

The Absent Father: A Vietnamese Folktale and Its French Shadows

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INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses some variants of a Vietnamese folktale that we shall generically call “The Shadow of the Absent Father”. The Emperor Le Thanh Tong first refers to the story in a poem written during the fifteenth century. The earliest detailed record of the tale, “The Story of the Woman from Nam Xuong”ⁱ by Nguyen Du (1496-1527)ⁱⁱ, is to be found in the sixteenth century volume *Truyen Ky Man Luc* (A Casually Recorded Collection of Popular Tales)ⁱⁱⁱ. There are many French language versions of the tale in collections of Vietnamese legends made throughout the twentieth century.^{iv}

We will focus here on two by the scholar and diplomat Pham Duy Khiem (1908-1974), which are included in his books *Légendes des terres sereines* (Legends from Serene Lands, 1942)^v and *La jeune femme de Nam Xuong* (The Young Woman from Nam Xuong, 1944)^{vi} respectively. They are told in very different ways. I will argue that “The Shadow and the Absent Man”, from the earlier volume, is more consistent in style and content with Khiem’s other writing. The latter, very traditional version, “The Young Woman from Nam Xuong”, represents a way of telling the tale that is alien to his style and outlook, thus leading it to be eventually excluded from the canon of Khiem’s work. I will also suggest that the story bears some of the dynamics of his own family experience.

THE ORIGINS OF THE TALE

In chapter 3 of his anthology, *Les Chefs d’oeuvre de la Littérature Vietnamiennne* (Major Works of Vietnamese Literature, 1966)^{vii}, Duong Dinh Khue introduces the political and cultural achievements of the Emperor Le Thanh Tong (1460-1497) and his literary circle of 28 poets, the Tao-Dan (The Altar of Belle-lettres). Their work has come down to us in the anthology *Hong Dong quoc-am thi-tap* (Collected Poetry of the Hong Duc Period), which contains over 300 poems and probably dates from the last two years of the Emperor’s rule.^{viii} Maurice Durand and Nguyen Tran Huan, authors of another survey of Vietnamese literature, agree with Duong that perhaps the most outstanding poems in the collection are the two eight-line verse epitaphs written by the Emperor himself (numbers 75 and 76), dealing with the lady Thiet, a young woman from Nam Xuong.^{ix} The second of these poems has been translated into English by Nguyen Nam as follows:

At the bank of the rapids rise curls of incense smoke
This shrine is probably dedicated to Truong’s wife.
Although confused by the lamp, do not listen to the words of the child;
[Because doing so would] bring her ill luck, even plunging her downward into the water
palace.
Since the sun and the moon witnessed her loyalty,
Was there any need to set up an altar to clear her of the unjust charge of unfaithfulness?
Passing by this place, I learn about the origin of the tragedy,
And reproach Truong’s blind jealousy.^x

Both surveys provide an outline of the story that lies behind this poem. Duong’s account is as follows:

She was called Vu-thi-Thiet and her husband was Truong-Sinh; they loved each other most tenderly. They had scarcely been married a year when he was called up for military service, to fight against Champa. She was already pregnant, and a few days after her husband's departure, she gave birth to a son whom she named Dan.^{xi}

Three years later, Truong returned home. The pair was overjoyed to see each other. Then, while she went to work in the fields, he stayed home with the child.

'Come, my son, climb up on your father's back. Daddy can serve you as a horse. Would you like that?'

'Are you my daddy too? How do you know how to speak? You don't look like my other daddy at all; he never says anything.'

Astonished. Truong demanded that the boy explain himself. The child replied: 'When you were not here, my father regularly came at night. He walked when my mother walked, and he sat down when my mother sat down. But he never kissed me.'

Being by nature an extraordinarily jealous man, Truong immediately made a dreadful scene, abusing his wife for her infidelity to him, without revealing the source of his suspicions. She tried in vain to justify herself, and the neighbours and her parents too defended her in vain. Truong remained convinced that she had wronged him.

Then Vu-thi went to the bank of the Hoang-Giang and took her last breaths.

'My innocence has not been recognised; the only way I can justify myself is by dying. May the fishes devour me if I am guilty!'^{xii}

And she threw herself into the river.

Night came. Truong-Sinh rested with his son in the cottage. He lit the lamp.

'Oh look, my other father has returned,' the child immediately cried out.

'Oh?'

'Over there,' the infant replied, pointing to Truong's shadow on the wall.

The mystery had been clarified: During the absence of her husband, Vu-thi used to point to the shadow on the wall to calm the child's tears as he demanded his father.

Realising his fatal error too late, Truong-Sinh had prayers recited in memory of his wife. Then, (according to the legend), Vu-thi, having perished innocently, became a spirit which manifested herself to the inhabitants of the village through supernatural phenomena. A temple dedicated to her veneration was immediately built at the place where she had thrown herself into the river. (Duong Dinh Khue, pp. 64-65)

Duong gives no source for his version of the tale. The plot is similar to many other accounts, although Duong has drastically shortened the rest of the story following the words "according to the legend" in the last paragraph. He has also added his own dialogue throughout. Let us now turn to Khiem and his two versions of the story of "The Shadow and the Absent Father".

PHAM DUY KHIEM

Pham Duy Khiem was born in Hanoi, Vietnam, on April 24, 1908, the oldest son of Pham Duy Ton and Nguyen Thi Hoa. His father was a writer of (often bawdy) short stories, a qualified interpreter between French and Vietnamese, a teacher in the radical Association for

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Mutual Education (Hoi Tri Ti) school, and a social critic. His books include *Buc minh* (Fretfulness, 1914), *Song chet mac bay* (Let It Be, 1918), *Con nguoi So Khanh* (Unfaithful Lover, 1919) and *Nuoc doi lam noi* (Complicated Life, 1919). Ton is reputed to have been one of the first Vietnamese to cut his hair and to wear western clothes. He died of tuberculosis on February 25, 1924, aged forty-three, leaving his family heavily burdened by debt.^{xiii}

Pham Duy Khiem received what was undoubtedly “the best French education that could be had at the time,” (Emerson, 2014, para. 7). studying for the classical *baccalauréat* under a residential scholarship at the Lycée Albert Sarraut in Hanoi, before going on to the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris. He was the first Vietnamese student to study at each of these two schools. Khiem was also the first Vietnamese to enter the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure and completed his *agrégation de grammaire* in 1935, focusing on classical Greek, Latin and French language and literatures. Returning to Vietnam, he taught Latin, Greek and French at his old school. At the beginning of the Second World War, he volunteered for service in the French army, the only Vietnamese without French citizenship to do so, eventually becoming an Infantry Officer. He returned to Vietnam in 1941, taught private students, and began to devote himself to a writing career. He described his military experiences in the book *De Hanoi à La Courtine*^{xiv} and in a second volume *De La Courtine à Vichy*, which, although finished in 1942, was never published. He published a collection of various newspaper articles, *Mélanges*.^{xv} He also completed the two collections of Vietnamese legends: *Légendes des terres sereines* (printed three times between 1942 and 1943), which won the Prix d’Indochine, and *La jeune femme de Nam Xuong* (February 1944). These two books were later republished together in the one volume in Paris in 1951 under the title of *Légendes des terres sereines*. Three stories were omitted from this book, including “The Young Woman from Nam Xuong”. The single volume has been republished many times since then and has also been translated into English and German.^{xvi}

Pham’s long period of literary activity during the 1940s was combined with political neutrality. He sided neither with the traditionalist Emperor Bao Dai nor with the communist Ho Chi Minh. After the Geneva accords were signed in 1954, Pham joined the conservative Ngo Dinh Diem regime – serving as as Secretary of State to the Presidential Council. Five months later, in 1955, he was appointed Chargé d’Affaires and then High Commissioner (Ambassador) to France from the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). The year 1957 was a momentous one for him. He published a novel under the pseudonym of Nam Kim, based on the love of a Vietnamese normalien and a French woman, *Nam et Sylvie*. The novel was awarded the Prix Louis Barthou by the Académie Française. On November 5, 1957, he received the degree of *Docteur honoris causa* from the Université de Toulouse. On November 16, 1957, he was elected Grand officier de la Légion d’honneur, in tribute to his efforts to uphold French values. However, he was also dismissed that same year from his diplomatic post because of his forceful protests at the corruptness of the Diem regime. He had been offered a second term of duty as ambassador to UNESCO, and later to Senegal, both of which he refused. Emerson (2014) also notes that other factors in his dismissal may have been the mention of an abortion in *Nam et Sylvie*, his dislike of Madame Nhu, and his having accepted the Légion d’honneur award without first asking permission from the South Vietnamese government. Khiem’s degree qualified French citizens, but not non-citizens, to teach in schools in France. He refused to take French citizenship. Presumably not in a position to return to Vietnam, although he did visit briefly in 1968 (Emerson, 2014), he subsequently worked in a series of menial, low paying positions in France, moving from school to school and sinking ever more deeply into depression. Eventually Pham Duy Khiem apparently committed suicide, drowning in a shallow pond behind his house at Montreuil-le-Henri, Sarthe, on December 2, 1974.

THE SHADOW AND THE ABSENT MAN

Khiem wrote two versions of the “Shadow of the Absent Father” folktale. The original edition of *Légendes des terres sereines*, published in 1942, contains a short version entitled “L’ombre et l’absent” (The Shadow and the Absent Man).^{xvii} *La jeune femme de Nam Xuong* (The Young Woman from Nam Xuong), published 2 years later, contains the longer and more traditional version of the tale.^{xviii}

In an “Avant-Propos” to *La jeune femme de Nam Xuong*, Khiem writes: “If you would like to know how I have used my sources, nothing is simpler: none of my legends is unedited: most of them have been published in French, some of them a number of times in various collections” (page xi). They were common property among aspiring writers at the time; he rewrote them as literature rather than collecting them from oral sources as folklore.

The second preface to the same volume tells the “Histoire d’une Légende” (The History of a Folktale), of “The Shadow and the Absent Man” in fact. After he was demobilised in 1940, Khiem was sent to Marseille to wait to be repatriated to Indochina. Towards the end of the year, boredom began to weigh heavily on him and, after several attempts to occupy himself, he decided to return to “an old project”: to write in French a collection of Vietnamese legends (p.3). But he quickly found out that there were no books to which he might refer and attempts to gain information from compatriotes proved futile. He was forced, therefore:

to search into my distant memories. It was then that, among various other images, several remnants of a beautiful tale began to rise to the surface, one I had heard some twenty to twenty-five years previously. But despite all my efforts, the details did not offer themselves to me. No student could help me, some had only vague memories, others were even poorer than I was. However I recalled that it concerned a shadow, the shadow of a woman on a wall ... Her husband was absent, she told her child that the shadow was his father ... The man returned, misunderstood something the child told him and believed that his wife had been unfaithful to him ...
(p. 5)

Khiem notes that he had now found, across the years, the essential material for a tale. Again he was tempted to delay writing, in the belief that what he had was far from sufficient to create a whole story. Rather, what he needed to do now was to wait until his return to Indochina to research Vietnamese texts and decide on the most authoritative sources. He would then: “*translate* the folktales, as faithfully as possible, comment on them when necessary (I was far from thinking that I would ever tell them in my own way, adding details I had personally invented)”(p. 5). However, the tale would not let him go.

He began with the woman’s idea to tell the child that her shadow on the wall was his father. To make this seem natural, Khiem then invented a scene in which a storm occurred, the child suddenly woke up, the mother spontaneously spoke a few words which reassured the child, words which explained the mother’s own psychological state when she was uniquely focused on her husband (pp. 6-7).

Next, he needed to create the habit of the child’s bowing down to the shadow as if it were his father. So that practice began on the very next day, with the most ritual and touching gesture, the “lay”, much to the mother’s delight. Finally the husband returned. How to separate the mother from the child? Khiem invented the idea of making an offering to the ancestors, for which the mother needed to go to the market to buy supplies. (In Duong’s account above, she returned to the fields. Other texts wait days or years for this separation to occur.) The same idea of an offering had been the first act of Khiem’s own mother after he returned from studying in France, “calling on the ancestors to witness his return, to ask for

their assistance, to share in the happiness of the living” (p. 8). The task of structuring the major nodes of the story was almost done.

In composing the story, Khiem admitted that he ignored many aspects of the wider narrative, particularly those to do with Truong Sinh’s mother and the whole second part of the story in which the young wife is received into the underwater kingdom after her suicide (p. 9).

Two features of the completed story stood out in his mind:

The first is the image of the woman alone with her shadow: an image that is both simple and strong at the same time, very familiar, singularly evocative. And what a find, to designate the shadow as being her husband! I thought in a poetic way of how our ancestors had one day invented this magnificent symbol, while dealing with a banal idea: ‘The thought of her husband had never left her, no more than her shadow ever could ...’

(p. 10)

By day, she had her every day activities to attend to. “But at night, there is silence, rest, essential thoughts. Not a grieving solitude, sorrow and tears, but a solitude full of love, rich in thoughts of him, filled with life” (p. 11).

The second “miracle” which explained the strength of the tale is the subterranean emotional quality that is “both tragic and grand”. Had the woman not loved her husband so much, she would not have described the shadow in that way to her son. The story touches on the “blind character of destiny inherent in life and love ... destiny has chosen the heart of a woman as an instrument for its atrocious, inevitable cruelty: it is the woman’s tenderness which is fatal for her, which has destroyed the happiness of them both”.

(p. 12)

Khiem chose not to “blacken” the character of the man, believing that the tragedy would be more profound if he was a “sympathetic and dignified character”. His misunderstanding is “excusable, understandable, fatal”. He suffers and we do not condemn his silence too quickly. It is a fault they both share. The long silence is again something Khiem had invented, commenting: “it appears particularly Vietnamese to the Vietnamese, and particularly French to the French”. When she cries a single tear, “the man was present, conscious, complicit, collaborating with the patience that marks the atmosphere, equal to the one he loves, communicating with her at this rare moment.” Khiem states that, as author, he has “cruelly nourished” the man’s sorrows by adding the detail that the child was born “eight months after his departure” (pp. 11-13).

These reflections are most helpful in understanding how Khiem approached the writing of the story. His aim was to create a unified tale, with a single beginning middle and end. He was concerned to create round characters, with reasonable psychological motivations. The affection and reserve of the actors, and the nostalgia and inevitable melancholy that mark his narrative, are strong features of all of his writing. The tragedy and melancholy arise because human beings are helpless in the face of destiny, which acts in random ways. The couple love and need each other but some very simple act of misunderstanding separates them forever. Fate is a Greek goddess, not a Vietnamese one, but Pham had spent much time reading classical European texts and knew how success could easily be turned to disaster. In terms of the dynamics of Pham’s own family of origin, we can also recognise that he has implicated his own mother in the story and yet, on the other hand, there is only the shadow of his father, whom in fact he never seems to have talked about in anything he wrote. Duy Khiem seems to have been of a completely different temperament to his father, introverted rather than extroverted, but Duy Ton’s modernity, his skill in French, his dedication as a teacher, and his fondness for writing short stories, were all reflected in the son.

THE YOUNG WOMAN FROM NAM XUONG

Following his return to Vietnam, Khiem was finally able to access the indigenous sources that were previously unavailable to him, especially Nguyen Du's classical anthology, *Truyen Ky Man Luc*. The work consists of twenty tales, drawn from a mixture of Chinese popular tales and Vietnamese anecdotes and folktales. The popular tale – Chinese *ch'uan ch'i*, Vietnamese *truyen ky* – belongs to a very old tradition in China and Vietnam. Raymond Van Over in his book *Taoist Tales*, describes the popular tale as follows:

Within the literary tradition of popular fiction, a distinctive storytelling form developed during the T'ang period (A.D. 618-806) – the *ch'uan ch'i*. The *ch'uan ch'i* was a popular fiction written for the first time in the classical language. Initially it represented the transcription of the oral tale, with its own tradition and techniques, into a written language and merely tolerated by the literati as supplying a need for acceptable fiction for the masses. And while Confucianism was the philosophy and literature of the literate wealthy classes, Taoism and Buddhism with their emphasis on magical wonders and personal salvation served as the material for the *ch'uan ch'i* fiction, offering the common people their own entertainment for the first time. Hence, the *ch'uan ch'i* ... are dominated by marvellous happenings, by feats of magic, dragon lore, love stories and adventures with witches, fox demons and Taoist priest-magician-immortals.^{xix}

One of the most famous Chinese collections, *Jiandeng Xinhua* (New Tales Told beside the Trimmed Lamp) was brought to Vietnam some time before 1442 and served as a model for the *Truyen Ky Man Lac*.^{xx}

Three stories from the *Truyen Ky Man Luc* contributed to Khiem's volumes of legends. The first, "Histoire de la Femme vertueuse de Khoai Chau" (The Story of the Virtuous Woman from Khoai Chau) was the source for "Nhi Khanh ou la femme du joueur" (Nhi Khanh or the Gambler's Wife)^{xxi}. The second, "Histoire du mariage de Tu Thuc avec une fée" (The Story of Tu Thuc's Marriage to a Fairy) was presented as "Histoire du Tu Thuc" (The Story of Tu Thuc)^{xxii}. The third, "Histoire de la femme de Nam Xuong" (The Story of the Woman from Nam Xuong), was a purely Vietnamese story and served as the source for "La jeune femme de Nam Xuong"^{xxiii}.

In the "Histoire", Khiem also notes that he read *La colline des abricotiers* (The Apricot Hill) by Nguyen Tien Lang^{xxiv} and Lê Doan Vy's series of school readers, *Le livre du petit*, "books for young pupils", small volumes of legends, to which, he admits, "I owe a great deal, for more than one of 'my' legends" (p. 16).^{xxv} However, Khiem insists in the "Histoire" that his sensibility was unlike that of the other authors he read (p. 15), perhaps (we may surmise) more sensitive and refined than theirs.^{xxvi} His aim was also not the same as theirs. Although he set out to translate the old stories, he also wanted to study them, confront them, and draw out their core, the true essence of the legends – mere repetition of contemporary renditions of the tales was not enough for him (p. 16).

Khiem's story "The Young Woman of Nam Xuong" is very different from "The Shadow and the Absent Man" and provides a crucial perspective on it. In the sixteenth tale in the *Truyen ky man Luc*, Nguyen Du presents in considerable detail the features Khiem included in "The Young Woman of Nam Xuong" but omitted in the first version of the story. These are the story of Truong's mother and Vu Thi's care for the old woman until her death; the return of Truong from Champa and the particular form of his dialogue with the child – on the way to visit his mother's grave; Vu Thi's extended suffering and her lamentation before her suicide; and the story of Vu Thi's residence in the watery kingdom, her appearance firstly to a fellow villager, Phan, and then to her husband, "from the middle of the stream in a golden chariot, surrounded by other chariots, banners and umbrellas, which covered the whole river, appearing and disappearing one after the other" (see the story below). To

complete his rewriting, Khiem added a large list of other folktales drawn from Nguyen Du (with explanatory footnotes), and included lines from verses by Le Thonh Tong and Nguyen Cong Tru (1778-1858).

Surprisingly, the actual incident of the shadow on the wall merits only one small paragraph in “The Young Woman from Nam Xuong”, inserted between the lengthy descriptions of the woman’s death and her river resurrection. The paragraph carries the burden of explaining the whole story:

During her husband’s absence, Vu Thi had amused herself by showing her shadow to the child and telling him that this was his father. Truong realised that his wife was innocent, but it was now too late, unfortunately.

Vu-Thi becomes an Immortal in this second part of the story and is worthy of veneration because of her devotion to her husband and the suffering it caused her. Khiem was interested in her love but not in her supernatural status.^{xxvii} The metaphysics of the couple’s final meeting follows what he describes in the second part of his “Le Cristal d’Amour” (“Love’s Crystal”) as a traditional Vietnamese belief. “To a Vietnamese ... all love is predestined, all unions are the inescapable consequence of a debt contracted in a past life, when two human beings bind themselves to each other, they are only freeing themselves of a mutual burden.” This bond continues “beyond this ephemeral existence”, when both partners must inevitably recognise their mutual obligation to each other, if they have not already done so.^{xxviii} As a result of their supernatural meeting, Truong in the material world and Vu Thi in the immortal realm, they are finally reconciled, even if they cannot be reunited. The gap between them, despite their great love, is absolute.

The story of the “The Shadow and the Absent Man” ripened while Pham was aboard ship for two and a half months. “The Young Woman from Nam Xuong”, on the other hand, took far longer to create but remained in his eyes “a translation of the legend such as it has normally been presented to Vietnamese over several centuries”. He had tried to write it “as faithfully as possible, but it was all the same an adaptation” (p. 18).

Overall this is a very different work from that of the earlier version. It shows none of the features of his style I have described above. The story is deliberately exotic and extremely concrete in its description of people and events; the characterisation lacks psychological complexity; and there is no clear climax. It remains close to the classical legend and is not a unified contemporary work of fiction. Despite his desire to translate, or at least adapt a classical Vietnamese tale, it is also probable that this was not the sort of story that appealed to Pham as a result of his French education, nor, he suspected, to many of his more sophisticated readers in “Paris, that capital of readers of quality” (cited in Yeager, 1987, p. 205, n. 58). One can understand, therefore, why he subsequently omitted the story from the Paris 1951 edition that combined the two books of legends into one volume. Despite her prominence in the title of the 1944 collection, “The Young Woman of Nam Xuong” belonged to the past and not to the world of a man with a contemporary sensitivity.

CONCLUSION

Khiem wrote his tales in French and they were shaped above all to encourage a sympathy in French readers for the richness of Vietnamese culture. Through contrasting “The Shadow and the Absent Man” with “The Young Woman of Nam Xuong”, we can see more clearly the results of his domesticating Vietnamese legends for a foreign audience that are to be found throughout his work: the omission of difficult cultural details (including personal names), the introduction of a pathos aroused by the deliberately tragic shaping of the story, focused on a single unified incident, together with the absence of any salvific dimension that would place

the woman's sacrifice in a wider cosmological perspective. Khiem preferred his own first version as being the essential and true core of the tale.

The French scholar Thanh-Van Ton-That (2015) has asked: "Can the absent tale be replaced by its foreign (language) shadow, without betrayal and loss?" She points out that the subterfuge requires the writer to elevate one and destroy the other (pp. 235 – 247). By comparing the two stories, we can see that in writing "The Shadow and the Absent Man", Pham radically transformed the Vietnamese original by bringing it closer to Western aesthetic and cultural expectations. In this sense, then, he did destroy it. From the perspective of Translation Studies, we may further say that the Target Text he produced as "L'Ombre et L'Absent" is a particular type of a translation or not a translation at all, a paraphrase undertaken between two languages – a Target Text for which there is no Source Text.

Many shadows danced on the wall when Pham Duy Khiem wrote this small masterpiece. Beside these cross cultural and linguistic transformations, it is likely that "L'Ombre et L'Absent" gained added personal significance from Pham's own experience of the loss of his father in 1924 and the consequent burdens this placed on him as the oldest son in the family – burdens he exacerbated but also avoided by studying overseas. The absent father, literary and psychological, is mute. He does not speak in any language we can hear and is incomprehensible to his son. Ironically, Pham's suicide by drowning may be seen as his way of protesting against the absent father in his life, the larger power he could not control. In identifying with the wronged young woman, he assuaged his own anxiety, rejection and hopeful innocence, in death.

END NOTES

ⁱ Now part of Ly Nhan district, Ha Nam province

ⁱⁱ For biographical details of Nguyen Du, see Nguyen Nam: "Writing as Response and as Translation: Jiandeng and the Evolution of the Chuangi Genre in East Asia, Particularly in Vietnam", unpublished PhD thesis, Harvard University, pp. 319-320.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Truyen Ky Man Luc Giai Am*, ed. Nguyen The Nghi and Nguyen Quang Hong. Khoa Hoc Xa, Hanoi 2001. Translated into French by Nguyen Tran Huan as *Vaste recueil de légendes merveilleuses*, Gallimard, Paris 1962. I will rely on Trann Huan's French translation in this paper. Diacritics have been omitted from Vietnamese words because of technical limitations.

^{iv} Jack Yeager refers to five versions of the tale in his *Vietnamese Literature in French*, CELFAN Edition Monographs, Tilane University, New Orleans 1999, p. 16. Valerian Bayo-Rahona lists about thirty collections of Vietnamese folktales in French: "Les Recueils de Contes Populaires Vietnamiens en Occident depuis les Annees 1940", unpublished thesis, Ecole Normale Supieure de Lyon 2011, p. 7.

^v Taupin, Hanoi 1942.

^{vi} Taupin, Hanoi 1944.

^{vii} Kim Lai An-Quan, Saigon 1966.

^{viii} Pham Trong Diem and Bui Van Nguyen (eds.): *Hong Dong quoc-am thi-tap*. 2nd edn., Van Hoc, Hanoi 1982.

^{ix} Durand and Nguyen complain of "the uninspired and pedestrian nature of the poetry", although they also note that the collection "marks the beginning of specifically Vietnamese literature and contains copious examples of themes dear to the hearts of Vietnamese poets" (Durand and Nguyen: *An Introduction to Vietnamese Literature*, trans, D. M. Hawke. Columbia University Press, New York 1985, p. 69). Duong agrees with their evaluation, p. 63

^x "Writing as Response and as Translation," p. 445.

^{xi} Nguyen Nam 2005 points out that the name means "birth" but also "absurdity" and "fantasy", p. 447.

^{xii} Alice Terada adds an extra clause to this prayer: "If I have been faithful to my husband, please change me into a pearl in the river, if I have been an unfaithful wife, let the fishes eat me." *Under the Starfruit Tree*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu 1989, p. 11,

^{xiii} On Pham Duy Ton see Eric Henry: "Pham Duy and Modern Vietnamese History". *Southeast Review of Asian Studies*, vol XXVII, 2005. Henry notes that "Tran Trong Kim, the future historian and prime minister of Vietnam, assumed the occasional role of guardian for Pham Duy and his siblings."

^{xiv} Hanoi 1941, republished in Paris in 1958 as *La place d'un homme* by Plon.

- ^{xv} Le Lang, Hanoi 1941, republished in 1942 by Taupin. The collection includes articles on the “Princess and the Fisherman” (Love’s Crystal) from 1938, and Tu Thuc, also from 1938.
- ^{xvi} Pham Duy Khiem: *Legends from Serene Lands*, trans. Harry Aveling, Prestige Publications, New Delhi 2011. Revised Vietnamese version, trans. Harry Aveling, The Gioi, Hanoi 2015. Pham Duy Khiem: *Vietnamesische Märchen*, trans. Lothar Römbell, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1968.
- ^{xvii} Taupin, Hanoi 1942, pp. 27-32.
- ^{xviii} Taupin, Hanoi 1944, pp. 21-36.
- ^{xix} Raymond Van Over: *Taoist Tales*. New York, New American Library 1984, p. 16. Cited by Hoa Minh Hoang, p. 62. Nam Nguyen writes: “As a literary genre fully established during the Song dynasty (980-1126) in China, *truyen-ki* often included two basic fictional elements: the romantic and the supernatural. Due to the supranormal components employed in their narrative, *truyen-ky* tales can be easily transformed into Daoist hagiographies and vice versa.” p. 450.
- ^{xx} See Nguyen Nam 2005.
- ^{xxi} Second Tale, *Vaste Recueil*, pp. 43-54. *La Jeune Femme de Nam Xuong*, 1944, pp. 95-110.
- ^{xxii} Ninth Tale, *Vaste Recueil*, pp. 129-142. *Légendes des terres sereines*, 1942, pp. 73-105.
- ^{xxiii} Sixteenth Tale, *Vaste Recueil*, pp. 43-54. *La Jeune Femme de Nam Xuong*, 1944, pp. 19-36. For an English translation, see Nguyen Nam, pp. 549-563.
- ^{xxiv} 1939, republished by Présence d’Asie in 1979.
- ^{xxv} These were over twenty small booklets, published by Editions Mai-Linh, Hanoi, each containing one story, edited by Le but drawing on the skills of a range of teachers. Le Doan Vy also compiled *Contes et Légendes d’Annam*, published by Mai-Lin in 1940 (?), which Pham may have used.
- ^{xxvi} On Khiem’s personality, see Emerson’s article, subtitled “A Man Apart”. Claide Cuénot has described him as “soberr, discreet, indulgent, slightly mysterious. Sometimes intinate and brotherly, sometime distant and discontented, a kind companion and a remarkable intelligence,” in “Pham Duy Khiem”, *La Ronde Table*, No. 139-149, July-August 1958.
- ^{xxvii} See, however, his commentary on the “Histoire de Tu Thuc”, pages 90-95 (omitted in the final Paris edition), on Immortals – and romantic love.
- ^{xxviii} *Légendes des terres sereines*, 3rd edn., Taupin, Hanoi 1943, pp. 7-8.

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APPENDIX

Pham Duy Khiem: The Shadow and the Absent Father

(Translated by Aveling 2011, revised)

There was once a woman whose husband had been sent to serve as a soldier at a frontier post at the end of the “land from which the rivers flow”. At that time, communications were very difficult, and during the period of over three years when they were apart, she received nothing but occasional news from him.

One evening she was sewing by the light of a lamp, near her sleeping child, when a storm began. A gust of wind extinguished the lamp, the thunder began to rumble, and the child woke up. He was afraid. His mother lit the tiny wick which she then placed in the oil, and when it cast her own shadow on the wall, she said: “There is nothing to be afraid of, my little one. Your father is there, watching over you.”

The child looked at the shadow and stopped crying.

The next day, when he was going to bed, he asked for his father. His mother smiled happily, and placed the lamp in such a way that the eyes of her son could see her silhouette. She taught him to join his hands and to say as he bowed to the shadow: “Goodnight, father.”

The custom was quickly established and each night the ritual was repeated. Then, once the child was asleep, she watched over him far into the night, alone with her shadow.

Her husband returned.

She came to him, she did not dare look at him, she had neither the gestures nor the words to show her joy, but when he was close to her, he saw a tear roll down her tranquil face.

Furtively she wiped it away. Then he heard her sweet voice: “We must offer a sacrifice to the ancestors. I will fetch some supplies and entrust the child to you.”

During her absence the man quickly befriended the child. But when he asked the boy to call him “father”, the boy refused saying: “No. You are not my father. I always say goodnight to my father when I go to bed.”

The misunderstanding was fatal and the man suffered intensely. He was too polite and too proud to ever ask his wife anything, so he was unable to escape his misery.

When she returned from the market, she sensed that some misfortune had inescapably come under their roof. Even her most cautious words, the least of her gestures, only served to exasperate her husband. He turned away from her, without saying a word. He was determined not to talk and guarded his silence, despite the temptation to speak with her and the hope that he might be proven to be mistaken.

He carefully bowed to the spirits of his ancestors, but then immediately folded up the mat so his wife could not honour her own ancestors. She held back the tears of humiliation that came to her eyes.

When she took the meal from the altar and served him the steaming rice, he did not touch his chopsticks. The rice in his bowl slowly became cold, she waited in silence and her sorrow knew no limits.

Abruptly the man stood up and left the house without saying a word.

For a while, the poor woman held some hopes. Then her suffering became so intense that the poor woman threw herself into the river.

When her husband learned of her death, his suspicions were shaken. He returned home.

That night, he lit the lamp and it cast his shadow upon the wall. To his great surprise, he saw his son join his hands and bow to the shadow.

Too late, he realised his terrible mistake. He had an altar erected near the river, and for three days and three nights prayers were said for the repose of her innocent soul. There was nothing he could do except resign himself to the irreparable situation, and he lived, to the end of his life, faithful to the memory of his departed wife.

The Young Woman from Nam Xuong

(Translated by Aveling 2015)

In the region of Nam Xuong there once lived a young woman named Vu thi Tiêt. Sweet and well mannered, she was also amiable and pretty.

A young man from her village, Truong Sinh, was attracted by her qualities and her charms and he begged his mother to go and asked for the young girl's hand in marriage, taking with her the hundred ounces of gold required for the rituals.

Once they were married, Truong showed himself to be extremely jealous and suspicious. But Vu Thi's behaviour was perfect and nothing ever happened which might have disturbed their union.

They had not been living together for very long before a war broke out between Vietnam and Champa. Truong came from an important family, but he was uneducated and was one of the first men to be called up to fight.

His departure from his mother and his wife were most touching; weeping, they offered him a thousand pieces of advice and hoped that he would quickly return to them, safe and sound.

Shortly after his departure, his wife brought a son into the world and named him Dan.

Then the days passed, and the months. Truong's mother fell ill, worrying about her son. Vu Thi lavished her care on the old woman, constantly providing her with medicines, but the illness did not diminish and the woman soon passed away. Vu Thi piously conducted the final rites, as if for her own mother.

In the following year, the Cham were defeated.

Free, Truong found his son at home but not his old mother. Learning the location of her grave, he tried to take the child up in his arms to go there. The boy was just beginning to talk. He wept and his father tried to console him. "Do not weep, my son," he said. "Your father is already sad enough."

"What?" the infant replied. "Are you my father, you too? But you can talk, while my father never says anything."

Astonished, Truong questioned the child, who told him: "Before you came, my father visited us every night. When my mother walked, he walked; when she sat down, he sat down in exactly the same way; but he never tried to pick me up."

It is easy enough to understand that, being a jealous man, Truong was convinced of his wife's unfaithfulness.

When they met again, he subjected her to many cruel reproaches; Vu Thi wept as she replied: "I was only a poor girl; I had the opportunity to come under your roof. But I have never had the time to enjoy my happiness because I have been separated from you for three years. My heart was sad, I kept it pure; I have never made up my face, I have avoided paths lined with flowers, how could I have sacrificed my virtue and soiled my body in the manner you suggest?"

"I have told you the fair white truth. Please untie the knot, my friend, and explain the nub of your mistrust."

But Truong absolutely refused to believe her.

She wanted to know the origin of his suspicions but he hid the infant's words from her, making only a vague response, and continued at every opportunity to overwhelm her with his spiteful words. More than once, he chased her away from their home. Parents, friends, neighbours, all solidly defended Vu Thi, but he remained deaf.

She was finally led to say: "When I placed myself under your protection, I believed that I would gain marital happiness and the security that one finds under the shadow of a large tree. I cannot doubt that my emotions are as light as a leaf and your accusations as heavy as a mountain! When the vase has fallen, the hairpin broken, what can be gained by climbing the Mountain of Waiting?"

She fasted, purified herself and went to the bank of the Hoang Giang River. Raising her eyes to heaven, she prayed these words: "My humble destiny has been scorned, and I have known very little happiness. Chased from my home, covered with insults, I address myself to you, you divine beings who now witness my misfortune. If my soul is truly pure, make me a My Châu pearl at the bottom of the ocean, or a blade of Ngu Co

grass on land. But if I have the innards of a bird and the heart of a fish, if I have failed in my duties as a wife and a mother, may I become food for fish and crustaceans, may eagles and ravens tear my body to shreds!"

Her prayer finished, she threw herself into the river.

Truong had not forgiven his wife, but now that death divided them, he wept and tried to find her body. His search was unsuccessful.

One night as he sat up late beside his lamp, he suddenly heard his son cry out: "Oh! Dan's father is here again!" The child pointed to Truong's shadow on the wall.

During her husband's absence, Vu Thi had amused herself by showing her shadow to the child and telling him that this was his father. Truong realised that his wife was innocent, but it was now too late, unfortunately.

The story continues: about the same time, in the same village, a worthy member of the Phan family dreamed that he saw a young girl dressed in blue who begged him to help her. The next day, a fisherman brought him a tortoise with a blue coloured shell. He purchased the tortoise and released it into the river.

Later, during the rule of Khai Dai of the Hô, the Chinese invaded Vietnam under the pretext of restoring the descendants of the Trân dynasty to the throne. While fleeing with the other residents of his village, Phan was shipwrecked at sea.

His companions perished but he found himself in a palace at the bottom of the ocean. The queen Linh Phi herself cared for him, declaring that he had previously saved her when she was travelling in the form of a tortoise.

During a feast in his honour, Phan thought he recognised Vu Thi among the spirits. But he dared not speak, and could only cast stealthy glances at her. Finally, she was the one to speak: "We have not been separated for very long," she said, "have you forgotten me already?"

She told him how, after she had committed suicide, the river spirits had pity on her and opened a path for her through the waters.

Phan asked her if she ever still thought of her village. She replied: "My husband chassed me away, he treated me with scorn, how could I ever have the audacity to show myself to him again?"

"Forgive me," said Phan, "you may have been able to allow the weeds to invade your parents' house, the brambles to cover your ancestors' graves, but how could you remain insensible to the son who needed your care?"

At these words, tears ran down Vu Thi's cheeks.

"Perhaps I will not always be able to take refuge in these depths," she said, "The horse born of Hô's race whinnies in the wind which blows from the north; the bird of the land of the Viêt rests on a branch that looks to the south, towards the warm homeland."

The next day, Linh Phi offered Phan a purple silk purse containing ten precious pearls and had him led out of the waters. Vu Thi told Phan to ask her husband to offer the prayers of deliverance for her soul, if he still remembered their former ties. She would then show herself to him.

Phan first met with Truong's incredulity, but when he showed an earring that Vu Thi had entrusted to him, Truong recognised the item and erected an altar at the edge of the river. The ceremony lasted three days and three nights.

At dawn on the fourth day, Vu Thi rose from the middle of the stream in a golden chariot, surrounded by other chariots, banners and umbrellas, which covered the whole river, appearing and disappearing one after the other.

Truong quickly called out to his wife, but when her reply reached him she was already far away: "I thank you, my friend, but it is no longer possible for me to return to the land of mortals. In my gratitude to Linh Phi, I have promised that I will never leave her."

She had barely finished speaking when everything faded away

This is the commentary that we find at the end of Nguyễn Du's version of the story: "Alas! When great similarities are involved, it is truly difficult to see things clearly, and very easy to make a mistake. That is why, in setting aside her spool so that she could stand up, the sage's own mother doubted him; when the axe was lost, suspicions naturally arose and even the neighbour's daughter had a hard time defending herself; Quong Vo accused an officer of deception, when he was only carrying the tears-of-Job herb in his carriage; and Tao Thao killed his benefactors. It was the same with Vu Thi: if heaven had not witnessed her virtue, without doubt she would have become prey for the fish ... Husbands, may this be a lesson for you!"

Simpler and better known is the poem composed by the king Lê Thanh Tôn, when he visited the temple consecrated to Vu Thi as he passed through the province of Ha Nam:

... Once the lamp has been extinguished, do not go and listen to the child!
... We should blame Truong for his great stubbornness.

The last line provides a summary of the general Vietnamese attitude to the story of Vu Thi. But the poet Nguyễn Công Tru, who liked paradoxes, has composed a song on this topic from which I translate a few fragments:

... Her heart was right but her intention was evil.
If she were true to her husband, why should she be unfaithful to her son?
... It is not proper to accuse any man of wrong
In the dark, one has only one's own lamp to show the way.

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