

## POPULAR CULTURE AND LETTERED CULTURE IN ANCIENT VIETNAM

In all societies that have arrived at a certain degree of social differentiation, there are two types of culture that may be qualified respectively as “popular” and “lettered”. Popular culture is that of the people as opposed to the dominant political and intellectual classes. The latter two may be distinct (but allied), as in ancient India with the pair Brahman-kshatriya, or mixed as in Confucian China with the bureaucracy of scholars-civil servants. The duality between the two kinds of culture may become less distinct with the democratization of power and education as well as with the omnipresent symbolic universe of the media. None the less, it survives, as has been proven by all sociological research on the nature of leisure time as employed by classes in industrial societies, in the “West” and in the “East”.

We must note that this distinction between two types of culture is challenged by some authors, principally Marxist. For them, the

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domination is such that the popular classes are completely alienated from the dominant classes, whose system of representations they interiorize, which ends in the acceptance of the established order. Any symbolic production on their part can only be marginal and reflect either some specific interests or a defensive attitude.

We do not share this simplistic view. No doubt the dominated classes do not arrive, generally, at the construction of a true ideology of themselves without the support of outside intellectuals, such as Buddha, issuing from kshatriya, that contested Brahminism or, closer to us, Marx and Engels, coming from the middle class. But the absence of ideology in itself does not imply the absence of conscience, and history shows that the people have always known how to develop a true culture—and not a sub-culture—conveying their knowledge, ideas, values, and aspirations. Certainly, we find important influences from the lettered culture, but they are not powerful to the point of eliminating the consciousness of difference and opposition nor resignation to the social *status quo*. We may even observe inverse influences, those of popular culture on lettered culture. Furthermore, in the case of foreign occupation, when lettered culture crumbled because it could not resist and thus also lost its legitimacy, popular culture remained alive and was a refuge that preserved national values and the spirit of independence. Such was the case in Vietnam when the French invaders defeated the monarchy in the second half of the 19th century.

The example of this country is particularly characteristic, and it is the one that we will present on broad lines.

## I. THE GENESIS OF VIETNAMESE CULTURE

Situated at the limits of the Chinese world and southeast Asia, at the crossroads of the great routes of economic and cultural exchanges, Vietnam for more than two thousand years has had to struggle to preserve its existence and its identity. On the other hand, its original territory—the delta of the Red River—is exposed to constant natural threats: floods, droughts and typhoons that may strike several times a year, carrying off houses and crops, animals and people. Communities have had to unite in order to work together to meet the challenges of the area, such as water control. The

first Viet kingdom was a federation of tribes, the Van Lang, appearing in 700 B.C. It had a relatively distinct culture, whose daily life and religious myths are depicted on its bronze drums. The kingdom of Au Lac, successor to Van Lang in 208 B.C., which was in its turn annexed by the Chinese Han Empire in 111 B.C. This integration lasted more than a thousand years. But there were continual revolts, and finally the Viet country definitively reconquered its independence from China in 939 A.D. While all the other peoples south of the Yangtse had been assimilated by the Han, the Vietnamese were able to resist this powerful civilization and preserve their language and national identity. How can this be explained? There are several reasons: The existence of an important economic basis, the Red River delta, supporting the growth of a large population; a solid infrastructure of village communities having preserved their autonomy with regard to foreign authorities; the existence of an ancient culture endowed with sufficiently original traits to prevent their absorption.

From the tenth to the end of the eighteenth century, several Chinese dynasties tried to impose again their domination. They were without exception repulsed. However, the political resistance was not accompanied by a cultural rejection. On the contrary, the Vietnamese monarchy borrowed from China a large number of institutions that it adapted to its own context, as well as the *han*, classical Chinese, which became the official language. It was also the official language of Korea and Japan, playing a role in eastern Asia like that of Latin in medieval Europe. Three philosophies exercised an important influence on cultural development: Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism, which were the “three religions” for the people. They were associated with the much older cults of ancestors and genies, which were themselves derived from the cult of the dead, one of the oldest practices of man, spread throughout all the regions of the world.

Buddhism arrived in Vietnam by sea in the first or second century. It arose from Mahayana, especially from *thiền* (*chan* in Chinese, *zen* in Japanese) that does not look for the truth in books but in meditation and illumination. When the country became independent in the 10th century, it adopted Buddhism as the state religion, through distrust of the Confucian scholars nourished on Chinese traditions. The founder of the first great dynasty, that of the

Ly (1009-1225), had been raised in a Buddhist temple and acceded to the throne thanks to the prestige of the priests. The community was placed under the authority of a *Quốc sư*, “master of the kingdom”, who assisted the sovereign in his prayers for the prosperity of the State and often served him as advisor. Most of the sovereigns and those of the following dynasty, the Trần (1226-1400), belonged to Buddhist sects: Trần Thái-tông (1226-1258) was the author of two treatises of doctrine that have come down to us. If religion was a means of government by educating the people to respect the monarchy and the established order and by threatening the guilty with the worst punishments in the life to come, it also played a civilizing role in the humanization of behavior and laws, and inspired architectural masterpieces, temples and *stupas* whose equilibrium of form and harmony of colors were intimately linked to the landscape. But, beginning with the fourteenth century, Buddhism fell into decadence, corrupted more and more by superstition, attacked by the Confucian scholars who considered it antisocial and anticivic and denounced the wealth of its temples.

Confucianism, introduced to Vietnam at about the same time as Buddhism, prospered during all the Chinese occupation. It regressed, as we have seen, after independence (939), the first kings mistrusting a bureaucracy too tied to the old imperial power. Officials were recruited through heredity and the recommendation of the nobles and priests. In addition, the monarchy was of a patrimonial type, confiding the levers of command to its near relations and giving them large domains located at strategic points. The prevalence of Buddhism did not, however, prevent the development of Confucianism. In 1070 the *Van Miêu*, “temple of letters”, was founded, consecrated to Confucius; it also harbored a college, the *Quốc tử Giám*, destined for the sons of dignitaries. The first literary competition opened in 1075. There were seven under the Ly in one hundred and seventy-five years. They served to recruit not only Confucian civil servants but also Buddhist and Taoist priests (“competitions of the three doctrines”). The small number of competitions shows that instruction hardly went beyond the confines of the capital, that it was reserved for the aristocracy and that the examinations themselves were not a requisite for public office.

A fundamental change came about in the 15th century, with the

Lê dynasty (1428-1788): the passage from an aristocratic government to a bureaucratic administration. Favored by the decline of Buddhism, Confucianism became the official doctrine: in addition, it was more suited to guarantee the cohesion of the State, the management of society and the formation of its cadres. Political centralization, the diversification of tasks and institutions, and population growth, demanded a continual reinforcement of administration and, consequently, an increase in the number of officials. The system of examinations based on merit was more appropriate than heredity or recommendation. In its turn, its development stimulated that of Confucian teaching and bureaucracy. After 1463, the competitions took place in each province every three years, those of the doctorate the following year in the capital and the finals in the royal palace. The status of the officials was regulated in 1477. The civil hierarchy comprised nine grades, the military six, each grade having two steps. Remuneration consisted of a small salary but principally of donations of land for the duration of the employment. Only the princes of the royal family benefited from hereditary rice fields. Thus, "the scholar-officials were established as the directing class while its recruitment slowly came to include more and more narrow strata of the population. It was the stability of this institution, cemented by a rational, coherent and total ideology that permitted the continuity of ancient Vietnam through all the vicissitudes of its history (peasant revolts, dynastic changes, secessions and foreign invasions)" (Lê Thành Khôi, 1982, p. 139).

After a period of vigorous growth, Confucianism also fell into decadence at the end of the 17th century, worn out by the aridity of *zhuxism* that, just because of the grandeur of its neo-Confucian organization, arrested the creative exuberance of the spirit and gradually immobilized the lettered class into a formal and hollow scholasticism. Other factors contributed to the decline: the narrowness of the system of literary competitions having no connections with economic and social life, the rise in monetary exchange, the venality of certain appointments due to the continually growing financial needs of the State, the inability to satisfy the demands of the peasantry. On the other hand, the decline encouraged a certain rebirth of Buddhism that created new sects and constructed new temples. Many lettered men became monks and we see on every side the appearance of theories on the "common origin" and "com-

mon body” of the three religions (*tam giao*). The syncretism that characterizes Vietnamese culture was formed in the 17th and 18th centuries: it integrated the three doctrines by borrowing from each a certain number of ideas and practices whose relative importance varied according to the social strata.

## II. POPULAR CULTURE AND LETTERED CULTURE

The two fundamental institutions of ancient Vietnam were the family and the community. If the first of these applied to everybody, the second was the area of activity of the popular classes, peasants and artisans. The lettered who passed the examinations became civil servants at the court or in a province; those who failed went back to their village and became schoolmasters. They were all imbued with the same Confucian culture, but the second group could be critical of royal authority or even lead peasant revolts. There was a certain symbiosis between them and the country people whose existence they shared, and it is probable that in addition to the Confucian values they transmitted, they also participated in the development of the popular culture.

Let us briefly restate what Confucianism is. Essentially, it is a conservative theory of the social order resting on a certain number of relationships and norms. There were five social relationships (*ngũ luân*): prince and subject, parent and child, husband and wife, brother and brother, friends and relations. The first two are the most important: they are placed under the sign of loyalty (*trung*) for the first and filial piety (*hiếu*) for the second. The norms or qualities that each person possesses are also five (*ngũ thùy*): they are humanity (*nhân*), justice (*nghĩa*), respect for rites (*lễ*), the knowledge of good and evil (*trí*) and faith (*tin*). However, although Confucianism is fundamentally conservative, it still contains some germs of democracy.

In the first place is its humanism. *Nhân* is the supreme virtue: “The way is not outside man. Whoever creates a way outside man cannot make it a true way. The man of quality (*quân tử*) is content to transform man, that is enough for him”.

The term *đạo*, translated as “way”, designates both the principle that governs the universe and the rule of life essential for men. “Is

there a precept”, asks Tu Công, “that can guide the action of an entire life?” “Love”, answers Confucius. “What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to another.” (*Discourses*, XV, 23). Farther along in the same work, he says to another person, “*Nhân* is the ability to realize five things in the world: self-respect, magnanimity, faithfulness, diligence and charity. Then one can direct others.” (*Discourses*, XVII, 6).

How may one acquire this virtue and become *quân tử*? Through education. The *Great Learning* (*Dai hoc*), one of the four classics along with the *Central Harmony* (*Trung dung*), the *Discourses* (*Luân ngu*) and *Book of Mencius* (*Manh tu*), begins with these words: “The Way of the Great Learning consists in enlightening one’s mind, renewing the people, achieving the supreme good.”

The way is also defined: “Investigate things in order to develop your intelligence, develop your intelligence in order to affirm the purity of your will to assure the uprightness of your heart, assure the uprightness of your heart to perfect yourself. This perfectioning of self achieved, you may direct your family. Your family well-directed you may govern the kingdom, the kingdom well governed, you may pacify the universe.”

A second democratic trait of Confucianism is the importance attached to the *people*.

Certainly the emperor is at the apex of the social and political pyramid. All power and all authority come from him. He is the son of Heaven, from which he has received the mandate to govern in the public interest. But likewise he is also responsible for all the evils that may arise, whether it is a matter of natural calamities, war or destruction. He is the one who possesses—or should possess—the “virtue” (*dức*) that serves as an example to the officials and the people. “If he does not possess it and practice it himself, he must not demand it of other men. That having nothing good, nothing virtuous in the heart, one may be capable of commanding men to do what is good and virtuous is impossible and contrary to the nature of things.” But the virtue of the sovereign also has a function of government, of maintaining the human and cosmic order. It is able to bring rain after a drought, to stop floods, so that the people may have good crops and a peaceful life (the digging of canals and construction of dams are the principal tasks of the government). As the *Great Learning* explains, “Love what the

people love, hate what the people hate. That is the way to be called 'father and mother of the people'." Mencius goes so far as to say, "In a State the most important element is the people. The gods of the Sun and the Grains are secondary. The sovereign takes last place. This is why the way to the empire is through gaining the hearts of the people."

Thus, when the ruler does not fulfill his function, when he does not assure a decent and peaceful life for the people, even more when he becomes a tyrant, popular revolt is legitimate. This right to revolt is expressly recognized by Confucianism. The *Great Learning* says, "The mandate of Heaven is not conferred on one family for eternity. This means that in practising the good, one obtains it; in practising evil, one loses it."

This idea distinguishes the East Asiatic monarchy from European monarchy. In Vietnam as in China, there was no monarchy by divine right. It is a constant tradition in Vietnamese history that the people have always conferred legitimacy on the heroes who have deserved well from the country, even when they were opposed to the existing dynasty. They gained this merit when they restored independence by driving out the invader: such as Lê Lôi who in the 15th century liberated the country from the Ming after a ten-year war, or Tay-son Nguyễn Huệ who triumphed over the Qing in 1788-1789. Inversely, opinion stigmatized the last Lê, Chiêu-thông, who the Qing had re-established on the throne.

In Vietnamese tradition, the two primary qualities of a Confucian, *nhân* (humanity) and *nghĩa* (justice) are always associated and are interpreted less by rapport with social relationships than in a political sense: with regard to the good of the people and the preservation of the nation. To be *nhân* is to love others, (*thuong nguoi*), other men, the people, not to encumber them with taxes and forced labor, not to oppress them. To be *nghĩa* is to act for the good of the people and oppose what can harm them, whatever one's own personal interests; the greatest "work of justice" is to deliver them from foreign occupation. Such is the sense of the magnificent "Proclamation of the pacification of the Ngô", drawn up by Nguyễn Trai, advisor and companion of Lê Lôi during his struggle toward victory over the Ming in 1427: *Humanity and justice consist in bringing peace to the people. But the army of liberation must first drive out the violence of the invader.*



Though Confucianism formed the nucleus of the lettered culture, it was also penetrated by Buddhism and Taoism.

Buddhism, whatever its schools, rests on the idea that existence is pain, that the origin of pain is desire and that nirvana is attained by the extinction of desire. The way leading to it is eight-fold: right views, right aims or intent, right speech, right conduct or action, right means of livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right meditation or contemplation. The themes of impermanence, suffering, renunciation, the law of causality from one existence to another (*karma*) are found throughout most of the works of the lettered men. The masterpiece of Vietnamese literature, the *Truyện Kiều* by Nguyễn Du (1765-1820) tells the story of the beautiful Thuy Kiều who, betrothed to Kim Trong, had to sell herself to save her parents, because filial piety comes before love. After a life of adventures in which she had known the worst abjections, Kiều was saved from suicide by a nun and found Kim Trong again. He was now married to her sister Thuy Vân, whom she had asked to replace her. Happiness dawned again, and Kiều lived as a friend with the couple. Now, it was in expiation of the sins of an earlier life—about which we are not told—that Kiều was forced to undergo trials until the balance was restored. From the first verses, we find the idea of the antagonism of ability and destiny, that of the equivalence of impermanence and pain:

There where the mulberry trees were leafing extended the sea:  
The things of life afflict the heart.

And the nun draws the moral of the story:

Happiness and unhappiness are the ways to Heaven. But their  
roots are also found in the human heart.  
Heaven is there, but everything still depends on ourselves  
Renunciation is the source of happiness, love the bonds of sorrow!

Written by a scholar, the *Kiêu* has become a popular poem, the “Bible” of the Vietnamese people. They find in it an echo of their own sufferings of their revolts against the mandarin oppression, their aspirations to justice. Even the most humble peasant knows at least some verses of the *Kiêu*, some of which have become current expressions.

Far from the Buddhist pessimism of the lettered class, the people were more attached to the religion of salvation. They prayed to Buddha and the *bodhisattvas* to ask their protection and their compassion. The two most popular figures were those of Quan Am (Avalokiteçvara) and Azida (Amitâbha). The first was represented as feminine and was invoked by reciting the sutra of the Lotus, especially in the case of danger or that of wanting a child:

If a man is thrown into a flaming ditch by an evil being, he has only to remember Avalokita and the fire will be put out as though it were quenched with water...

The woman who desires a child and worships the bodhisattva Mahasattva Avalokiteçvara will have a beautiful and lovable son, gifted with the characteristic signs of virility, loved by many people, winning hearts, making the roots of virtue that are in him grow (Translation by Thich Thiên Châu).

The other popular figure was that of Azida (Amitâbha). The Vietnamese Buddhists were more or less amidists. They prayed to him to be reborn in the pure Land of the West:

Sariputra, if, hearing the Buddha Amitâbha, a good man, a good woman invoke his name for one day or for seven days [...] this person will have a concentrated and untroubled spirit. At the moment of his death, if he sees the Buddha Amitâbha and his Community of Saints appear, his spirit not being troubled, this person will immediately be reborn in the happy land of the Buddha Amitâbha...

Sutras in his honor were also recited in funeral ceremonies to ease the sufferings of the relatives and dead ancestors. Buddhists greeted each other with the formula "*Nam mô A-zi-dà Phât*" when they met in the temples (Thich Thiên Châu, 1970).

Alongside Confucianism and Buddhism, the lettered culture integrated Taoism. It retained mysticism (lacking in Confucianism), the search for the Tao of nature, the consciousness of change in all things and their reciprocal influences (which brought Taoism close to Buddhism and led to medical science) and finally, poetic sentiment. For the people, Taoism, like Buddhism, was a religion of salvation, but penetrated with magic in which astrologers, sor-

cerers, geomancers and mediums intervened. There was the belief in a universe formed of four superimposed worlds between which the frontiers were not hermetically sealed: the celestial world, governed by the Jade Emperor, the terrestrial world, the world of the waters, the world of shadows. One of the most popular cults was that of the *Chu vi* or Spirits of the Three Worlds (celestial, terrestrial and aquatic). It was practiced through the intermediary of male, but more often, female (*bà dông*) mediums, whose trances allowed the divinities to communicate with their faithful.

But the most ancient cults, as we have said, were those of the ancestors and genies.

The cult of the ancestors (*tô tiên*) was the binding element of the clan, the basis of society. The clan was composed of all the families descending from a common ancestor through the male line: it was patriarchal. Its head was the head of the oldest branch. It was in his house that the temple of the ancestors was erected, whose cult united the living and the dead, jointly liable for rewards and punishments. The Confucian influence had re-enforced the cult with its notion of *hiêu*, filial piety, considered as an essential virtue: it involved not only obedience to parents but also marriage and birth of children to perpetuate the clan and the cult.

The cult of genies (*thần*) was, like the cult of ancestors, connected to the primitive cult of the dead associated with animism. The greatest of the genies were the heroes who contributed to the establishing of the country or to defending it against invasions: such as the genie of the mountain Tan-viên, who built dikes to control the waters, or that of the village Giong who saved the country from the An. Others had rendered services to their native village by teaching trades, the manufacture of mats, conical hats, pottery, and so on. Others were perhaps the evil spirits that were honored because of particular circumstances. Each village had a tutelary genie to which it rendered a cult in the *dinh*, that was also the "community house" where collective meetings were held. The festival of the genie was that of the village and lasted several days, usually in the spring or autumn, times when the peasant rested after his work in the fields, before the rice harvest (5th and 10th lunar months). It opened with an invocation to the genie (*van tê*) that related his merits, drawn up and read before the altar by a member of the lettered class. Then the lacquered red and gold throne, accompanied by banners,

drums and cymbals, was led in procession through the streets of the village. When the rites were over, the games began all around the *dinh*. These games attracted people from all the region and prizes were awarded: boat races, wrestling, cock fights, as well as fights between buffalos, birds, crickets and fish. For the girls, there were competitions in cooking rice, spinning and making cakes. Often a troupe of players came to give performances of *chèo* dramas or nautical marionettes. This popular theater presented daily life or tales and legends that, apparently respectful of the established order, did not hesitate to attack the norms and the authorities. As in other cultures, the role of social critic fell to the buffoon (*hê*). Here is an example of an often-employed ruse, the pun: "When the person playing the mandarin said: *Tiếng lành đồn xa, tiếng du đồn xa*" (a good reputation travels far and wide, a bad reputation also) the *hê* replied, "*Quan đồn lót da, quan phu lót da*" (the postmaster fleeces you, the district mandarin also). And to proclaim to the spokesman, "The mandarin is making his rounds. Those who have chickens, lock them up well!" (Lê Van Hao, 1980, 143-144).

Popular literature, born and developed within the structure of work and village festivals was thus opposed to the lettered culture, even if it accepted some of its values.

### III. POPULAR LITERATURE, A REFLECTION OF OPPOSITIONS AND CONVERGENCES WITH LETTERED CULTURE

Up until the end of the 19th century, the official language, as we have said, was *han*, classical Chinese that played in Eastern Asia the role of Latin in Europe in the Middle Ages. Official acts were drawn up in *han*, as well as the dissertations for competitions and most prose and poetic literature. However, works by scholars in the national tongue (*nôm*) appeared in the 13th century and spread in the poetic masterpieces of the 18th and 19th centuries. But, alongside this savant literature existed an entire peasant literature of songs, proverbs, fables and tales, in which the people expressed their joys and sorrows, their ideas and ethics. Orally transmitted to our day, it ranks high among the folk literature of the world for its richness, spontaneity and humanity. It is there and not in the sa-

vant literature that we find the most exact and complete reflection of the life of the Vietnamese people.

Man sang before he wrote. Popular songs, the *ca-dao*, also called *phong-dao*, were undoubtedly associated primitively with the rhythm of work and physical gestures accompanied by regular sounds or cries.<sup>1</sup> Transplanters, boatmen, fishermen and harvesters, singing, to lighten their toil, refrains that at first had no meaning: *hồ khoan! giô ta!...*, to which were added the cadenced words of their emotions and feelings. Thus many songs, the oldest ones, are of a collective origin, born of the communion of a group doing the same work or of village enthusiasm during a religious festival. Others are the work of one, anonymous, poet, kept and transmitted through the countryside, because they responded to the state of collective spirit.

The essence of the *ca-dao*, and in general of all popular literature as opposed to that of the lettered class that was often imbued with Buddhist pessimism, is, shall we say, optimism, gaiety, self-confidence and faith in the future: in a word, the love of life, run through with a broad current of good sense and humor. If the dominant ethic of the lettered culture encloses the individual in an imperative network of rites and obligations, the mass of the people, behind their green bamboo hedges, continued to live according to nature, freely singing about their emotions and their loves.

From infancy to old age, song accompanied the individual. His mother or his sister cradled him, calling him cajolingly *cai bông*, gudgeon, or *cai co*, egret. Lullabies, often ironic and tender, also had a moral to them. They taught the infant the future difficulties of life, its quarrels and ugliness. The highest ideal proposed was purity, and this was what the cry of the egret expressed, or the vision of the lotus, that, born in the mud, does not smell of its odor.

The adolescent worked in the rice field. Most of the popular songs concern rural life, entirely dominated by factors of which the peasant was not master: drought, flood and typhoons. His existence was a continual struggle, but he loved his land all the more, and the precious grain that gave him so many worries. The following song

<sup>1</sup> Lê Thành Khôi, "*La chanson populaire vietnamienne*", *Les Lettres nouvelles*, 1954, p. 432.

expresses this love in a form that is both naive and resolute:

Little Bôm has a fan made of palm fronds  
The rich man will give him three oxen and nine buffalos for it  
Bôm says Bôm does not want any buffalos  
The rich man offers him a deep pond full of tench  
Bôm says Bôm does not want any tench  
The rich man offers him a raft of *lim* wood  
Bôm says Bôm does not want any *lim* wood  
The rich man offers him a calling bird  
Bôm says Bôm does not want a calling bird  
The rich man offers him a rice cake, Bôm laughs!

Women participated in the work of the fields and for that reason were almost the equal of men, contrary to what occurred in the lettered class in which the woman was confined to her home. Not only did the peasant woman transplant the rice shoots, strip the paddies, raise the pigs and chickens; she also contributed to paying the taxes on the products she sold in the market. And when the man was faced with an invasion and had to take up arms, she replaced him in all his tasks.

This labor in common gave rise to an abundance of love songs. Boys and girls met every day. Whether they irrigated, labored or harvested, they could be heard from one field to another, calling and responding. Direct or veiled, getting to the heart of the matter was always poetic. It was often made with the offer of a quid of betel, whose tradition goes back to the reign of Hungvuong (1000 B.C.). Sometimes it was the girl herself who offered it, and this is another proof of the greater liberty she enjoyed in the country:

I entered the garden to pick a green coconut  
I cut it in six parts and offer you this quid of betel  
This quid is made with Chinese lime  
With cat-canh inside and cinnamon at both ends  
But whether it be strong or insipid or sharp and burning  
And whether or not we become man and wife  
Taste its flavor so you will remember it.

Some girls knew very well how to put suitors in their place. Here is a boy who approaches a girl (the first four verses). While one "well-bred" girl (in the Confucian sense) is qualified as *em* (little

sister) another gives herself out to be *chi* (older sister) to mark her disdain.<sup>2</sup>

You are carrying a heavy load and the road is winding  
Even if I am not carrying it it weighs on me  
You are carrying a heavy load and the road is very long  
Let me carry it so that we can become husband and wife  
—If you carry it I (*chi*) will pay you your wages  
Because with your face you are really not worthy to be my  
husband!

Here is another for whom the masculine gender is less than nothing. She speaks in the name of the women qualified as *chung chi* (elder sisters) with regard to men called *chung em* (younger brothers) and even *chung bay* and *mây*, terms of scorn used toward inferiors:

We are girls with golden bells,  
Standing on top of the mountains as equals to Heaven  
We are the pillar of the celestial palace  
You, pack of mice, try to shake it  
Cursed be you, band of mice,  
If the column falls you are the ones who will be crushed!

Here we have a discourse that is hardly in conformity with Confucian morals that prescribe three submissions (*tam tong*) for woman: to her father, then to her husband and, after his death, to her son. Even though it may not represent a general attitude, it shows that the woman did not let herself be imposed on by the man.

The same is true with social hierarchy: *si, nông, công, thương* (lettered, farmer, artisan, merchant). There are lettered and lettered. There was the small minority who passed the examination and became mandarins. There was the majority who, after successive failures, became village schoolmasters: they depended for their living on what the peasants who asked them to teach their children were willing to pay. In spite of the respect the villagers had for knowledge, in their eyes the lettered man was only one whose “long

<sup>2</sup> In ancient Vietnamese “I” (*tôi*) was not used.

back requires material for clothes and who lies down after he has eaten" (*dài lung tôn vai an no lai nam*). Moreover, "first the scholar, then the peasant. But when there is no more rice, and you must go hunting for it, first the peasant, then the scholar!" (*Nhật si nhi nông, hết gạo chạy rong, nhất nông nhi si*).

Contact with the earth gave the peasant a robust good sense. He knew that it was his hard and patient work that supported all the other classes, so he was not impressed either by the aristocracy of culture nor by the orders of the mandarins. The sharp observation of reality gave birth to a humor that was often fierce. Although superstitious himself, the peasant never missed an occasion to let fly sharp arrows at the divines, sorcerers and charlatans who exploited public credulity, or at the false priests who forsook their vows of abstinence and chastity. Happy widows and stupid men also furnished material for inexhaustible jokes.

Here is how a couplet ridiculed the soothsayer:

This house is haunted by a spirit  
There is a dog that barks through his mouth.

These gallant propositions were lent to a young priest:

I am a respectful and wise young priest:  
I have set fire to all the temples I have passed by  
I constantly treat myself to dog meat  
I plant my staff in the muddy furrow  
Nam mô through the lands of the North and the East  
Let all young unmarried girls come and take me!

Disrespect did not spare the officials: "The mandarin is in a hurry, but the people are not. If the mandarin is in a hurry, let him start swimming and continue on his way!" (*Quan co cân nhưng dân chua vôi quan co vôi quan lòi quan đi*).

A lively testimony to popular thought and moral philosophy is also offered by sayings and proverbs (*tu ngu*). The conversation of the man of the people—as well as that of the lettered man—was full of these maxims in which an age-old experience is crystallized. There were first of all formulas comprising the knowledge of the peasant in the matter of atmospheric phenomena, knowledge that was necessary to him for his work:



## *Culture in Ancient Vietnam*

When the wind from the north blows in the seventh month and the dragonfly takes wing, then there will be a typhoon.

Others allude to the special characteristics of a region, to beliefs, superstitions and general customs. *Một miệng giũa làng bang một sàng xo bệp*: "A mouthful in the eyes of the entire village is worth more than a basket full of rice in the corner of your own kitchen." This saying shows the importance attached by the villager to the precedence of place in communal banquets and to the part due to him according to his rank. Everyone also knew the famous expression of communal autonomy: *Phep vua thua lê làng*: "The king's law cedes to that of the village customs."

There are many comparative locutions, always concrete and not without humor:

Cool as a rock, cold as money  
Embarrassed as a nun giving birth

Humor characterizes most of these proverbs and sayings that show human customs and psychology. The Vietnamese wit, fine, mocking, rather close to French wit, is prompt to grasp the ridiculous and comical of a character or a situation. Behind each maxim is seen a sly smile, but most often without malice. What makes this wit even sharper is the monosyllabism of the language, the balance and parallelism of the words and phrases, the variety of accents. "Each sentence," writes G. Gordier, "is, if I may say so, trigger-sharp. It is pointed or it cuts. Everything is clear".<sup>3</sup>

The proverbs also decree the principles of a customary ethic and the rules for current living. Of course, this ethic is not transcendent; it is earthy and sometimes egotistical. It easily takes the form of couplets that are intermediaries between maxims and songs. Many, for their poetry and imagery, have a true literary value.

While songs and proverbs present a typically Vietnamese characteristic, tales and fables have undergone many foreign influences, not only Chinese but also Indian, *chames*, and Khmers, which have been superimposed on the primitive bases. This basis, common in

<sup>3</sup> G. Cordier, *Etude sur la littérature annamite*, I. *Considérations générales*, Saigon 1933, p. 197.

addition to most of the countries of southeast Asia, is here represented by legends relative to the creation of man, his food, rice, his companion, the water buffalo. Then come the historical legends that relate to the dynasty of the Hồng Bàng, the eighteen rulers who reigned over the Van Lang during the first millennium B.C. They recall the origin of the betel quid or rice cakes and the feats of the first heroes who fought against invasions from the north; from the son of Phù-dông who grew up to become a giant to defeat the An to the two Trung sisters who committed suicide in order not to survive their defeat by the Han, and to all the generals who were conquerors or conquered in their fight for independence. The people piously rendered them a cult in the *dinh*, and their memory maintained the spirit of national resistance.

Different characters appear in the tales. Each has his particularity. Merciful Buddha comes to help the poor and unfortunate who invoke him. The mandarin is sometimes a good judge, sometimes a corrupted official of whom an honest censor making his rounds rids the country. A wife who is most of the time good and loving, at other times plays dirty tricks on her husband. Many fables make fun of the fool, the ignorant, the miser, the father-in-law deceived by his son-in-law, the soothsayer mystified by his client.

Animals are the brothers of man and also have their psychology. Each is individualized and expresses a type: the tiger, the dog, the cat, the hare, the crocodile, the serpent, the monkey, the turtle, and so on. Among themselves or among men, they represent the "human comedy in one hundred different acts". Social satire had free play with a biting wit, the weak but intelligent man always triumphed over the strong but stupid one. But when they leave this terrain, the tales reveal good-hearted people who believe in immanent justice and goodness that always finds its reward in this world or some other. A testimony to Buddhist influence but also to the idea that they had of Heaven, *Gioi*, Heaven, was the supreme "Being" that saw all, heard all and judged all: he punished sins and rewarded virtue. It was toward him that men's prayers rose when, bent beneath the harshness of their miserable lives, they aspired to more justice and happiness.

But devotion was not the daily bread of the peasant. Very quickly, good sense, humor, scepticism and malice took the upper hand. The most popular type in the tales is Trang Quynh, called *Trang*

(first doctor) for his wit even though he only had the grade of *huong công* (bachelor). Lettered himself, Quynh symbolized the irreverence with regard to all the Confucian traditions of obedience to the prince, respect for social norms and sexual repression. Here are two of his tricks played on the authorities.

One day a mandarin stopped with his suite at an inn. Quynh, pretending to be a poor student, approached him timidly. The mandarin was majestically chewing a betel quid. When he threw it away, Quynh picked it up and examined it carefully. Astonished, the mandarin asked him: "How is it that you, a student, are such a fool?" "Excuse me", answered Quynh. "One of our proverbs says: the mouth of noble people contains cast iron and steel. I wanted to assure myself that the remains of your quid really contained them".

The mandarin understood that Quynh was making fun of him but found no answer to make.

A certain prefect was detested by all the country for his extortions and abuses. One day when he was making his rounds in a palanquin, Quynh, dressed as a man of the people, stood modestly by the side of the road. He was quickly requisitioned as a porter. A moment later, the suite went over a half-flooded dike. "Great mandarin", asked Quynh, "Bachelors are not liable to forced labor, are they?"

"Fool, don't you know that they are exempt from all prestation?"

"Then I, *Công Quynh*, do not have to carry you!"

And he violently threw off the pole of the palanquin that was on his shoulder into the water. The mandarin, caught in the net of the hammock barely escaped being strangled and drowned.

We must not believe, however, that the peasant rejected all Confucian values. On the contrary, the tales exalt humanity, justice, loyalty and filial piety. In writing that "humanity and justice consist in bringing peace to the people", Nguyễn Trai was in perfect accord with popular thought on the national level.

On the individual level, the Confucian *nghĩa* also evoked an idea of justice but in a particular sense. As Phan Thi Dac writes,<sup>4</sup> it was "respect for ties between human beings for life. The tie is created

<sup>4</sup> In a manuscript that she was kind enough to communicate to me. I used it throughout this passage.

when one of the partners observes the attitude recommended for his role and thus obliges the other". It was different from love (*tin*) that "may exhaust itself", says a popular adage, while *nghia* continues to exist. Here we may translate it as faithfulness or loyalty "beyond love, especially for the day in which the ravages of time would have done their work, in which attraction dies and in which the tenderness that unites the couple must take a different aspect and another gravity". Inversely, "the deeper *nghia* goes, the more durable love will be", says another adage. This loyalty is recognized by the law that forbids the husband to repudiate the wife who has contributed to the family fortune, who has worn mourning for her parents-in-law or who has no near relatives on which to depend. And the popular romances always praised the hero, who, arrived at prestige and to whom the king offers his daughter, refuses to separate from the wife he married in poverty: a testimony to his moral rectitude.

*Nghia* applied to all human relationships, especially between friends. Here is the very popular story of Luu Binh and Doung Lê.

Luu Binh and Doung Lê had been very close friends since their childhood. Luu Binh had taken Doung Lê, of a poor family, into his family, so that they could study together. Doung Lê applied himself to his studies with all his strength. Soon he received his degree and was named mandarin. Luu Binh, rich, thought only of amusing himself; he failed several successive examinations. Later, his house was pillaged by bandits. Ruined, he wanted to resume his classes, but he no longer had the means. At the end of his resources, he went to Doung Lê to ask for his help.

But success had changed his friend. When the doorkeeper went to announce Luu Binh to him, he became angry and reprimanded the servant: "Mandarins do not have the poor as friends. Chase him away!" Luu Binh, pale with anger, went stumbling off.

On the road he met a woman, Châu Long, who told him she had been abandoned by her husband and offered to help him. They set out for the capital where Châu Long rented a house so that Luu Binh could resume his studies. She went into commerce to earn enough to cover their expenses. When Luu Binh wanted to come into her room, she told him, "When you have passed the examination and you become renowned, we will get married. If not, no. At the moment love would make you waste time".

After three years of effort and perseverance, Luu Binh took the examination and passed it. But when he joyously returned home, Châu Long had left...

After several days, Luu Binh had a palanquin made ready to take him to Doung Lê's house, so that he could boast about his new position and reproach his friend for his behavior. Doung Lê met him and congratulated him; he had his wife come to greet his friend. It was Châu Long. Doung Lê said, "When you came to see me, I pretended not to know you in order to offend your honor and incite you to work. Then I asked my wife to go and help you in my place. The service she rendered me is as great as the mountain Thai-son".

Luu Binh, deeply moved, bowed down to thank the couple and the old friendship between them was renewed.

These examples, like those drawn from other countries, show that the culture of a people is never homogeneous. How could it be, when society is not? The more it is differentiated into classes, castes or stations, the more the culture is also differentiated. But it would be equally erroneous to distinguish a "popular" culture as absolutely separated from a "lettered" culture. The two share a certain number of values and a common linguistic base; reciprocal influences circulate. It is through their agreement with the popular spirit that the great writers are distinguished. We said of the verses of Nguyễn Du, the immortal author of *Kiêu*, that they are for the Vietnamese like air and water, because he knew how to describe the most diverse types of psychology through the vicissitudes of a human drama, to crystallize in a few lines all the changing beauty of the seasons, to blend into the harmony of his song the essence of the literate culture and the popular dream.

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