

# From Verse Narrative to Novel: The Development of Prose Fiction in Vietnam

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WHEN HOÀNG NGỌC PHÁCH, a young Vietnamese living in Hanoi, published *Tố Tâm* (Pure heart) in 1925, his book immediately became a cause célèbre.<sup>1</sup> The first three thousand copies sold out in two weeks. The publisher printed another two thousand copies, and they too quickly disappeared from the bookstores (Phan Cự Đệ 1974:21). Girls disappointed in love succumbed to the influence of the work and committed suicide by jumping into Lake Tây or Lake Trúc Bạch. The work provoked a debate concerning what was proper reading for young women that continued into the 1930s.<sup>2</sup>

The book that created such a furor is a work of prose fiction about a twenty-year-old woman called *Tố Tâm*,<sup>3</sup> who falls in love with a student at the Teachers' College of the University of Hanoi. Nothing can cool her love, not even her learning that the student's parents have already arranged for him to marry someone else. After she obeys her mother and marries a man she does not love, she loses all desire to live and willingly

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The authors interviewed Vietnamese scholars and writers now living in the United States and are indebted to them for many insights regarding the early development of the Vietnamese novel.

<sup>1</sup>*Tố Tâm* was written in 1922 when the author was still a student, and a portion of it appeared in a school publication. According to a preface written by Lê Hữu Phúc, a friend of the author, publication in book form was delayed because the author feared the reaction of readers to a work "written in a new form to which we were not accustomed" (Hoàng Ngọc Phách [1925] 1963:v). Our references (henceforth *TT*) are to a reprint published in 1963.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, *Phụ Nữ Tân Văn* [Women's news]; Jan. 11 and Aug. 30, 1934.

<sup>3</sup>*Tố Tâm* is a *biệt-hiệu* (pen name, pseudonym) given the heroine by Đạm Thủy (also a pen name), the student she loves. These two main characters are almost always referred to throughout the novel by their pen names, a practice that emphasizes the literary and rarefied nature of their love (Công Huyền Tôn Nữ Nha Trang 1982:8).

surrenders to sickness and death. The author, a teacher and recent graduate himself of the teachers' college, was in many ways an unlikely person to have written such a controversial book, especially one that caused such tragic reactions in young women. A staunch believer in traditional Confucian morality, he had published an article a few years earlier in which he worried about the unhealthy effects that sentimental literature could have on young women (1920). *Tổ Tâm* obviously conveyed a message not completely congruent with the conscious intent of its author.

*Tổ Tâm* was not the first Vietnamese novel—not the first long narrative written in vernacular Vietnamese prose. Much, of course, depends on how “novel” is defined. According to the definition we develop below, there were instances of the genre in the south, in what the French called Cochinchina, at least thirteen years before *Tổ Tâm* was published in northern Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> But it was one of the first novels, and it affected contemporary readers more deeply and has received more attention from critics than other novels published around the same time.<sup>5</sup> *Tổ Tâm* marks a rupture in Vietnam's literary and cultural life: it was perceived as something dramatically new. To appreciate its newness one has to understand what preceded it, including the traditional way of composing stories and the messages these stories were designed to convey. Before the novel emerged in Vietnam, the verse narrative was the preferred form for composing fictional stories. We will therefore compare *Tổ Tâm* to a nineteenth-century work entitled *Lục Vân Tiên* (ca. 1860), one of the last verse narratives to be written in *chữ nôm*, or southern script, a system of writing the Vietnamese language using Chinese characters.

As the American critic Lennard Davis (1983:2) points out, any discussion of the development of the novel must state clearly the criteria used to determine when narrative discourse turned into novelistic discourse. Common terms are not always reliable because people often apply the same term to very different kinds of works. The French, for example, use *roman* to refer to both romance and novel. We assume in this article that a novel is a fairly long story in prose. For other features of our definition we rely on Davis's discussion of ways that a romance differs from a novel. Davis is describing the beginnings of the English novel, but his nine points work well for our purposes because Vietnamese verse narratives like *Lục Vân Tiên* are also romances—different, of course, from Western romances but sharing certain key features with them.

In speaking of the origins of the English novel, Davis argues against the idea that the romance is “a forbear of, a relative of, or an influence on the novel.” Instead, he argues, there was “a profound rupture, a discursive chasm between these two forms” (1983:25). That is the point of his nine distinctions: to emphasize the rupture. In Vietnam the rupture was in some respects more profound than it was in England because the movement from one genre to the other was also a movement from verse to prose, from logographic writing to an alphabetical system, from circulation by

<sup>4</sup>This is not the accepted view of most Vietnamese and Western literary historians. Most argue that *Tổ Tâm* and another work published the same year (1925), *Quả Dưa Đỏ* (The red melon) by Nguyễn Trọng Thuật, also a northerner, were the first novels to appear in Vietnam. We present our arguments for the novel's southern origins in another article (Cao thị Như Quỳnh and Schafer:forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup>*Quả Dưa Đỏ* (see n. 4) received high praise and was avidly read but it was not as controversial a work as *Tổ Tâm*. It is only a quasi-novel and is more accurately described as a romance or as a piece of didactic prose fiction along the lines of *Gulliver's Travels*. Nhất Linh's *Nho Phong* (Confucian manners), which also appeared in 1925, received less attention than either *Tổ Tâm* or *Quả Dưa Đỏ* primarily because, aside from the fact that it was written in prose, it closely resembled the traditional verse narratives. Nhất Linh was also a younger, unproven writer in 1925.

woodblock printing and oral performance to circulation by movable type printing and private reading, from the literacy of scholars toward a literacy that was much more widespread.

Before beginning our comparison we will consider some of the terms used by Vietnamese to refer to different kinds of narratives. We must also explain the movement from a logographic writing system (*chữ nôm*) to an alphabetical system (*quốc ngữ*) because this change made possible the development of the Vietnamese novel.

### *Tiểu Thuyết, Truyền Kỳ*

Like the Chinese term *hsiao-shuo* (literally, small story) from which it is derived, the Vietnamese term *tiểu thuyết* may be applied to various kinds of narratives. Most Vietnamese literary historians use the term to refer to a modern novel following the Western model, as an equivalent to *roman* or "novel." Some literary historians like Thanh Lăng use it more generally to refer to a structured narrative whether in verse or prose: Thanh Lăng classifies Vietnamese verse narratives (for example, *Truyện Kiều* (The story of Kiều) and *Lục Vân Tiên*) as *tiểu thuyết* (1967, 2:441–49). Usually, however, if the term refers to a narrative in verse it appears with a qualifying phrase. Phạm Quỳnh calls *Truyện Kiều* a *tiểu thuyết* "written in verse" (*viết bằng vận văn*; 1921:4). Phan Cự Đệ sometimes refers to traditional Vietnamese verse narratives as "classical novels" (*tiểu thuyết cổ điển*) to distinguish them from modern prose novels, which he calls simply *tiểu thuyết* (1975:39, 52). Vietnamese literary historians like Phan Cự Đệ also use *tiểu thuyết* at times to refer to both nineteenth-century verse narratives and twentieth-century prose narratives when they want to emphasize similarities between these two kinds of discourse—to present the modern Vietnamese novel as the result of indigenous development as well as Western influence.

Vietnamese use the term *truyện kỳ*, derived from the Chinese *ch'uan-ch'i* (literally, to narrate strange things), to refer to "the retelling of stories, handed down from the past, about strange events" (Phạm Thế Ngũ 1965, 1:143). More specifically, by *truyện kỳ* Vietnamese mean stories told in prose such as those in *Việt Điện U Linh Tập* (Spiritual powers in the Viet realm), a collection of tales written in Chinese,<sup>6</sup> and compiled by Lý Tế Xuyên in 1329. This collection contains twenty-seven tales arranged under three headings: tales of sovereigns, tales of ministers, and tales of superhuman powers. The tales record the achievements of Vietnamese heroes who distinguished themselves by fighting foreign—usually Chinese—invaders. The spirits who figure in the stories, such as the mountain spirit from Thanh-hóa and the fire dragon spirit, represent supernatural powers that Vietnamese believed played an important role in human history. There is also a fifteenth-century compilation of *truyện kỳ* stories called *Lĩnh Nam Trích Quái* (Selected tales of extraordinary beings in Lĩnh Nam) and a sixteenth-century collection called *Truyện Kỳ Vạn Lục* (Giant anthology of strange tales).

Many *truyện kỳ* stories are based on earlier written records, and twenty of the twenty-seven stories in *Việt Điện U Linh Tập* contain an acknowledgment of an earlier

<sup>6</sup>Or more precisely in Sino-Vietnamese, a term preferred by some scholars because the language of this early literature was not completely Chinese. When read aloud, it would be given a Vietnamese pronunciation and, according to Nguyễn Ngọc Bích (pers. com. 1986), sometimes its syntax varied slightly from classical Chinese. We have written the titles of these *truyện kỳ* stories in the modern Vietnamese orthography, which indicates how Vietnamese pronounce them. The original stories were written in Chinese characters. See DeFrancis 1977:14–16 for a discussion of the term Sino-Vietnamese.

source. The story of Mực Thân, for example, one of the “minister” tales in *Việt Điện U Linh Tập*, begins “Examining the *Historical Records*,” a reference to a work compiled in the early twelfth century by a palace attendant in the court of King Lý Dương Hoán (Taylor 1986:32–33). Other stories in this and other collections of *truyện kỳ* appear to be the first inscriptions of stories that were previously transmitted by word of mouth within an oral culture. Although written in Chinese, all the stories in these collections are Vietnamese stories.<sup>7</sup> They are the first recorded examples of Vietnamese prose narrative. Phan Cự Đệ points out that as one moves from older to more recent *truyện kỳ* collections, one encounters tales that are longer, more fictionalized, more often about ordinary people (less focused on supernatural happenings), and more often about events that relate to the period of the compiler (1975, 2:38–42). In summary, Vietnamese were writing stories in prose long before the twentieth century, and these stories can be seen as moving from folk history and mythology toward discourse that was more novelistic. But these stories were written in Chinese, not Vietnamese.

### *Truyện Thơ Nôm and Chữ Nôm*

Most Vietnamese call their verse narratives *truyện thơ nôm* or *truyện nôm*, not *tiểu thuyết*. *Truyện* means simply story; *thơ* means poem or poetry; and *nôm* refers to a way of writing the Vietnamese language using Chinese characters. These characters were called *chữ nôm*, a phrase that in English is sometimes rendered as “southern characters” (because *nôm* is generally considered as deriving from *nam*—south) or “demotic characters” or “demotic script” (because these characters were used to write the Vietnamese language—the language of the common people; (DeFrancis 1977:27). Scholars debate when this script was first used. In 1970 Đào Duy Anh, a scholar in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, located a stele dated 1210 from a temple in what is now Vĩnh-Phúc Province. On this stele the names of villages that made donations for the building of the temple are inscribed in *chữ nôm*. Thus this script was certainly in use in the early thirteenth century, and some scholars believe it was used at least in a limited way as early as the eighth century (Nguyễn Đình Hòa 1982:30).

*Chữ nôm* was a complex system that employed Chinese characters as both phonetic and semantic indicators. The Vietnamese word *một* (one), for example, was represented in *chữ nôm* by a Chinese character with the meaning “to drown” or “to lose.” This character was chosen because the Chinese word “drown/lose” sounded like the Vietnamese word *một*. In this case the *nôm* character was a pure phonetic indicator. Other Vietnamese words were rendered in *chữ nôm* by using Chinese characters as semantic indicators. There were also composite creations formed by using one Chinese character as a phonetic indicator, another as a semantic indicator. *Chữ nôm* was not a consistent system: characters were written differently depending on an individual writer’s style, the region he was from, and the period in which he lived (Dương Quảng Hàm [1941] 1968:113–17; DeFrancis 1977:24–26). Despite its inadequacies, *chữ nôm* became an important invention for Vietnamese. It allowed them to express themselves in their native language and to give vent to personal feelings that would be more difficult to convey in a second language. It also enabled the Vietnamese scholar-gentry to com-

<sup>7</sup>Some Vietnamese scholars have argued that *truyện kỳ* stories and other literature written by Vietnamese in Chinese (or Sino-Vietnamese; see note 6) should not be considered a part of the national literature of Vietnam, but most scholars disagree. Durand 1962 summarizes this debate, which was conducted in a series of articles appearing in the journal *Văn Sử Địa* (Literature, history, geography) in the 1950s.

municate with ordinary Vietnamese. Nonliterate peasants could not read a *nôm* text, but if they heard one read, they could understand it; and if it was written in a poetic form with parallelism, rhythm, rhyme, and other mnemonic devices, they could memorize it and recite it for others to enjoy. Because *chữ nôm* enabled disaffected court officials and members of the gentry to reach the common people, some Vietnamese rulers tried to suppress it (DeFrancis 1977:37–38). They failed, however, and literature in *nôm* continued, reaching its crowning achievement in the *truyện thơ nôm*, or verse narrative.

Exactly when the first *truyện thơ nôm* was written is not clear, but perhaps as early as the thirteenth century Vietnamese poets began to use a traditional verse form called *lục bát* (literally, six-eight) to tell a story. The *lục bát* form requires couplets with first a six-word, then an eight-word line—hence the name. There are also requirements related to the placement of rhyming words and words with certain tones. For several reasons, the form was perfect for telling quite long stories in verse. It was familiar to both literate and nonliterate Vietnamese primarily because it was often employed in a popular kind of folk poetry called *ca dao*. *Ca dao* verses are usually only one or two couplets long; they are short lyrics often expressing the romantic yearnings of peasants closely attached to the rice fields that provided them with their means of livelihood. At some point Vietnamese poets perceived that some of the features of the *lục bát* form made it an excellent medium for telling longer stories. In *lục bát* each line rhymes with the preceding line, but new rhymes constantly appear, yielding a scheme that avoids monotony when prolonged to tell a story (Huỳnh Sanh Thông 1979:xxxiii). In the hands of a master like Nguyễn Du, whose *Truyện Kiều* (Tale of Kiều) is the most highly praised verse narrative, the *lục bát* form becomes an effective vehicle of poetic expression. Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's *Lục Vân Tiên*, composed when some Vietnamese were already “putting down their brushes” (used to write *nôm* characters) and “taking up their pens” (used to write the new roman script), has received less praise, but it is still one of the better examples of the genre. It has been especially popular in the south.

### Quốc Ngữ

The French Jesuit missionary Alexandre de Rhodes is generally credited with devising a system of writing Vietnamese using roman characters.<sup>8</sup> He presented his system in 1651 when he published a Vietnamese-Portuguese-Latin dictionary and a catechism. The transcription system employed in these two works eventually became, after only minor changes, the system presently used to write the Vietnamese language. It generally follows the principle that each phoneme should be represented by a separate grapheme. Roman letters are used for consonant and vowel sounds with additional diacritical marks to indicate vowel quality and tones.

This system was presented in 1651, but it did not begin to be widely used until after 1905. After de Rhodes's dictionary and catechism, 187 years passed before another book was published in the roman script, a Vietnamese-Latin-Latin-Vietnamese dictionary written by Father Jean-Louis Taberd, another French missionary (DeFrancis 1977:64). Vietnamese continued to write in Chinese or in *chữ nôm* throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Both Phan Chu Trinh and Phan Bội Châu, two influential anticolonial leaders during the 1920s, wrote their revolutionary tracts in Chinese, revealing the Vietnamese tendency to write in Chinese when they wrote prose. *Chữ nôm* was used almost exclusively for poetry.

<sup>8</sup>De Rhodes was greatly assisted by other missionaries. See DeFrancis 1977:54–60.

Why did so many years pass before the new script, which in the late 1860s came to be called *quốc ngữ* (national language), was used more widely? This question is important because the emergence of the novel in Vietnam is related to the development of the roman script and to the increased literacy that this new script, which is very easy to learn, made possible. Its answer helps explain why the novel did not emerge in Vietnam until early in this century. One reason for the slow growth of *quốc ngữ* is that Alexandre de Rhodes and his fellow missionaries apparently devised it only for their own use—as an aid in learning Vietnamese and in preparing sermons for delivery in Vietnamese. They probably taught it to Vietnamese priests, but there is no evidence they attempted to spread its use more widely into the Vietnamese community. A second reason for the slow growth of *quốc ngữ* is the inconsistent language policy of the French colonial administration. Paul Bert, resident general in Annam and Tonkin, favored limited support for *quốc ngữ*, arguing that students would learn French more quickly if they first learned to read and write texts in their own language written in roman letters. Étienne Aymonier, director of the École Coloniale, on the other hand, opposed *quốc ngữ* and argued for direct instruction in French. Because of this vacillation *quốc ngữ* was taught much more intensely in some parts of Vietnam than in others (DeFrancis 1977:48–66, 136–40).

Another reason Vietnamese did not adopt *quốc ngữ* more quickly is that many perceived it and French as the languages of collaboration and Chinese and *chữ nôm* as the languages of resistance. DeFrancis (1977:159–69) argues convincingly that *quốc ngữ* finally began to take hold in Vietnam only after Phan Bội Châu and Phan Chu Trinh and the leaders of the Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục (Tonkin Free School)<sup>9</sup> began to promote it as a tool of nationalism.

### *Lục Vân Tiên*: One of the Last Truyện Thơ Nôm

Nguyễn Đình Chiểu (1822–88), the composer of *Lục Vân Tiên*, was born in Gia Định Province, the son of a mandarin from central Vietnam. He passed the first rung of the civil service examinations in 1843 and was studying for the metropolitan examinations (*bội thí*), the next level, when he received word that his mother had died. Quickly abandoning his hopes for passing the exams, he began an arduous journey home to mourn his mother's death. Soon after, he became sick and eventually blind. Settling in his home in Gia Định Province, he began to support himself as a doctor of traditional medicine and as a teacher. His compatriots came to love and respect him not only for his popular poems but also for his support of local resistance leaders and, when the battle was lost, his refusal to cooperate with the French authorities (Võ Lang 1964:1510–17).

He composed *Lục Vân Tiên* around 1860 in traditional *lục bát* verse form, dictating it to others who wrote it in *chữ nôm*. Nineteenth-century writers like Nguyễn Đình Chiểu preferred to tell their stories in verse: because only 3 to 5 percent of the population knew *chữ nôm*,<sup>10</sup> writers who wanted an audience of significant size had to compose their stories in a form that possessed the mnemonic devices to make oral dissemination possible. This is the first and perhaps the most obvious difference between *Lục Vân Tiên* and *Tố Tâm*: the former was written in verse in a logographic writing system and

<sup>9</sup>The French allowed this school to be established in March 1907 but closed it in January 1908 because it was spreading a spirit of nationalism. See Marr 1971:156–84.

<sup>10</sup>DeFrancis (1977:19) cites He Le-geng's estimate that only 3 to 5 percent of the population ever mastered Chinese characters, which one would have to know to write *chữ nôm*.

circulated in what was essentially an oral culture; the latter was written in prose in an alphabetical script and circulated in a society in which literacy was not yet extensive but was spreading rapidly.

Other differences appear in elements of the two stories themselves. There are autobiographical elements in both: Nguyễn Đình Chiểu and his character Vân Tiên are blinded under almost identical circumstances; Hoàng Ngọc Phách and Đạm Thủy are both students at the Teachers' College of the University of Hanoi.

### Summary of *Lục Vân Tiên*

As the story begins, Lục Vân Tiên says good-bye to his teacher and sets off for the capital to take the examinations. On the way he saves the beautiful Kiều Nguyệt Nga whom brigands have kidnapped. Her gratitude quickly turns to love. She writes him a poem to express her appreciation and returns to her home where she pines for her gallant rescuer. Vân Tiên never gets to the examination site because he hears that his mother has died, and he returns immediately to participate in her funeral. On his journey he becomes so sick and weak from weeping for his mother that he eventually goes blind and becomes an easy victim for a host of evil characters, including the parents of a woman that his parents had planned for him to marry. Afraid they will be stuck with a worthless blind man for a son-in-law, his prospective in-laws leave him to die in a cave. A fairy leads him out and, assisted by a friendly woodcutter, he ends up in a pagoda where the narrator allows him to rest while recounting the misfortunes of his heroine.

Hearing mistakenly that Vân Tiên has died, Nguyệt Nga vows to remain chaste and forever loyal to his memory. A spurned suitor persuades the king to offer her as a tribute wife to the King of Phiên, a country that has been harassing the country of Sở (the home of the hero and heroine). Forced to make an impossible choice between faithfulness to Vân Tiên and loyalty to the king, Nguyệt Nga attempts suicide by jumping off the boat taking her to the land of Phiên. She is saved by the Buddhist goddess of mercy and eventually takes refuge in the home of a kind old woman.

The narrator then returns to Vân Tiên, whose luck begins to change. His sight is restored by a fairy who visits him in a dream, and he reviews his lessons and passes the examinations with the highest rank. At the king's request he leads a successful expedition against the Ô-Qua, enemies of the land of Sở. At the end of this battle he stumbles on the old lady's home where Nguyệt Nga has taken refuge. They are joyfully reunited and later happily married. The King of Sở, eager to retire to a pagoda, allows Vân Tiên to take over the throne. While the virtuous are being rewarded, the evil are getting their just deserts: the prospective father-in-law who left Vân Tiên to die in a cave dies of shame, his wife and daughter get eaten by two tigers, and an unfaithful friend of Vân Tiên's is devoured by a whale when his boat capsizes.

### Summary of *Tổ Tâm*

*Tổ Tâm* is presented as a story told to the author by a friend, Đạm Thủy, who has just graduated from the Teachers' College in Hanoi. The story concerns Đạm Thủy's love for Tổ Tâm, a daughter of a wealthy widow (Bà Án) whose mandarin husband has died. Đạm Thủy meets Tổ Tâm by chance when her uncle recovers a wallet Đạm Thủy lost and Tổ Tâm's mother summons him to their house to return it. As he leaves the house after the visit, he catches a glimpse of the beautiful Tổ Tâm and also notices

on a table a dog-eared, obviously carefully read copy of a novel he has written. Invited by Tố Tâm's mother and encouraged by her young brother, Đạm Thủy returns regularly to visit and becomes a friend of the family. At first he treats Tố Tâm like a sister, but soon they fall hopelessly in love. Tố Tâm has studied Chinese as a child and later French. She loves to talk about literature, to write poems and essays, and they pass many pleasant hours reciting poetry and discussing social issues. When Bà Án and her daughter go to the seaside near Hải Phòng, Đạm Thủy visits them and he and Tố Tâm take romantic walks on the beach at Đồ-sơn.

Their love is hopeless, however, because Đạm Thủy's family has already arranged for him to marry another woman, the daughter of old family friends, and Đạm Thủy respects his family too much to oppose his parents' wishes. When he tells Tố Tâm about his parents' plans for his marriage, Tố Tâm says she has known about them for a long time and that she is reconciled to a "love without hope." They continue to see each other, but things come to a crisis when Bà Án expresses her wish that Tố Tâm marry a promising graduate who has a French baccalauréat degree. At first she refuses, but when her mother becomes ill and insists, she finally agrees to marriage but never lets her husband consummate their union. After the marriage she becomes very ill and dies. The medical cause of death is consumption—pulmonary tuberculosis—but it is clear, as she says in the epitaph she wrote for herself, that she died for love. When Đạm Thủy calls on her mother and brother after her death, her brother, carrying out a request of his sister, gives Đạm Thủy a diary that she has kept faithfully throughout her illness.

Up to this point the tale has been presented as told to the *ký giả* (reporter, recorder) by Đạm Thủy. When Đạm Thủy mentions the diary he gives it to the writer and lets him read it. Most of chapter 4 consists of diary entries. In Tố Tâm's last entry, written just before she died, she tells Đạm Thủy to engrave these words on a tree or stone near her grave: "Here is the grave of an unfortunate person who died for love." In chapter 5, the last chapter, Đạm Thủy explains how he became ill after Tố Tâm died but was nursed back to physical and spiritual health by his brother, a successful landowner. His brother's treatment involves a ban on the reading of sad poems and romantic novels coupled with discussions about family responsibility and his future career. The story ends with Đạm Thủy explaining to the writer that he will follow the advice of his brother and the woman who died for him (for Tố Tâm also had reminded him of his responsibilities to his family and country) but that the wounds from his love for Tố Tâm will always be with him.

### From Romance to Novel

We will now apply Davis's nine differences between romance and novel to these two Vietnamese narratives and assess how well they account for the movement from verse narrative to novel. We will begin with setting, the topic of Davis's first and third distinctions:

1. The romance is set in the distant, idealized past; the novel is set in a more recent, less heroic setting.
3. The romance is usually not set in the country of the author but in a remote exotic location; the novel tends to be set in the locale of the author. (Davis 1983:40)

The contrast between settings is clear. *Lục Vân Tiên* is set roughly during the time of the Chou and Ch'in dynasties (1027–206 B.C.), but Nguyễn Đình Chiểu makes no attempt to keep his historical references consistent. Characters refer to historical per-



sonages who lived during later dynasties, for example. The geographical references are also neither consistent nor accurate. The setting is an idealized Sino-Vietnamese landscape; Nguyễn Đình Chiểu makes no attempt to portray a real locale. Vân Tiên goes to Trường An (Ch'ang-an, modern Sian), the T'ang capital of China, to take his examinations, but scholars have not been able to find real-world referents for many of the other place names. (Trần Nghĩa 1969:126–28). *Tổ Tâm*, on the other hand, takes place at the time and in the locale of the author. Đạm Thủy, the hero, has just graduated from the modern teachers' college established by the French. Tổ Tâm, the heroine, lives in “district X” in “house #58” in Hanoi.

Davis's second distinction relates to models:

2. The romance is based on the epic; the novel is modeled on history and journalism. (1983:40)

This distinction is somewhat more problematic, but only because Vietnam does not have a genre exactly corresponding to the Western epic. Vietnamese verse narratives have some features associated with the epic, however: like Western epics they are long narrative poems that tell of historical or legendary deeds; like the Homeric epics they contain many formulaic expressions, including proverbs and four-word idiomatic expressions, that facilitate dissemination in an oral society; and they may, like a Western epic, tell a story that is central in the society. Many have argued, for example, that Nguyễn Du's *Truyện Kiều* expresses the national soul of the Vietnamese;<sup>11</sup> although we are not aware of such claims for *Lục Vân Tiên*, this poem glorifies those persons who protect their virtue and defend their country from foreign invaders—certainly central themes in Vietnamese history.

*Tổ Tâm*, in contrast, is modeled on journalism. Hoàng Ngọc Phách says in his preface (pp. ix–xii) that he is going to tell a story he heard from a friend. He assumes the stance of a reporter and refers to himself in the first person, often using *ký giả* (recorder, reporter) in lieu of the first person pronoun *tôi*. One encounters sentences like the following: “This reporter had some personal business and had to stay at school; crossing over to the room of the new graduates, seeing this reporter's close friend Lê Thanh Vân, whose pen name was Đạm Thủy, packing his things before returning to his village, this reporter sat down and watched him pack” (p. 14). Hoàng Ngọc Phách, unlike Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, is writing recent history—news.

Davis states his fourth distinction as follows:

4. The romance depicts the life of the aristocracy and is designed for an upper-class reader; the novel tends to be more middle class in scope and is geared to a slightly less aristocratic readership. (1983:40)

This distinction illuminates a difference between *Lục Vân Tiên* and *Tổ Tâm*, but it needs some qualification. *Lục Vân Tiên* does depict aristocratic figures: Vân Tiên and Nguyệt Nga are from the upper class and Vân Tiên takes over the throne at the end of the narrative. There are, however, some minor characters from the peasant class—the woodcutter who assists Vân Tiên and the old woman who helps Nguyệt Nga, for example.<sup>12</sup> Because *Lục Vân Tiên* existed as both a written text read by members of

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, Phạm Quỳnh (1919). Because more revolutionary-minded Vietnamese considered Phạm Quỳnh to be a lackey of the French and suspected he was using the poem to preach submission to colonialism, his views became extremely controversial. See Marr (1981:154–55). A Western scholar, Eric Henry, concludes that “the safest course would be to characterize [*Truyện Kiều*] as a romance in verse with affinities to epic” but that the less cautious could call it an epic and not be wrong (1984:81).

<sup>12</sup>Trần Văn Giàu (1969) stresses the importance of these humble characters in *Lục Vân Tiên*

the scholar-gentry and an oral text memorized and recited by illiterate common people, we can not say it was designed only for aristocratic readers. We can, however, say that it was not geared for the middle class. *Tổ Tâm*, on the other hand, is clearly “middle class in scope.” Hoàng Ngọc Phách, himself a member of the new petite bourgeoisie that emerged in Vietnam between the world wars, peoples his work with middle-class characters like himself and clearly writes for a middle-class audience. *Tổ Tâm* was first published, after all, in a university newspaper whose student readers aspired to be teachers and educational administrators.

Length is the focus of the next distinction:

5. Romances tend to be long and episodic; novels are shorter and more compact of plot. (Davis 1983:40)

*Lục Vân Tiên* is not long by the standards of a European prose romance, but it runs to 2,150 lines, long for a verse narrative. It is definitely episodic, as the plot summary reveals, and exhibits nicely the traditional Sino-Vietnamese linear, string-of-beads method that Phạm Quỳnh (1921:8) refers to as “straight road” (*đường thẳng*) narration: events are narrated one after the other with no digressions, flashbacks, or long intervening passages of description. Like most *truyện thơ nôm*, *Lục Vân Tiên* has a tripartite structure consisting of a chance encounter between hero and heroine, a period of separation and suffering, and a joyful reunion. Nguyễn Đình Chiểu alternates between accounts of Vân Tiên’s and Nguyệt Nga’s adventures, announcing his transitions from one to the other in rather heavy-handed fashion. After Vân Tiên and Nguyệt Nga meet, he begins his first section (*thú*), which is about Vân Tiên, as follows: “There is still much to tell about her [Nguyệt Nga’s] story, / But please let me record the first section of Vân Tiên’s story” (lines 285–86). Usually he finds a peaceful place—a pagoda (for Vân Tiên), the home of a kind old woman (for Nguyệt Nga)—where one character rests while he recounts the adventures of the other. There are six *thú* (sections), all explicitly marked by these narrator intrusions. They probably reflect the demands of oral recitation. The poem was often chanted by singers, and both they and their listeners may have needed a rest after three hundred lines. Nguyễn Văn Dân (1967:56), who comes from the southern region of Vietnam, where *Lục Vân Tiên* was especially popular, says he remembers that singers used to memorize *Lục Vân Tiên* by *thú*; those who had memorized all six would take requests from the audience and chant any *thú* their listeners desired to hear.

*Tổ Tâm*, which is short (103 pages), is organized quite differently. Hoàng Ngọc Phách calls his novel a *tiểu thuyết tâm lý* (psychological novel), and we have more to say below about what he understands by this term. Here we want to point out only that it is an apt term for the way *Tổ Tâm* is structured. There are very few episodes in *Tổ Tâm*—no clashes with brigands or foreign invaders, no last-minute rescues; the action is psychological, not physical. There are quite long passages describing natural scenes and the feelings of the lovers. But the most modern feature is the ending. Instead of the traditional *hậu* (ending) in which the hero passes his examinations first in his class and marries the heroine, the novel ends sadly with the death of the heroine. Since *Tổ Tâm*’s only fault is to love someone too intensely, her death seems unjust.

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and argues that because of their presence the poem expresses a Vietnamese “*nhân-nghĩa*” (love and righteousness) different from that presented in the Confucian texts—different because it seems to emanate from the land and the people and is not exhibited only by a scholarly elite. Trần Văn Giàu and other Hanoi critics admire Nguyễn Đình Chiểu because he refused to cooperate with the French but they are disturbed by his Confucianism, with its stress on loyalty to the king.

By ending in this way Hoàng Ngọc Phách's novel suggests a more complex moral world than the one created by Nguyễn Đình Chiểu in *Lục Vân Tiên*.

Davis also discusses pronoun usage and the perspectives and forms through which a narrative may be told:

7. Novels of the eighteenth century tend to be written in the first person or in letter form; romances are never written in these forms. (1983:40)

Traditional verse narratives like *Lục Vân Tiên* are never told in the first person. The modern first person pronoun *tôi* (I) originally meant "subject"; sometimes, for example, the phrase *vua-tôi* (king-subject) is used to refer to the first Confucian bond. Phan Khôi (1930:13) explains that some writers avoid this pronoun because they think it is too self-deprecatory—the way a slave would refer to himself. In conversations with friends and whenever they want to avoid being cold and impersonal, Vietnamese use kinship terms as pronouns to refer to themselves and others. A boy, for example, may use the word *cháu* (literally, nephew) as a first person pronoun and *bác* (literally, father's older brother) as a second person pronoun in a conversation with an older man in the village. *Tôi*, which has no kinship meaning and conveys no sense of intimacy, began to be used more as Vietnam modernized and people in larger towns needed a way of referring to themselves when they talked with strangers.

This sociolinguistic situation partially explains why composers of verse narratives would not write in the first person: they would not know what pronoun to use. There are, however, other explanations, ones related to the traditional concept of authorship—and to Davis's eighth and ninth distinctions:

8. Romances make clear that they are mixing fact and fiction to create an essentially fictional plot; novels tend to deny that they are fictional.
9. Romances follow the rules of *bienseance* and *vraisemblance*; novelists openly reject these rules since they claim to be writing history or recording life as it is. (1983:40)

The composers of traditional (Latin *traditio*, handing over) verse narratives do not tell stories of individuals living in their own time; they pass on stories found in old books. They take their plots from Chinese romances,<sup>13</sup> usually from "talent-meets-beauty stories" (*ts'ai-tzu chia-jen*; Sino-Vietnamese; *tài-tử giai-nhân*), a type of story that began to be written in late Ming times and flourished during the Ch'ing dynasty. C. T. Hsia describes the plot of these stories as follows: "The sentimental novels about a scholar and a beauty or beauties . . . usually have a very simple plot. Some villain or villains will cross their path, but the lovers are finally happily married, usually after the scholar has earned top honors at the examinations and the beauty has vindicated her honor" (1968:329). The Vietnamese verse narrative *Nhị Độ Mai* (Twice-blooming plum flower; late eighteenth century) is based on a Chinese novel with the same title (*Erb Tu Mei*; sixteenth or seventeenth century; author unknown). Nguyễn Du took the plot for *Truyện Kiều* from the Chinese novel *Chin Yün Ch'iao chuan*, published in the second half of the seventeenth century (ca. 1660–90). Nguyễn Đình Chiểu took elements for the plot of *Lục Vân Tiên* from *Nhị Độ Mai* (Schafer 1983).

Some narrators, like the one in *Nhị Độ Mai*, mention the title of the older book; others make a vaguer reference to their source. Here, for example, are the seventh and

<sup>13</sup>Applying Davis's criteria, we call these works romances, but Henry (1984:63) makes the interesting observation that the Ming and Ch'ing talent-meets-beauty stories are closer to early European novels than Chinese "classic novels" like *The Scholars* and *Dream of the Red Chamber*—closer in the sense that they focus on "the struggles of protagonists rather than upon the growth and decay of social groups."

eighth lines of Nguyễn Du's *Truyện Kiều*: "By lamplight turn these scented leaves and read / a tale of love recorded in old books." Here the "leaves" (*sủ xanh*) is a reference to the old custom of recording historical events on bamboo leaves (Huỳnh Sanh Thông 1983:3, 169). *Lục Vân Tiên* begins, "Before the light look at the story of Tây-Minh" (no story of Tây Minh has been found).<sup>14</sup> These vaguer references to obscure sources suggest that by the nineteenth century referring to an older book as a source for one's story was becoming a convention. Stories no longer contain straightforward bibliographical references like the phrase "Examining the *Historical Records*" used by Lê Tế Xuyên, the fourteenth-century compiler of Vietnamese *truyện kỳ* stories mentioned above. But neither do they employ the kinds of devices used by novelists to achieve "formal realism," such as the manuscript *trouvé*.<sup>15</sup> Composers of verse narratives have moved away from historical discourse to the quasi-historical discourse characteristic of romance, but they have not completely severed their ties with historical writing and become confident inventors of fictions.

Poets included these vague references not to avoid charges of plagiarism (originality is not something traditional authors believe they must achieve) but to suggest that the stories they were telling had a basis in historical fact and were not completely invented. Most stories were indeed based on fact. The Chinese stories to which many Vietnamese verse narratives refer are about actual historical events. Lư-kỷ, for example, an evil character in both the Chinese and Vietnamese versions of *Nhị Độ Mai*, was an actual person who caused the T'ang emperors a great deal of trouble.<sup>16</sup> The Chinese novel from which Nguyễn Du took the plot of *Truyện Kiều* is based loosely on historical events that occurred in sixteenth-century China (Henry 1984). The authors of Vietnamese verse narratives refer to earlier sources not to assume completely the stance of a historian but to make their tales more credible by linking them to actual people and events. In other words, they follow the rule of *vraisemblance*, or resemblance, which refers to the practice of tying one's story to historical fact. *Vraisemblance* contrasts with the realism of the novel. Unlike novelists, romance writers do not try to report life accurately: after tying their protagonists to history, they allow them to win hearts and slay enemies (and pass examinations) in very unrealistic ways. The allegiance of Vietnamese romance writers to the rule of *vraisemblance* and their avoidance of the first person are related. If one adopts the stance of a reteller of a story that is based on historical fact and comes from old books, then it is appropriate to avoid the first person: it is not your story that you are telling; it belongs to the tradition.<sup>17</sup>

The stance assumed by the narrator of *Tố Tâm* differs sharply from the stance of the composers of verse narratives. Hoàng Ngọc Phách tells his story in the first person,

<sup>14</sup>There is, however, a Chinese moral essay by Trương Tải (Chinese, Chang Tsai) entitled *Tây Minh*. See Trần Nghĩa 1969.

<sup>15</sup>Watt (1957:32) uses the term "formal realism"; Booth (1966:155-59) discusses devices novelists use to achieve it. See also Davis 1983:174-92.

<sup>16</sup>Lê Trị Viên and Hoàng Ngọc Phách discuss the Chinese and Vietnamese versions of *Nhị Độ Mai* in their introduction to a 1972 edition of the poem (pp. 11-25). This is the same Hoàng Ngọc Phách who wrote *Tố Tâm*. He never wrote another novel but continued to edit traditional Vietnamese works. He also assisted in the preparation of an edition of *Lục Vân Tiên*. See Trần Nghĩa (1969:125).

<sup>17</sup>If traditional Vietnamese writers wanted to tell their own story, they had to do it surreptitiously, as Nguyễn Đình Chiểu did in *Lục Vân Tiên*. In his poem he achieves what in real life eluded him: he regains his eyesight and rids the land of foreign invaders. *Lục Vân Tiên* is in this sense a personal poem. Davis (1983:11-24) points out that quasi-allegorical works are framed (the fact-fiction distinction is blurred) and this framing, he says, is a feature of the novel. The poem is not primarily a self-expressive work, however, and in all other respects it is clearly a romance.

sometimes nicely avoiding the troublesome pronoun *tôi* by referring to himself as *ký giả* (reporter). When Đạm Thủy tells his story to the *ký giả*, however, Đạm Thủy refers to himself as *tôi*. Much of the novel consists of letters written by Đạm Thủy and Tổ Tâm and most of chapter 5 is Tổ Tâm's diary. Thus *Tổ Tâm* is part first-person account, part epistolary novel, part diary. These devices were dramatically new and were rarely used even by later writers associated with the Self-Strength Literary Group [Tự lực văn đoàn]. Note that the source for the story of Tổ Tâm is a friend, not an old book. Note also that Hoàng Ngọc Phách mentions his source in his preface and not in the body of the novel. His preface also contains this comment: "Because this reporter is not yet old enough to know how to invent characters for a story, this reporter has simply copied it down [as he heard it from his friend]" (TT, xii).<sup>18</sup> By mentioning in his preface that he is simply reporting a friend's story, Hoàng Ngọc Phách conveys the idea that *Tổ Tâm* is a true story. Romance writers, in contrast, suggest that their protagonists are real historical figures, but they admit their plots are fictitious. To use a term Davis prefers, *Tổ Tâm* is quite elaborately "framed," as was Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and many of the early European novels (1983:11–24): they are presented in such a way that readers do not know for sure whether the story is fact or fiction. This ambiguous relation to fact is, according to Davis, a distinguishing feature of the novel. *Tổ Tâm* was clearly labeled a *tiểu thuyết*, which suggests a work of fiction, but the preface, the reportorial stance of the narrator, and the fact that the characters were like those that Vietnamese in Hanoi encountered every day encouraged readers to accept it as true. These encouragements apparently succeeded. In a 1942 interview Hoàng Ngọc Phách told how on a boat ride his companions threatened to throw him overboard and not let him back in the boat until he revealed the true identity of Tổ Tâm (Lê Thanh 1942:105).

Davis argues that early English novelists like Defoe did not clarify whether they were writing truth or fiction because in the mid-eighteenth century "news" and "novels" were not yet clearly differentiated. He sees the novel as emerging from an undifferentiated news/novels matrix—as the result of a gradual sharpening of the distinction between journalistic and fictional prose. In other words, he suggests (Davis 1983:42–70, 154–73) that Defoe's elaborate framing of *Robinson Crusoe*, which makes it impossible to determine whether it is a true or fictitious account, was unconscious and that Defoe blurred the distinction between fact and fiction because he was not yet clear in his own mind about the difference between journalistic and novelistic prose. Was Hoàng Ngọc Phách equally unclear about the difference? Probably he was clear about it, because he had read modern French novels whose authors and readers were aware that fiction and journalism were different genres. Vietnamese readers were probably not so clear about the distinction. In the Vietnamese tradition prose was used to write moral treatises, history, and *truyện kỳ* stories, which, as we have pointed out, were a kind of embellished or pseudo-history. Prose was also used in journalism, of course, which by 1925 was well developed in Vietnam.<sup>19</sup> Hoàng Ngọc Phách may have blurred fact and fiction to give *Tổ Tâm* the allure of news and associate it with an increasingly accepted genre—the journalistic account. Or he may have been influenced by French and Chinese works like Dumas fils's *La dame aux camélias* (see n. 16), Bourget's *Le disciple*, and Hsu Chen-ya's *Hsueh hung lei shih* (Vietnamese, *Tuyệt*

<sup>18</sup>Compare this line from the first chapter of *La dame aux camélias*: "Since I am not yet of an age to invent, I must make do with telling a tale" (Dumas [1846] 1986:1).

<sup>19</sup>The first journal in *quốc ngữ* appeared in 1865. By the end of 1925 over fifty journals had been established in Vietnam (although not all were still publishing in 1925). See Huỳnh Văn Tông 1973.

*Hồng Lệ Sứ* [Sorrowful tale of a snow swan]) whose authors employ similar framing devices.

We now take up Davis's remaining distinction:

6. Romances value the preservation of virtue and chastity; novels tend to focus on illegal doings and forbidden passions. (Davis 1983:40)

In considering this distinction we shall begin to focus more on the content than on the form of *Lục Vân Tiên* and *Tố Tâm*. Distinction 6 is related to the rule of *bienseance*, included in Davis's ninth distinction. *Bienseance* refers to decorum, to the requirement accepted by the writers or romances that those characters who perform exemplary deeds should be rewarded and those who commit bad acts should be punished. In Vietnam *bienseance* was, until the twentieth century, accepted as a given. "The purpose of literature is to carry doctrine" (*Văn dĩ tải đạo*) says a Sino-Vietnamese proverb. *Lục Vân Tiên* qualifies as a romance because it demonstrates—perhaps better than some other verse narratives—this principle of *bienseance*. Plot becomes the instrument used to realize the principle: in the end the virtuous hero and heroine are rewarded with marriage and *Vân Tiên* obtains the throne, while the evildoers are devoured by tigers and whales or some other *deus ex machina*.

*Tố Tâm* does not completely abandon the rule of *bienseance*, but it inches away from it, thereby crossing the threshold separating romance from novel. This more than any other departure from traditional narration explains why *Tố Tâm* shocked its readers.

### The Five Bonds, Loyalty-Filial Piety, and Chastity-Righteousness

What doctrine did the verse romances carry? Primarily the Confucian doctrine summed up by the Sino-Vietnamese phrases *luân-thường* (or *cương-thường*) and *trung-hiếu tiết-nghĩa*. The first phrase refers to the five bonds (*luân* or *cương*) and the five principles (*thường*) of moral conduct. The five bonds are king-subject, parent-child, husband-wife, older sibling-younger sibling, and friend-friend. The five principles are benevolent love (*nhân*), righteousness (*nghĩa*), propriety (*lễ*), wisdom (*trí*), and faithfulness (*tín*). The second phrase names the virtues one should observe in fulfilling the bonds. *Trung*, loyalty, refers primarily to the first bond: subjects should be loyal to their king. *Hiếu*, filial piety, refers to the second bond: children should demonstrate filial devotion to their parents. *Tiết*, usually translated as chastity or purity, refers to the obligations of the wife in fulfilling the bond of husband-wife. To fulfill *tiết* a woman must preserve her virginity before marriage and remain faithful and obedient to her husband afterward. When her husband dies, she must not take another husband but must transfer her obedience to her oldest son. "To venerate one husband—that is *tiết*," *Trần Văn Giàu* explains (1973:252).

*Nghĩa*, one of the five principles, is used in the phrase *tiết-nghĩa* to refer to the obligations of the husband. The code of conduct suggested by the word *nghĩa* did not preclude the taking of more than one wife but it did require a high level of moral conduct. Often *nghĩa* appears with *nhân*, another of the five principles, in the compound word *nhân-nghĩa*. The phrase suggests a man who obeyed the common Sino-Vietnamese four-syllable expression, "Respect righteousness, despise riches" [*Trọng nghĩa khinh tài*], a man who helped the needy, a man who performed righteous deeds not for hope of material reward but because it was right to do so.

Traditional thought in Vietnam was shaped by other doctrines besides Confucianism; there were Buddhist, Taoist, and non-Sinic Southeast Asian elements. But

the importance of *luân-thường* for Vietnamese is undeniable. Phan Đình Phùng, a leader of struggles against the French in the 1880s who came from the same village as Hoàng Ngọc Phách (Đông Thái village in Hà Tĩnh Province), makes this clear: "Our country is thousands of years old; our land is not large, our troops are not strong, our wealth is not great; the one foundation on which to build our country is *luân-thường*: king-subject, father-son" (quoted by Trần Văn Giàu 1973:221).<sup>20</sup> All Vietnamese verse narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries preached the Confucian virtues of *trung-hiếu tiết-nghĩa*, and none did so more forcefully than *Lục Vân Tiên*. Nguyễn Đình Chiểu announces his Confucian moral at the beginning of his poem: "Men take loyalty-filial piety [*trung hiếu*] as your rule, / Women take chastity [*tiết-bạch*] as the word to improve yourselves" (lines 5–6). In the tale the hero and heroine exhibit the Confucian virtues at every turn. Vân Tiên demonstrates *trung* by being a loyal subject of his king and by helping him fight those who threaten the kingdom. He demonstrates *hiếu* by not taking his examination and by returning home for his mother's funeral and weeping so excessively over her death that he goes blind. He demonstrates *nhân-nghĩa* by always being ready to perform righteous acts, like his saving of Nguyệt Nga from the brigands.

Nguyệt Nga is a fitting match for the virtuous Vân Tiên. By traveling long distances to join her father, who has been transferred to a faraway post, she demonstrates *hiếu*. About to be sent to a distant land as a tribute wife, she worries not about herself but about who will take care of her aging father, another demonstration of *hiếu*. When she is about to be offered as a tribute wife, she must make an impossible choice between the Confucian virtues of *tiết*, or faithfulness to Vân Tiên, and *trung*, loyalty to her king. Her inability to decide between these two virtues drives her to suicide.

### The "Forbidden Passion" in *Tổ Tâm*

In many aspects *Tổ Tâm* is a moral tale in the *tài-tử giai nhân* (talent-meets-beauty) tradition. Đạm Thủy is a talented student (albeit one who reads French philosophy and novels, not the Four Books and Five Classics) and Tổ Tâm is a young woman who, like Thúy Kiều and Nguyệt Nga and other heroines of the verse narratives, possesses both beauty and literary talent. Đạm Thủy demonstrates *hiếu* by agreeing, despite his love for Tổ Tâm, to marry the woman his parents have chosen for him. Tổ Tâm, like a typical heroine of a verse narrative, must decide between filial piety and her love for Đạm Thủy. Outwardly she acquiesces and marries to please her mother, thereby demonstrating *hiếu*, but inwardly she remains pure and continues to worship Đạm Thủy, thereby demonstrating *tiết*. Like Nguyệt Nga in *Lục Vân Tiên*, she opts for suicide, not a quick suicide by drowning but a slow suicide by giving up the desire to live. Tổ Tâm is not married or even officially betrothed to Đạm Thủy (that is what causes all the problems), but in the Vietnamese tradition private pledges of devotion, not only a public betrothal, could put a woman under the strictures of the husband-wife bond. Nguyệt Nga in *Lục Vân Tiên*, for example, is not publicly betrothed to Vân Tiên until the end of the story. Vân Tiên is not even aware that she is suffering to remain chaste for him. It is Nguyệt Nga's private pledge that makes her act toward Vân Tiên as a virtuous wife was expected to act toward her husband (Công Huyền Tôn Nữ Nha Trang 1973:62–77). Like Nguyệt Nga, Tổ Tâm operates on the basis of a private, not a public, pledge.

<sup>20</sup>Phan Đình Phùng mentions only the first two bonds, the two that were considered to be the most important because they were the basis for political stability.

*Tố Tâm*, however, definitely carries a different doctrine from *Lục Vân Tiên*. For one thing, *Tố Tâm* and *Đạm Thủy* act in nontraditional ways. In Vietnam marriages were arranged by parents, and the bride and groom usually did not know each other, or knew each other only slightly, before they were married. Before marriage young people were to follow the rule *Nam nữ thọ thọ bất thân* (Men and women should never touch each other). Therefore scenes like the one at *Đồ-Sơn* where *Tố Tâm* and *Đạm Thủy* walk along the beach alone and the one in which *Tố Tâm* grasps *Đạm Thủy*'s hand to show her love would have struck readers as new and daring. In fact, they would have bordered on the scandalous, because *Đạm Thủy*'s parents have already engaged him to another woman. *Tố Tâm* knows about *Đạm Thủy*'s engagement and admits at one point that her love is hopeless, but she still persists in loving him. In traditional Vietnam love was always associated with marriage. In immersing herself in a love that has no chance of ending in marriage, *Tố Tâm* definitely exhibits non-traditional behavior (*Công Huyền Tôn Nữ Nha Trang* 1982:5).

But these aspects of *Tố Tâm* are only small indications of much more powerful influences shaping Vietnamese culture between the two world wars. *Tố Tâm* did not become a cause célèbre because it was considered prurient. Physical attraction is not an important force in *Tố Tâm*. *Tố Tâm* and *Đạm Thủy* are attracted to each other because they share an interest in literature, intellectual discussion, and natural scenery. *Hoàng Ngọc Phách* has *Đạm Thủy* explain that between two people whose love is based on mutual appreciation of the finer things of life physical beauty is secondary and the relationship can never deteriorate into something crudely physical (*TT*, 57). What is new about the *Tố Tâm*–*Đạm Thủy* relationship is the two lovers' contemplation of the idea that their love for each other might be the most important thing in their existence—more important than obedience to parents and the maintenance of family harmony. This is the “forbidden passion” that upset conservative readers. Marriages were arranged by parents who often chose partners that would promote the prestige and economic well-being of the family. Children were expected to obey. Traditional Confucian morality placed a person so tightly within a web of social relations that it was difficult to think of oneself as an autonomous person with individual likes and dislikes, free to make personal choices. *Tố Tâm* shocked readers because *Hoàng Ngọc Phách* allows his characters to dream about individual happiness based on romantic love in a society still dominated by a morality that placed the well-being of the group, especially the family, above that of the individual. To use terms favored by a modern critic from Hanoi, *Tố Tâm* appeared when “capitalist individualism” was on the rise but “feudal Confucianism” still held sway (*Phan Cự Đệ* 1974, 1:23). It is this tension in *Tố Tâm* that makes it such a striking document of a society in transition.

### *Tố Tâm's* Foreign Relations

The notion that romantic love was the supreme happiness comes from the West, as *Hoàng Ngọc Phách's* *Đạm Thủy* is aware. At one point he thinks of running off to some remote area with *Tố Tâm* and building a life together. “I thought of taking her away,” *Đạm Thủy* explains, “and didn't worry about leaving my native land because I had been influenced by Western love novels, but then I realized that my feeling for the family was stronger and could smash this new influence and prevent me from doing anything rash” (*TT*, 61). In the end, Western individualism is defeated and traditional Confucian morality upheld.

Leslie Fiedler (1966) traces the notion of romantic love to codes of courtly love in eleventh-century Provence and to the eighteenth-century romantic movement. From



these sources emerged the bourgeois sentimental love novel, a type of novel that favors women's names for titles: Richardson's *Clarissa*, Rousseau's *Julie*, Lamartine's *Graziella*, Dumas fils's *Camille*. Hoàng Ngọc Phách's heroine Tố Tâm is related to these heroines just as certainly as she is related to Hạnh Nguyên, Thúy Kiều, Nguyệt Nga, and other heroines of the Vietnamese versions of Eastern talent-meets-beauty stories. Tố Tâm's behavior can be understood in two ways: as a demonstration of Vietnamese faithfulness (*tiết*) and loyalty (*trung*) to a man to whom she has secretly betrothed herself; or as an intentional, romantic, Rousseauian surrender to passion. Hoàng Ngọc Phách apparently realized that his heroine's actions could be understood in both ways. Because he, as a student at the teachers' college, was soon to be in charge of the moral development of Vietnamese youth and because he himself believed in the traditional *đại gia đình*, or great family,<sup>21</sup> he included a preface in which he presented the novel as an object lesson on the dangers of the kind of romantic love encouraged by Western novels. He also stressed Tố Tâm's Confucian virtues. Here is a woman, he says, who endures suffering rather than harm the man she loves. This feeling, he continues, "when applied in the home makes one a pious daughter [*con hiếu*], when applied to the country makes one a loyal subject [*tôi ngay*], when applied in the husband-wife relationship makes one a good wife and a kind mother" (*TT*, xi). Unfortunately, he analyzed love in such exacting detail and described so effectively how love is revealed in glances and gestures that readers, especially young readers, worshiped him—as Phạm Thế Ngũ (1965, 3:366) says—as a "teacher of love," not a "teacher of morality." Another critic suggests that Hoàng Ngọc Phách's imagination and artistic qualities put him in touch, perhaps unconsciously, with realities related to the attractions of romantic love that the "educator/moralist in him" prevented him at first from fully recognizing. When he recognized that his novel extolled and defended as much as it condemned romantic love, he added a preface to correct the damage (*Công Huyền Tôn Nữ Nha Trang* 1982:19–20).

*Tố Tâm* has another preface, written by a friend of the author's named Lê Hữu Phúc. It sheds some light on this lack of fit between authorial intention and reader reaction and helps us understand what Hoàng Ngọc Phách meant by a *tiểu thuyết tâm lý* (psychological novel). Knowing that *Tố Tâm*'s readers would expect all stories to carry a moral message, he contrasts two approaches to moral education: an outdated approach in which ethical principles are presented as ready-made commandments that may not be discussed and a modern approach in which ethical principles are based on careful observation and study of human psychology. Having established this distinction, he associates the old *tiểu thuyết*<sup>22</sup>—"the kind of *tiểu thuyết* that specifies clearly, unambiguously, and directly what is good and what is bad"—with the old pedagogical approach and the *tiểu thuyết tâm lý* with the new approach (*TT*, vi–vii). When you read a psychological novel, Lê Hữu Phúc explains, you cannot simply imitate the behavior of the hero and heroine because, unlike characters in the old stories, these characters may not be moral exemplars. They are closer to case studies, and readers must analyze them and derive their own conclusions about their behavior. In other words, *Tố Tâm* does not have an explicit moral message announced at the start in ringing phrases as a verse narrative like *Lục Vân Tiên* does, but it contains warnings

<sup>21</sup>In his interview with Lê Thanh, Hoàng Ngọc Phách says he believes the Vietnamese family is a sacred institution that instills in people a willingness to sacrifice and to place altruism above selfishness. "In *Tố Tâm* I wanted to present the amazing influence of the family. The characters in the story understand what it means to make sacrifices for one's parents" (Lê Thanh 1942:109–11).

<sup>22</sup>By "*tiểu thuyết*" here Lê Hữu Phúc means verse romances like *Lục Vân Tiên*

about the dangers of relationships like the one between Tở Tâm and Đạm Thủy. Of course, *Tở Tâm*'s readers did not heed the warnings—not, we would suggest, primarily because they were unaccustomed to working for their moral messages (although that may have contributed) but because *Tở Tâm* sent conflicting messages. Hoàng Ngọc Phách later gave a speech in which he presented arguments on the relation of literature to moral education identical to those presented in this preface by his friend (Hoàng Ngọc Phách [1933] 1941). Clearly in *Tở Tâm* Hoàng Ngọc Phách was trying out the new approaches to moral education that he was learning at the teachers' college at the same time that he was experimenting with a more objective method popularized by French novelists like Maupassant and Bourget. No doubt he hoped that his educational and literary experiments would complement each other.

In sketching the history of the sentimental love novel, Fiedler says that it was from Richardson that Goethe and Rousseau<sup>23</sup> “learned the basic lesson that the subject of the novel is the ‘human heart,’ which is to say, the psyche in all its complexities and dark self-deceits, but especially in the moment of love” (1966:107). These and other European writers passed this lesson on to Hoàng Ngọc Phách. Consider for a moment the similarities between *Clarissa* and *Tở Tâm*: both heroines have names suggesting purity, both are models of virtue, both are lured by attractive male lovers into relationships of which their families and society disapprove, and both commit suicide by willing themselves to death. These similarities no doubt exist for two reasons: because of similarities between the socioeconomic conditions of England and France in the eighteenth century and Vietnam between the world wars (rising petit bourgeois class, capitalist economic system) and because Hoàng Ngọc Phách read French sentimental poems and novels. No doubt the second reason was more important than the first. French writers were very popular with Hoàng Ngọc Phách and his circle: “We read Bourget and Barrès,” he told Lê Thanh in a 1942 interview, “but we preferred the writers and poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth century: Rousseau and Chateaubriand and the writers we called the ‘top four’: Lamartine, Hugo, Musset, and Vigny” (Lê Thanh 1942:102). Hoàng Ngọc Phách's character Đạm Thủy quotes Lamartine (*TT*, 54) and Alfred De Vigny (*TT*, 16) and mentions reading Paul Bourget and Maurice Barrès (*TT*, 14). There are noticeable similarities between *Tở Tâm* and Lamartine's *Graziella* and Dumas fils's *La dame aux camélias*. All three are stories of a passionate, hopeless, and forbidden love; in all three works love is sacrificed to fulfill family responsibilities; in all three the hero reads wrenching letters from his lover after she has died.

Hoàng Ngọc Phách was clearly influenced directly by European writers; he was also influenced indirectly by them via Chinese mandarin duck and butterfly fiction,<sup>24</sup> a type of fiction partially inspired by translations of European novels, especially by Lin Shu's popular translation of Dumas fils's *La dame aux camélias* (Link 1981:54). Hoàng Ngọc Phách's *Tở Tâm* is in many ways a Vietnamese version of *Hsueh hung lei shih* (The sorrowful tale of a snow swan) by Hsu Chen-ya (Vietnamese, Từ Trâm Á), which appeared in the Vietnamese journal *Nam Phong* in 1923 and 1924 in a translation by Mai Khê. Hoàng Ngọc Phách wrote *Tở Tâm* in 1922 (see n. 1), but no doubt Mai Khê's (or someone else's) version was available before this version appeared in *Nam Phong*. Since Hoàng Ngọc Phách knew Chinese, he could also have read *Hsueh hung*

<sup>23</sup>*Clarissa* appeared on the continent in 1751 in a French translation by Abbé Prévost.

<sup>24</sup>This term was first used to refer to a kind of fiction that appeared in China in the 1910s. Its creators were fond of using the conventional symbols of mandarin ducks and butterflies for lovers; hence the name. Writers of the May 4th Movement later used the term to refer to many types of popular fiction written in an older style (Link 1981:7–8).

*lei shih* in the original Chinese. In any event the novels are strikingly similar. Both are elaborately framed with prefaces designed to suggest that the ensuing story is true, both are tales of hopeless love, both contain letters and diary entries, and both end sadly with the heroine willing herself to death. Link outlines six stages of the "Romantic Route" through which the characters in a mandarin duck novel passed: "(1) Extraordinary Inborn Gifts, (2) Supersensitivity, (3) Falling in Love, (4) Cruel Fate, (5) Worry and Disease, and (6) Destruction" (1981:64–78). *Tổ Tâm* and *Đạm Thủy* follow this route, providing further evidence that *Tổ Tâm* is a Vietnamese adaptation of a formula popularized by Chinese writers of mandarin duck fiction. So similar are many of the passages in *Tổ Tâm* and Mai Khê's translation of *Hsueh bung lei shih* that if a passage were lifted from its context it would be difficult to tell from which work it came.

In his 1942 interview with Lê Thanh, Hoàng Ngọc Phách never mentioned *Hsueh bung lei shih*. He described his intentions regarding *Tổ Tâm*: "My goal was to write a novel [*tiểu thuyết*] completely different—in both form and content—from existing novels. In form, I followed the new French novels; the way of telling the story, the description of scenes—all this was according to French literature. In content, I brought in some new thinking; the psychology of characters was analyzed following the techniques of the well-known contemporary novelists" (Lê Thanh 1942: 103–4). The leading practitioner of the psychological novel in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was Paul Bourget, a friend of Maupassant's and a member of Émile Zola's circle. He experimented with realism and naturalism but later found psychological approaches more to his liking. He shared with the realists and naturalists a fondness for observation and detailed description with little authorial comment, but instead of describing outward appearances he preferred to describe the internal psychological states of his characters. Bourget's most successful novel was *Le disciple* (1889), the story of a young man, a "disciple" of a leading determinist philosopher, who drives a young woman to suicide when he uses her to test the validity of his master's theories. It seems clear that Hoàng Ngọc Phách was familiar with this work. He listed Bourget as a favorite author in the interview mentioned above, and there are some scenes in *Tổ Tâm* that resemble scenes in *Le disciple*. For example, Robert Greslon (the disciple) and *Đạm Thủy* discover in similar ways that their love is reciprocated—by coming across some revealing writing and mementos during an unannounced visit to their loved one's room. One critic suggests that *Đạm Thủy*, like Robert Greslon, "at least half consciously, seduces *Tổ Tâm* by playing on her thirst for romantic literature" (Huỳnh Sanh Thông 1984:111).

These similarities, however, are less important than a similarity of technique. A great deal of *Le disciple* involves Robert Greslon's careful self-analysis of his emotions as he falls in love with Charlotte. Like Greslon, *Đạm Thủy* analyzes his feelings in great detail as he reports how his relationship with *Tổ Tâm* moved from brotherly affection to passionate love. Detailed description of anything—outer appearances or inner mental states—was rare in the Vietnamese literary tradition. Phạm Quỳnh, a leading intellectual, collaborator with the French, and editor of the journal *Nam Phong*, pointed this out in 1921 in the first critical study of the Vietnamese novel. Traditional Chinese and Vietnamese writers preferred, he says, the "to record history" (*chép sử*) or "straight road" (*đường thẳng*) approach to story telling, which leaves no room for digressions or descriptions of scenes or feelings (Phạm Quỳnh 1921:8). The fixed poetic form of the verse narratives encouraged only very concise description, usually achieved by using clichés and allusions to the Chinese classics. At least four years before Hoàng Ngọc Phách wrote *Tổ Tâm* some writers had tried their hand at realistic description—most notably Phạm Duy Tốn—and Phạm Quỳnh published and praised their efforts

in his journal,<sup>25</sup> but Hoàng Ngọc Phách was the first northern writer to construct a long work of prose fiction that included extended descriptions of natural scenes and feelings. No doubt this innovation contributed to the dramatic effect *Tổ Tâm* had on its readers.

## Conclusion

After *Tổ Tâm* the chasm between romance and novel became even greater. Hoàng Ngọc Phách's *Đạm Thủy* and *Tổ Tâm* are tempted by individualism, but in the end they sacrifice their personal pleasures in order to maintain the harmony of the *đại gia đình* (great family). In the early 1930s Nhất Linh and other writers of the *Tự lực văn đoàn* (Self-Strength Literary Group) organized a movement that had as two of its ten announced aims the promotion of individualism and the eradication of Confucian morality.<sup>26</sup> Hoàng Ngọc Phách only hints in *Tổ Tâm* that there may be something wrong with arranged marriages;<sup>27</sup> the Self-Strength writers wrote novels that explicitly attacked them and other aspects of traditional, primarily Confucian morality. *Tổ Tâm* can be seen as a bridge spanning the gulf between verse narratives like *Lục Vân Tiên* and the works of the Self-Strength writers.

Lennard Davis says the rupture between romance and novel should not be understood as a deliberate revolt against romance; he is against oversimplified notions of influence that portray literary history as a linear series of individual writers consciously imitating or rebelling against previous writers. All questions of influence, he says, should be referred back to the sociocultural context (Davis 1983:41). The Vietnamese case partially confirms Davis's view, but of course unlike English novelists like Defoe and Richardson, who groped toward a genre that did not yet exist, Hoàng Ngọc Phách and other early Vietnamese novelists attempted to do in Vietnamese what others had already done in other languages. There was some deliberate imitation. But *Tổ Tâm* cannot be understood as a simple act of rebellion or imitation. It was, as we have attempted to show, a product of its age. Hoàng Ngọc Phách understood this. In reflecting later on the impact of *Tổ Tâm*, he said: "It seems to have appeared when we were waiting for such a novel" (Lê Thanh 1942:106).

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<sup>25</sup>See, for example, Phạm Quỳnh's (1918:355) introduction to Phạm Duy Tốn's "*Sống Chết Mặc Bầy*" (A matter of life and death), a story employing objective and careful description that is modeled on "La partie de billard" by Alphonse Daudet.

<sup>26</sup>These aims were printed in the journal *Phong Hóa* (Manners and morals), Mar. 2, 1987.

<sup>27</sup>He hints this, for example, by having a wise uncle of *Tổ Tâm*'s argue persuasively (but futilely) with her mother against forcing children to marry someone they do not love (64-65).

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