialist state, was a source of pride and also a frequent source of chagrin to both the state and the people. This was understood to be a "civil" (*dân sự*) air service, in contrast to the "military" (*quân sự*) one. "*Sự*" means "affair, event, thing, matter, business." "*Dân*" means "people" and "*quân*" means "military." But

there is another way to say “civil” or “military” in this sense. Instead of using “*sư*” as the suffix in these compound words, one may use the morpheme “*dụng*.” “*Dụng*” means “to use.” Thus “*dân dụng*” can be understood as “for use by civilians,” or “use by the people.”

The compound word “*dân dụng*” conveys the idea that this air service was being provided to serve “the people,” or even “ordinary people.” This would make it a desirable characterization from the perspective of the socialist state. Air travel — like elementary education and basic health care — was being provided to the people by a socialist state responsive to their needs.

Some of the ordinary people, however, preferred to use the term “*dân dụng*” for another reason. There were not many flights scheduled, and demand for seats often far exceeded the supply. It was not uncommon for “ordinary people” to make reservations, get their ticket, make arrangements to be met or make appointments at their destination, and then to be “bumped” at the last minute, usually by some high-ranking cadre or civil servant, or by someone with more powerful connections.

This practice led some people to interpret (and to use ironically) the word “*dân dụng*” as if it were the word “*dân rụng*.” “*Dụng*” and “*rụng*” are — at least in the northern dialect — homonyms. But while “*dụng*” means “to use,” “*rụng*” means “to fall” or “to drop” and is often used in reference to ripe fruit or dead leaves falling from a tree. Thus the term for “civil” (*dân dụng*) aviation, originally understood as something like “airline to be used by the people,” came to be understood by some as “the airline that sheds ordinary people” (*dân rụng*).

By such verbal devices did people put extravagant claims of the state in brackets, expressing (with the active collaboration of their interlocutors) their displeasure and negative evaluations. Aural puns and other such clever wordplay are highly valued by the Vietnamese, who find them vastly enjoyable. So one often suspects that people might make such puns merely to demonstrate how clever they are and that others might repeat them merely to make themselves interesting conversationalists. But mere display of wit, or aspiration to be seen as a raconteur, is only one hand clapping. To have effect, there must be another hand moving toward it.

For wordplay or significant omission of meaning to be effective, there must be some shared prior awareness in the mind of both the speaker and his or her audience of some condition, state, or attribute — in the above case, similar evaluations of the airline, and perhaps some shared resentment arising from their interpretation of the cause of displeasure. A pun like this could resonate with other resentments that arose from situations involving “cronyism” or “bureaucratic” attitudes, or instances of inequity based upon relative power and influence. When the audience for such an aural pun provides the second meaning as the speaker intended, the total meaning of the pun is not only completed, it is in some sense tacitly but powerfully confirmed.

When small acts like this spread throughout a group, various larger messages flow into the “current of thought.” For example, the state is unfair, or society is still inequitable, or managers and staff of state-owned enterprises are incompetent, or the system is not working the

way it is supposed to. Sometimes many flow together to significant effect, producing a meta-message that “something has got to change.” While in individual instances such behavior may be seen as “weapons of the weak,” when there are a number of such instances and they are repeated over and over, they flow into each other to become a stream of that “elusive and tenacious . . . body of opinion” to which Paul Mus called our attention. It is intangible precisely because it is unspoken, because its punch lies in its “second meaning” that is implicit until the active collaboration of the audience provides it. Thus, a sufficient number of small gestures can combine to constitute a powerful force in society.

Poetry is still relatively important in Vietnam, but it is not at all the dominant expressive mechanism it was for many centuries and well into the twentieth century. The role once played by poetry in Vietnam is now shared with novels, television programs, films, newspapers, magazines, journals, popular songs, jokes that circulate by word of mouth, plays, paintings, sculpture, even certain aspects of architecture and advertising. All those who, like poets and novelists, create cultural products, very broadly defined, might collectively exert more influence on the course of events in Vietnam than can legislators or government planners.

But I do not want to overly privilege the role of articulate urban elites who are sometimes imagined to stand apart from both “officialdom” and “the masses.” The phenomenon under consideration seems to be a socially diffuse, temporally extensive, and highly interactive process in which all of society is somehow implicated. Multiple discourses, or what Bakhtin [1981] called “dialects,” interpenetrate each other constantly.

Barbara Babcock was writing about Virginia Woolf and drawing on prior texts in phenomenological criticism when she wrote that

Reflexivity creates “places of indeterminacy” — gaps or holes in the text — which the reader must fill in with his own imagination and which thus confuse the distinction between actor and audience, between writer and reader. [Babcock 1990: 103–104]

Victor Turner, in a letter to Babcock responding to this approach she was taking, spoke to her of “the mutual involvement of author and reader” and of a recurring mode of “intersubjective reflexivity” that entered social life. But it seems that something like this “confused distinction” and “mutual involvement” between author and reader, between speaker and audience, characterizes a good deal of significant social intercourse in Vietnam.

Many if not most (perhaps all?) Vietnamese incorporate several different discourses into their conceptual and communicational repertoires, agilely and often effortlessly shifting back and forth among them, sometimes even recombining them (with or without irony) as they adapt to different contexts. This condition, I would suggest, is at least to some extent true of the most senior party and government officials and of the humblest members of society. No one is completely exempt. And this can sometimes lead to confusion or skepticism even among Vietnamese themselves, who take words very seriously but seldom at face value. One Vietnamese recently told me: “you seem to be learning a lot about how people talk. Please don’t make the mistake of believing that this lets you know what they really think.”

Even explicitly “scientific” papers quite often resort to intentional ambiguity when they must touch upon sensitive or controversial or dangerous topics. Once a senior Vietnamese scientist with whom I was acquainted asked my help in contriving an English-language translation of a scientific report that would preserve the ambiguity in the original Vietnamese text. The act of translation seemed to be forcing him to reveal more clearly exactly what he was saying, and this was very distressing to him.

One might go so far as to say (or hypothesize) that ambiguity is an integral part of the total system, perhaps an essential mechanism through which what sometimes seems to be a very dogmatic and very authoritarian government and what sometimes seems to be a virtually ungovernable citizenry continue to find sufficient means of mutual accommodation to keep themselves — and each other — going.

Article 5 of the 1992 Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam states that each of Vietnam’s 54 officially recognized ethnic groups has the right to “promote its fine customs, habits, traditions, and culture.” A few pages later, Article 30 states that “superstitions and harmful customs are to be eliminated.” What is not explicitly stated is who shall decide what is “superstitious” or “harmful” and what is “fine,” nor by what or whose criteria such decisions shall be made. So in the end, each government agency, each ethnic group, every province, district, and commune administration, will fill in these blanks according to their own concrete conditions, needs and perspectives, the various pressures to which they are subjected, and bureaucratic convenience. Conflicting views and interpretations will be to some degree negotiated dialogically in an on-going process of mutual adjustment. And in the villages ethnic minority people will exercise their ingenuity to keep doing what is important to them while abandoning that which is less important.

In this and many other domains of social life that the government seeks to regulate, some injunctions will be complied with, some reinterpreted, and some quietly ignored. Often (everywhere in Vietnam, including in Hanoi itself), a campaign to change some behavior or practice will be vigorously enforced with great fanfare for a few weeks or months and then people will gradually revert to their former habits while state representatives studiously ignore them. Efforts to clear the sidewalks of Hanoi from encroachment by households and businesses and attempts to enforce traffic laws (such as getting vehicles to stop when the light turns red), are obvious examples.

Even in the highest reaches of state power, the nature of the Vietnamese language and the ways Vietnamese have become accustomed to using it are not irrelevant. For more than 20 years now a series of decisions has transferred effective control of productive resources out of state control and back to individual farm households. Many of these steps were vigorously debated at the highest levels, and draft documents were written and rewritten many times as part of a laborious process of negotiation. Sometimes, or so I have been told by well-informed sources, the necessary extent of consensus could be attained only by the deliberate use of very ambiguous wording that left carefully contrived blanks of meaning that each of several factions could fill in with a meaning acceptable to it. In one document that resulted in much more

power for households, households were never mentioned; but semantic space was carefully left so that households could be included in the way some people understood the document. Reformers, aligned with a growing current of thought that impelled them to act and reinforced their actions, filled in the blank to transform the rural landscape and economy.

By layering meanings, by playing on words, by not just what they say but also by what they omit and then encourage or allow their audiences to provide, all sorts of articulate Vietnamese men and women can invite other people to join with them in the collaborative (re)construction of texts and images that can achieve some collective (re)description and (re)imagination of Vietnam, past, present, and future, promoting certain kinds of change and inhibiting others. But they can do this successfully only to the extent that their art, or whatever sort of cultural material they produce, resonates with the experience and sensibilities of their audience, clarifying and intensifying existing feelings and focusing them on things that matter in society, things like politics and gender relations and many other things as well.

Like some of the poems and stories presented above, policies and regulations are also often subject to multiple interpretations as they are issued and implemented. Their meanings will vary and often change as different groups participate in creating a number of more or less diverse readings, each in light of their own unique matrix of life. Various possibilities inherent in the texts are emphasized or discarded in ways that facilitate certain intentions and actions and not others. Disparate interpretations are negotiated, alternative understandings are often mediated, sometimes ignored, sometimes further contested.

In his careful study of differentiation in and among Black Thai villages in the northwestern uplands of Vietnam, Thomas Sikor documents how “discrepancy between national policy and village practice” led to a “discrepancy between national policy and the local trajectory of decollectivization.” These discrepancies, he observes, were in effect the outcome(s) of “negotiations between the state and villages. The provincial and district state authorities mediated the negotiations between the state and villagers” [Sikor 1999: 337–338].

This is a crucial and often undervalued dimension of the process by which “renovation” and its various elements came into being and have steadily evolved. Vietnamese society will continue to be (re)imagined and transformed through a process of communication and interaction in which the mutual and collaborative (re)construction of not just poems and novels, but also moral standards and policies on land and business, gender relations, and a wide range of other issues are (re)articulated and continuously modified through a process of continuous and reciprocal reinterpretation.

In ending, I essentially return to the questions with which I began: If members of societies (cultures, sub-cultures) actively create and fill in blanks in their communication with each other, how extensive are these practices, and why are such semantic holes built in? In what ways and to what extent do societies differ in the nature of such mutual involvement? On what occasions and to what effect do different groups within a society engage in such activity?

I have provided some examples and made some preliminary and perhaps provocative comments on Vietnamese practices. But this examination is, like its subject matter,

incomplete. I hope that readers can participate in its completion by providing more examples from their own experience and in refining and extending (or correcting) the argument. Scholarship — like poetry and like social change — works best as an on-going, interactive process of collaboration.

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(Note: All translations not otherwise attributed are my own–NLJ)

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