

## Rethinking the Status of Vietnamese Women in Folklore and Oral History

### Introduction

When one takes a close look at Vietnamese society, one may be startled by the paradoxical status of women: their low social representation, or absence thereof, and their actual place in society, testified to by history and confirmed by legends, or even their preeminence in some oral traditions and symbolic representations. Does one not say in Vietnamese: “When the enemy is at the gate, the woman goes out fighting” (Giac den nha dan ba phai danh)? And, indeed, they were made to contribute to the war effort against the Americans. Drawn into the Thanh Nien Xung Phong (Committed Youth), hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese females sacrificed their youth by answering “aye” to the call of “the country needs you,” enrolling and going to the front in order to accomplish the hardest tasks. A good many of them had not yet had time to savor the taste of love before falling into the oblivion of history. Those who survived and are still alive today live in such a state of moral and material abandonment that they often have had to form a community within the community (a village) to cope with the general indifference.<sup>1</sup> The history of these women and this movement is yet to be written.

Apart from a few isolated cases, the existing studies that deal with women’s issues do not allow a global vision, nor do they trace back the course of time in order to find out whether their position has always been the same. Those who hope to address this question will inevitably encounter source-related problems, at least insofar as ancient history is concerned. As for the colonial period, there is

sufficient material to form a relatively truthful idea of reality.<sup>2</sup> It is, for instance, acknowledged that during the 1930s Vietnamese women, that is, those of the more educated or progressive classes, began to liberate themselves from the social yoke or family ties, forcing other social actors to place the issue at the forefront of the national debate. But the movement was not to be pursued after 1945. The urgency of the national war of independence set the question aside and relegated it to a hypothetical agenda. Because of the paucity of classical sources (be they archives, annals, miscellanies, or memoranda), which do not dwell much on the subject when they exist, the historian needs to find other ways and means. Consequently, oral sources as well as cultural traditions may be of use to fill the gap. A new way was thus paved in the 1950s by Phan Khôi, who took the initiative in considering language as a historical source.<sup>3</sup> It is on this most promising path that I shall endeavor to follow suit, dedicating myself to the roles and representations of women in Vietnamese society.

In this respect, the riches of proverbs, sayings, and folk songs (*ca dao*) constitute an unequalled and immeasurable stock of information. I refer in particular to two collected volumes: one by Nguyễn Văn Ngọc, many times reedited, whose first edition dates back to 1926; and the other by Vũ Ngọc Phan, which may now be regarded as a classic of its kind.<sup>4</sup> As shrewd observers, the Vietnamese describe what they see and feel through compositions that, albeit succinct, are endowed with rhyming qualities and much common sense. Every domain of human activity is represented in this treasury of the Vietnamese language: therein, love takes a nonnegligible place, humor finds good terrain, bawdiness flourishes, morality wages its authority, psychology has its fair share, social relations are reflected with clarity, and peasant life is detailed in full. If every period produces its own linguistic sequence so as to translate a multifaceted reality, borrowing foreign words seems to be an essential part of that process.

### **Gender Relations in Legends and Vietnamese History**

Since the dawn of the Christian era, the Vietnamese woman has shown both determination and combativeness. These qualities have

been demonstrated in the persons of the Trung sisters. Let us just remind ourselves that they are the first historical figures—as opposed to mythical ones—to have assumed rebellion against Chinese domination. According to Nguyễn Trai, a scholar whose literary talent was coupled with a military career, they renamed the country Hùng Lạc, Hùng being undoubtedly the name of the clan, and Lạc that of the ethnic group wherefrom the Vietnamese people are descended. Another text reveals a no less puzzling detail: the two siblings' surname was Hùng.<sup>5</sup> How, then, not to be tempted to speculate on a relation between this term, *Hùng*, and the homonymous first dynasty of Vietnam? Having had a close look at it, what does one see: a name, Hùng, borne by two different families, separated by an interval of three centuries, that is, if one refers to the official historiography, dating from the beginning of the Hùng dynasty at around 2600 B.C. and its fall at the end of the third century B.C.? This would simply mean that each of the eighteen Hùng sovereigns, *all males*, should have reigned for an average period of one hundred years if one is to agree with the date of the Trung sisters' rebellion in 43 A.D. Indeed, all common sense prevents us from considering something so ludicrous. Through the grace of what miracle could all Hùng sovereigns have enjoyed a longevity as surprising as supernatural? Moreover, one knows that the legend of the Hùng dynasty appeared for the first time as late as the fifteenth century, during the Lê dynasty, after the Ming had been ousted. This precision ought to be underlined, for, as noted by Ta Chi Dai Truong, no document prior to that date has ever mentioned the existence of such a legend.<sup>6</sup> How did it suddenly come into existence in the fifteenth-century official history, namely, Ngô Sĩ Liên's *Dai Viet su ky toan thu* (The Complete History of Dai Viet)? Is it a mythification or the will of the new ruling dynasty to rewrite history and in so doing erase those parts of history that would not conform with the official line?<sup>7</sup>

Be that as it may, the history of Vietnam and its monarchs has always been strewn with legends, which, in the absence of written sources, can prove, within their own limits, to be useful material. If the founding myth of the Viet people may now be read in textbooks, the mystery of its true origin remains whole. Ethnologist Nguyễn Tu Chi is the only one to have attempted to fathom it. Let us, in turn, briefly recall this legend and read it to the letter.

Vietnam's national history in its legendary part relates that the

Viet people descend from a mythical couple, Lac Long, an offspring of the dragons, and Au Co, a fairy. They gave birth to a hundred eggs, out of which a hundred sons were hatched. Notwithstanding this happy progeniture, the couple had to part because of astrological incompatibilities—one belonging to the water element and the other to the fire element. But before each went his or her own way, Lac Long and Au Co divided up the children: half followed their father back into the waters, the territory of the dragons, while the other half went with their mother to the mountains. Comparing this legend with a similar Muong version, Nguyễn Tu Chi sees in this separation a symbol of the divorce, at a date undetermined, between the two cousin peoples, the Viet and the Muong.<sup>8</sup> This hypothesis is yet to be confirmed. For the time being, let us limit ourselves to the narration of this most astounding legend.

What has become of the fifty sons who followed in the footsteps of their dragon-father and returned to the waters? Nobody knows. For if the Viet people have been able to develop and prosper they could only have done so on firm ground, where the fifty others remained with their mother, Au Co. (Despite the fact that they live on a long coast, the Vietnamese have always preferred the mainland.) At this stage of the inquiry, one may ask oneself how fifty males—those who stayed with the mother—were able to reproduce without the aid of any other female, except their own mother. Did they marry among neighboring tribes, and in this case which ones? And how is it, then, that the legend should not have retained the female factor in the national reproductive process? Did Au Co resume her role of genetrix? In the latter case, incest would have been the original mode of reproduction in those pristine times—we are in 2000 B.C., remember! In other words, the Vietnamese people would be the descendants of the fifty sons who remained with their mother. So here, it goes without saying, the maternal element becomes essential. Must one conclude that this legend, which appeared in the fifteenth century, the golden age of Confucianism in Vietnam, should have left such a patent trace of a matrilineal society? Another detail ought to be noted: the “hundred sons” produced by this mythical couple may be an unambiguous indicator of the Confucian predominance of men over women. But how could the forebears of the Vietnamese people in 2000 B.C. have conceived a theory that had not yet been born? Was Confucius not Buddha’s and Socrates’ contemporary in the sixth century B.C.? The legend proves utterly

anachronistic in the face of historical evidence. However, in the share of their progeniture, Au Co appears to have been the strict equal of Lac Long, since she was entitled to half of the children. Is this proof of the legend's feeble construction, if one accepts it as the work of the Confucianists—who considered males to be superior to females—or must one just see a deliberate emphasizing of a difficult transitory period during which two antagonistic systems were at loggerheads? Or is it just an indication that the practices evoked had not quite disappeared at the moment of the legend's fabrication?

This legendary story is testified to in the common phrase, known to every Vietnamese, *Con rồng, cháu tiên*, "Children of the dragon, grandchildren of the fairy," a proud epithet that the Vietnamese have bestowed upon themselves to legitimize their origin. Here again one notices that *dragon* and *fairy* are not on the same hierarchical level. The former is placed just above the ego level, whereas the latter is once removed from there (grandmother or great-grandmother, since the term *cháu* is used both by grandchildren and great-grandchildren). The dissymmetry, both parental and temporal, situates the female element prior to the male. From this expression, at least two assumptions may be made: First, relations between parent (the father) and child are closer; consequently, the male takes precedence over the female. The second hypothesis is the grandparents' position, in this case that the grandmother is more important than the parents, represented here in the person of the father, because the elder comes before the younger. This temporal indicator, which recalls the respect of ancient rituals, forces one to acknowledge a prevalence of women over men. In short, the male-female opposition remains, although the male is no longer, as has often been the case, represented as the omnipotent figure.

In another respect, if one looks at the literary form of the phrase *Con rồng, cháu tiên*, what comes to mind is the scholarly style of parallel sentences (*câu đối*), very much in fashion in the Chinese classical culture. In the phrase, *con* (child) is opposed to, or rather finds, its parallel (*đối*) in *cháu* (grandchild), likewise for *rồng* (dragon) and *tiên* (fairy). Conceived by a Confucianist scholar, this expression could only have come into being during the sinicization period. It is highly probable that it should have appeared at the same time as the aforementioned founding myth in the fifteenth century.

A last remark: the dragon is one of the four wonder animals,

embodying imperial power in Chinese symbolism, introduced in Vietnam at the very earliest in the beginning of the Christian era. This remark also applies to the Lac Long and Au Co episode and specifically to Lac Long. The adoption of this honorific symbol could only have been the work of the sinicized ruling classes. *Long* is, besides, a Chinese term for “dragon,” the Vietnamese vernacular being *rông*. In the same perspective, one may also read in textbooks a variant in which *Lac Long* becomes *Lac Long Quan* (Lord/His Worship Lac Long) and *Au Co* becomes *Bà Au Co* (Mistress Au Co). *Lac Long* is here qualified with the title *Quan*, used for a person of high rank. The nominal group “Lac Long + Quan” follows the Chinese syntax; conversely, it is the Vietnamese syntax that is applied to the feminine element “Ba + Au Co.” Two rationales therefore cohabit in the same tale: the male element imbued with Chinese thought and the female reflecting Vietnamese usage, syntactical and otherwise.

As for the term *tien*, it is a Chinese-based word that may be translated as “fairy,” “immortal,” or “being that has attained immortality through wisdom and detachment” (*tu* in Vietnamese). One observes that *tien* in Chinese is formed by two characters: “mountain,” preceded by the radical “man.” In other words, *tien* ought merely to designate “the man in the mountain.” Would it be pushing it too far to assume that the feminine ancestor of the Vietnamese—the fairy Au Co—was a Montagnard? Did the population of today’s Vietnam not correspond with a slow emigration from the south of China and through the mountains to the plains? One could, of course, carry on speculating endlessly, but with the true intention of finding new paths, and without prejudice or partiality, to prepare the ground for further fields of investigation is no vain endeavor. Even though this last interpretation may seem far-fetched, the term *tien* nevertheless conveys a Chinese notion that could not have been introduced into Vietnamese society before its sinicization. One falls once more into an absolute anachronism.

### **Challenging Confucian Values on Women’s Status**

Let us concentrate for a moment on the Confucian component of Vietnamese morals. As a child, every Vietnamese had to learn at school the following poem by heart.

*Cong cha nhu nui Thai Son<sup>9</sup>*  
*Nghĩa mẹ như nước trong nguồn chảy ra*  
*Một lòng thờ mẹ kính cha*  
*Cho tròn chu hiếu mới là đạo con.*

(The good deeds of Father are as great as Mount Thai Son  
 The virtue of Mother is as bountiful as springwater  
 gushing from its source  
 Wholeheartedly is Mother to be revered and Father  
 respected  
 So that the child's way may be accomplished.)

This proverb, epitomizing the gist of Confucian morals, was probably diffused during the sinicization period, which roughly corresponds to the beginning of the Christian era up to the fifteenth century, perhaps a little later. Here one is not so much faced with a problem of dating as of meaning. The third line tells us that Mother is “to be revered and Father respected.” However, *revere* and *respect* are not synonymous: one generally reveres gods, deities, supernatural beings, or humans transformed into divinities. But in this precise case it is the mother one reveres and not the father. How blasphemous for a society that gives a dominant, let alone omnipotent, position to the father! How contradictory with Confucian values! Ought one not to see, through this anodine formulation, the survival of some archaic social model wherein the mother is more important than the father? In other words, this reading of Confucianism—which apparently gives precedence to the father in the family structure—has been unable to eradicate all traces of a more ancient (or perhaps at the time still extant) society of a matrilineal type that revered the motherly figure. Great is the temptation to locate this cult of a mother goddess in a more universal pattern, ubiquitous in the history of mankind. Here, one deals not only with linguistics but with semantics. The permutation of the verbs *revere* and *respect* could have been done without altering the rhymes; besides, such contraventions of the versifying rules are often encountered in the oral tradition. And when one knows the rigor with which the classical scholars made their choice of words to express their ideas, one can only assume that the terminology used in this moralistic proverb did not merely answer the requirements of poetics but surely expressed another consideration, that is,

that of recalling ancient practices in order to keep them alive. In that way, one could say that the author, despite his Confucian background, did not wish entirely to deny his deep social and cultural origins. Another instance may be found that makes us lean toward this interpretation. The following folk song brings further evidence thereof.

*Lay cha ba lay mot quy*  
*Lay me bon lay con di lay chong*

(Before Father, I bow my head to the ground three times  
 and kneel  
 Before Mother, I bow my head to the ground four times  
 [When leaving home] to take a spouse.)

*Lay*, the act of touching one's forehead to the ground, is in Asia a sign of submission, respect, or veneration. Why does the daughter bow only three times before her father and four before her mother? Why this asymmetry in favor of the mother? Contrary to the Confucian reading, this folk song (*ca dao*) is no deed of a scholar; it just mirrors those customs common to the nonsinicized Vietnamese society, or at least widespread among the social classes ignorant of the Confucian morals. This presumption is reinforced by the fact that here the daughter tells her parents that she is to take a spouse; she does not submit passively to the parental will. This ought to be stressed: the normally "done thing" for girls of Confucian education was to leave one's decision to marry to the discretion of the parents.

In the spoken language, the married couple is phrased *vo chong* (wife-husband). If one refers to social precedence—and one knows how much importance the Vietnamese give to such matters—the order of the words puts the woman before the man. How ironic! These two words (*vo chong*) belong to the vernacular and not to the Chinese-based vocabulary used in the more literary, philosophical, or scientific domains. The phrase may have been constructed when the Vietnamese still lived under Chinese influence, and their language, being less rich, sufficed to express their vision of the world. It is most likely that in distant times Vietnamese women had a more important role than men. It explains why one used to and still continues to say *vo chong* and not the converse. Does the saying not go thus: *Nhat vo nhi troi*



(First comes one's wife, then comes heaven)? This is absolute blasphemy, for who places heaven above everything else, so much so that it has been deified and a cult to it rendered! This proverb contains two Chinese words—*nhat*, “first,” and *nhi*, “second”—and could only have found its origin during the sinicization period. Nonetheless, the state of affairs seems to have been in total contradiction to the established order. One finds oneself again on the matrilineal side.

In Vietnam's traditional society, in a wedding it is the man who asks the woman's hand and all costs are incurred by him; it is the very meaning of *cuoi* in the expression *cuoi vo*, “take a wife.” However, the reading of *ca dao* (folk songs) teaches us otherwise, and in many cases quite the contrary. For instance:

*Rap renh nuoc chay qua cau*  
*Ba gia tap tenh mua heo cuoi chong*

(Troubled runs the water 'neath the bridge.  
The old woman prepares herself to buy a pig and take a spouse.)

or even:

*Gia bao nhieu mot ong chong*  
*Thi em cung bo du dong ra mua*

(However much it costs to get a man,  
I'll have saved enough to purchase one.)

If one may be reticent in the case of the first *ca dao*, owing to the woman's old age, the phrase *cuoi chong* is unambiguous and probably gives an insight into what used to be common practice. As for the second folk song, there is little doubt as to who is speaking: it is a young girl, to wit, the personal pronoun *em*, which is used by a girl/woman when modestly speaking of herself. In the second verse, the verb *mua*, “purchase/buy,” is explicit enough: the woman buys her husband and not the converse.

So it seems that in the olden days, when Vietnamese society did not yet conform to the Chinese moral and social organizational model, it was the woman who made the choice; moreover, she could

marry more than one man. The existence of polyandry is testified by various folk songs.

*Nguoi ta thich lay nhieu chong  
Toi day chi thich mot ong that ben*

(Others would fain have many a husband.  
I'd rather have only one but ever close at hand.)

*Tram nam tram tuoi tram chong  
Phai duyen thi lay chong ong to hong nao xe*

(In a hundred years' time, you're a hundred years old and  
can wed a hundred husbands.  
Finding a man is not the doing of some genie of  
matrimony.)

The first folk song needs no further commentary; as for the second, "a hundred husbands" is not, of course, to be taken literally, but it means that a woman may marry as many husbands as she will. Here is an interesting point: according to the woman, if she weds as many times as she wishes, it is not due to the goodwill of some genie. The Chinese notion of a genie (*ong to hong*, the oldster who weaves the red threads of marriage) capable of sealing happy unions is being rejected. Two practices and two moral codes are clearly in contradiction; one is local, while the other has been borrowed and grafted upon the former.

If the folk songs allude to ancient customs contradicting the moral code of conduct of the ruling classes, one finds other instances that reflect the conflict between these two social models as well as the difficult transitional period during which both coexisted. Take, for example, the following.

*Ngay sau con te ba bo  
Sao bang luc song con cho lay chong*

(Though when I die you will make an offering of three  
cattle,  
I'd much rather you granted me permission to marry while  
I am still alive.)

In Vietnamese, this *ca dao* is without ambivalence. The mother speaks to her son. Confucian morality forbade a widow to remarry and obliged her to submit to her eldest son's will in virtue of the three precepts of obedience (*tam tong*). *Marry* here means "remarry," for one is concerned with a widow, that which is not explicit in the folk song. Doubtless, this was a time when Confucianism triumphed in Vietnamese society: note the importance of the son's position, from which the mother expresses her desire to subtract herself. As the woman is the depository of traditions and the conveyor of collective memory, her wish—as illustrated in this folk song—must refer to some prior social practice. This *ca dao* not only gives an example of a conflict of generations but also that of two antagonistic sets of values that succeeded one another or became intricately intertwined. In other words, it could be roughly dated from the beginning of the sinicization period.

With regard to the term *tê*, one ought to dwell on it a little longer. *Tê* is a ritual that consists of a sacrifice made to a revered person (say, Heaven, Confucius, or a tutelary genie). Only males are allowed to officiate, pronouncing out loud codified formulas of Chinese origin, which, albeit short, are incomprehensible to the mortal coil. Since this ceremony is borrowed from the Chinese tradition, the spectacle has an exotic semblance: precise and solemn gestures, pomp and circumstance, ornate vestments, and so on. In the colloquial sense, *tê* carries an altogether different meaning when used by an angry woman in the expression *ba tê cho mot tran*, which could be translated as "[This] old woman/grandmother [standing before you] is going to teach [you]." So here the woman assumes a superior status (that of grandmother) in order to express her wrath and scorn, and *tê* means "to abuse and ridicule somebody with insults." Could this change of significance be a deliberate act on behalf of women meant to mock and mimic the original male ritual? The ritualistic formulas have become in their mouths terms of abuse and foul language. When the Vietnamese woman is ready to fight her enemy, *any* enemy, one can grant that it will be a show worth any spectacle of a man sacrificing before the altar. She shakes and gestures toward the despised individual, blatantly abusing him; she might even lift her skirts before an assembly of witnesses to show her parts and shame the person. The scene lasts as long as she deems necessary. Facing such a situation, the "victim" has no choice but to clear off as quickly as possible so as

not to be exposed any longer to public ridicule. Could this be interpreted as the response of a gender, excluded from certain rituals, expressing its rebellion? If this be the case, it would take us back to the times when Chinese morals were the rule but women kept affirming their social position and wanted to repossess the relics of a remote past when they were still the chiefs.

### The Representation of Incest in Oral Tradition

Let us go back to the notion of incest. If many societies repress incestuous acts, others seem either indifferent or consenting, and one is not lacking in such examples. In the Vietnamese oral tradition, there is this instance.

*Con gái mười bảy cho ngủ với cha,  
Con trai mười ba cho nằm với mẹ.*

(A girl of seventeen, let her not sleep with her father.  
A lad of thirteen, let him not lie with his mother.)

This proverb is to be construed as a recommendation or a prohibition. If society needs to make certain rules of a prohibitive nature in order to preserve social harmony and morality, it may be that it is faced with a situation that it deems alarming. In other words, if certain things need be so expressly spelled out one can assume, with more or less certainty, that such things found their cause in reality. Be that as it may, prohibition in any society responds to a reality, whether social, human, moral, cultural, political, or economic. It concerns those practices that constitute a menace to the community or are in contradiction with it; one does not forbid a thing or a concept that does not exist. Which government would forbid, say, people to look at themselves in a mirror? Vietnamese society has given cause to many a telling proverb.

*Chau cau mà lay chau co  
Thoc lua day bo giong ma nha ta*

(If the maternal uncle's nephew marries the paternal aunt's  
niece,  
our house will have its stores full of rice.)

*Vua chua cam doan lam chi  
De doi con di chang lay duoc nhau*

(Wherefore do kings and lords forbid  
two sisters' children to marry each other?)

The first proverb gives clear indications as to degree of kinship between the spouses. The union in this case is judged auspicious and will bring prosperity. In fact, the nephew/niece (*chau*) of the maternal uncle (*cau*) and the niece/nephew of the paternal aunt (*co*) are, in an indirect manner, termed as "siblings." Their union is assimilated to an incest that, far from being disapproved, seems highly commended. As for the second proverb, it not only tells that the prohibition was decreed by kings and lords<sup>10</sup> but that the common people, on the contrary, did not mind intermarriages, namely, in the case of first cousins. In the religious tradition, the couple "*Ong Dung Ba Da*," which, according to the legend, contains a brother and sister, is worshiped as tutelary genies in the Red River delta.<sup>11</sup> Without attempting to go through all the world's traditions, one notes the presence, as in most founding myths, of an original couple, either a brother and a sister, or a mother and a son. In Greek mythology, it is Gaia who, at the beginning of the universe, mates with her son Uranus in order to beget the Titans. With the Baruyas of New Guinea, the founding myth traces the origin of mankind back to the primordial union of a brother and a sister.<sup>12</sup> Could one not regard these tales as some crystallization of the human collective memory, bequeathed from generation to generation under the form of myths? In other words, could these not be some sort of archetype whose authors have been lost in the limbo of immemorial time? In spite of this original incest—which may shock more sensitive souls—Greek myths have never ceased to occupy one of the most highly regarded chapters in the history of human civilization. If Confucianism, however, considered such incestuous acts as a menace to law and order, the common people saw no cause for reprimand in unions involving kinsmen, at least to a certain degree of relationship.

On the linguistic level, the Vietnamese word for incest is *loan luan*, a Chinese-based word, which means literally: "anarchical morals, inverted or drifting morality." If the Vietnamese had to borrow the word from the Chinese, it is because the idea of "incest" probably

did not exist in their body of conceptual representations. Had such a state of affairs posed, in their eyes, any problem, they surely would have created a word for it. Is a foreign word not clear evidence that the object or concept that is described in the language borrowed from did not exist in one's own? Examples abound.

However, one needs to be circumspect when dealing with this kind of question—fascinating as it may be, in fact, one of the anthropologist's most studied subjects—for its emotional load is most explosive. The past, whether it be historical or mythical, cannot be gauged with today's eyes, since every period has its own *raison d'être* and its proper representational system. Nevertheless, it would be as absurd to defend a custom on the sole merit of its finding its cause in the past. The quest for meaning is paramount and prior to any other consideration, be it ideological or philosophical, affective or moral. Unless and until the hidden meaning has been cleansed of its parasites, one cannot hope to see a glimmer of comprehension.

### **Modernity and Women's Quest for Equal Rights**

Decades later, under French colonial power, Vietnamese women embraced modernity with their already historical gains and cultural practices. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Franco-Vietnamese education, and the media, contributed to major changes in Vietnamese society. These two agents of modernity, although limited in Vietnam<sup>13</sup> and under the control of French colonial authority, did provide Vietnamese women with social and political spaces, which were traditionally dominated by men.

By 1920, many Vietnamese women held university degrees and eleven of them were granted fellowships to study in France. In Paris in 1935, Hoang Thi Nga, of Hanoi, was the first Vietnamese to receive a Ph.D. in science<sup>14</sup> from a French university. In the past, under ancient dynasties, women were not even allowed to participate in the mandarin examinations. These examinations gave men status and social recognition, granting the brightest graduates the privilege of having a stone stele in the literature temple in Hanoi.

In 1936, after the election in France of the Popular Front party, and during the period of high expectations for social change, Vietnamese women activists created a committee to write a "guest book" in

each city, Hanoi, Saigon, and Hue, during the months of August and September. This new form of activism among Vietnamese women was praised in the newspaper *Dan Ba Moi*, in an editorial written by Nguyễn Thi Kiem, a journalist well known by her readers. The title of the article shows a great deal of cynicism, “The Building of the Indochinese Congress: For the First Time Women of Three Regions Have Found Ways to Meet in Order to Engage in Politics.”<sup>15</sup> But Nguyễn Thi Kiem had no illusions when she wrote:

To engage in politics is to work in the highest spheres of power in order to claim equal rights for a group of people that one is representing or hopes to represent. In a way, its true meaning is to be able to “engage in politics” in any country in the world. But in our country, which is under colonial power, its meaning is very limited. What do we have to defend and claim as rights? In our country, to engage in politics is to accumulate testimonies, take pictures to document our misery so we can beg for a little bit more from French authority. And we don’t even get much opportunity to do that. This is why there is no difference between Vietnamese men and women when they engage in politics.

But of course, these opinions could not have been expressed if there were no newspapers to support women’s rights. In Vietnam during the period 1929–36, there were three feminist newspapers or at least newspapers that supported women’s rights: *Phu nu tân van*, published in Saigon from 1929 to 1934; *Phu nu thoi dam*, published in Hanoi from 1930 to 1934; and *Dan Ba Moi* published in Saigon from 1934 to 1936.

The number of copies of each of these publications was quite astonishing at the time: 2,000 copies for *Dan Ba Moi*, 6,000 for *Phu nu thoi dam*, and 8,500 for *Phu nu tan van*.<sup>16</sup> As a comparison, in 1936 there were 111,000 people living in Saigon and 149,000 in Hanoi.<sup>17</sup> These weekly newspapers were written for both men and women readers. All the topics were of general social interest to both genders and included articles on premarital virginity and early marriage, polygamy and widows’ remarriage, and romantic love and free choice of a spouse. In other words, Vietnamese women were claiming their equal rights in a male society. The interest of these newspapers is that they

challenge a male society in which men were not only at the center but had supreme power. And at the same time these newspapers initiated dialogues by publishing special columns in which readers could express themselves. In other words, they created a platform for open discussion, which in turn contributed to the intellectual endowment.<sup>18</sup> In addition, male writers were supporting women's rights as was the case in the publication of *Tô Tâm*, a romantic novel by Hoang Ngoc Phach, former student of the École Normal Supérieure of Hanoi. Ten years later, in his novel *Doan Tuyet* (The Break), the writer Nhat Linh, alias Nguyễn Tuong Tam, saved a woman from an abusive family. The Vietnamese family, a representation of Confucian society, was contested by the women's movement.

In any event, the participation of Vietnamese women in the political arena was not simply a product of Vietnamese history. Vietnamese women at the time were also supported and encouraged by other women's movements around the world, in particular in China and the Western countries. On the other hand, one could have argued that this new frenzy of liberation had a downside. In 1930, weekly newspapers in Hanoi constantly noted the rising number of suicides by Vietnamese women. A small lake was renamed as "grave of beauty," Mo Hong Nhan.<sup>19</sup> But in reality these tragedies, which provoked high emotions among the readers, were not as abnormal as the media presented them. In fact, the level of suicide in Hanoi for both men and women was relatively low in comparison with that in Europe during the same period. There were 2.7 suicides per 100,000 people in Vietnam, while in France there were 20.2. Thus, public opinion was very much influenced by the media's dramatization of current events.

By 1930, women who were placing women's issues on the Vietnamese national political agenda included Dam Phuong, Nguyễn Thi Kiem, Thuy An, and Nguyễn Thi Khang.<sup>20</sup> It is also important to note that this Vietnamese feminist movement was limited to the urban boundaries of the cities of Hanoi and Saigon. The life of the majority of Vietnamese peasants was far removed from urban concerns and political debates and was still dictated by the cultural patterns of previous generations. This does not mean, however, that Vietnamese women in the countryside were totally submissive to men's authority. On the contrary, only a few privileged people who wanted to imitate the urban cultural lifestyle followed Confucian cultural practices. On the other hand, the majority of peasant women worked side by side with men in



the fields and enjoyed some level of equality. Such equality was derived from their rural mode of subsistence. In villages, religious practices were respected and had a significant impact on gender relations. For instance, during religious holidays women often went for a two- to three-day trip to visit a distant pagoda. Men stayed home and had no problem with their wives traveling with other woman friends or relatives. This is another example of how Vietnamese women gained and claimed some rights and independence throughout history.

### Conclusion

This work of clearance is still at its locating stage; from now on we may start to form some ideas. We must agree with Phan Khoi, who argues that Vietnamese society in effect went through a matrilineal system, lasting at least till the era of the Trung sisters, before adopting the patriarchy. Relying on variegated material as well as implacable demonstrations, he rightly objects to his antagonists, “Where were the men, then—if one assumes that Vietnam was patriarchal—since it had fallen to women to conduct the rebellion?”<sup>21</sup> Thus, this hypothesis calls into question the myth of the Hùng kings who, according to official historiography, succeeded to the throne from father to son during eighteen generations and over a period of two millennia. This father-to-son dynastic rule is in utter contradiction to a matrilineal succession, and in that respect the existence of the Hùng kings is indefensible. This does not entail the nonexistence of the Vietnamese people as such but means that their rulers were not those whom they pretend to have had. But in the cases of both the legendary couple of the dragon and the fairy and the Hùng dynasty, both instances seem to have appeared for the first time in the fifteenth century with the compilation and revision of the *Dai Viet su ky toan thu* by Ngô Sĩ Liên. It is most likely that after independence was snatched at the hands of the Ming, the author, with the court’s encouragement, inserted those episodes in order to forge and instill a stronger sense of national identity. The fact that the Trung sisters should have borne the same patronym, Hùng, and that their kingdom was named Hung Lac responds to a similar nationalistic rationale. A strong desire to assimilate both clans, the Trung sisters’ and the Hùng kings’, the founding dynasty, and efface every matrilineal aspect underlay this new edition

of national history. All the clues had been confused from the start, giving a semblance of coherence with this two-thousand-year succession of Hùng sovereigns uninterrupted until the Trung sisters' rebellion. What was built is a construction with an impressionist facade, resting on improbable foundations that easily fall in pieces with the first breeze of historical criticism.

This long list of puzzling facts would not be complete were one not to add those elements furnished by the oral tradition and popular practice. To that extent, *quan ho* gives us interesting material regarding the relations between men and women. Based on alternate songs inspired by love, this local tradition places males and females on an equal footing.<sup>22</sup> As for ritualistic traditions, take the case of the goddess Lieu Hanh, who, hunted down by the authorities under her last avatar, had to take vengeance by wreaking havoc before seeking the Buddha's protection. Does she ultimately symbolize in the popular psyche what the Vietnamese woman used to be? The cult of Lieu Hanh finds an echo among the people, and seeing the autonomy of her disciples, all females but for a few exceptions, it shows how relative the position of men may be. An insight into the primeval times when the woman was the head of the family? At any rate, all these elements make us think that, despite the adoption of Confucianism as a basis for social organization and in view of superseding the matrilineal system, the collective memory has preserved relics of the old system through the oral and popular traditions. If the assumption of the existence of a matrilineal system in Vietnam is accepted, the case is far from being unique in Southeast Asia. Today on Vietnamese territory there are still ethnic minorities that have such a societal model of organization. Lai Cua's recent research has revealed the existence of a small community, called Na, living between Yunnan and Tibet, whose peculiarity is to have neither fathers nor husbands.<sup>23</sup>

The elements furnished in this essay constitute the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, the reconstitution of which requires, of course, many more pieces. Will the feminine figure appear on the face of this restored palimpsest? In the affirmative, it will provide us with very useful information on a world where the woman used to rule as mistresses. Besides, the mystery remains intact as to when and why Vietnamese society switched to the patriarchal model. Was it an effect of Chinese colonization or a deliberate choice on the part of the natives? What did the new system bring compared to the old one? Did

this shift, probably decided by the ruling classes, have the sole consequence of removing women from power? Could women have reacted to this power taking or did they just have to accept it? This mutation may also be construed as a logical sequence in a societal organization based on obsolete oral traditions incapable of fighting a formalistic culture based on literacy. So the founding myth of the dragon and the fairy, and, incidentally, the Hùng dynasty episode, could have been wholly fabricated for the cause. But, on the other hand, why not interpret these legends as the adaptation of more ancient myths whose original meaning has been betrayed? Finally, a myth does not come out of nothing, for all myths plunge their roots deep into the terrain of human reality and the further one penetrates into the maze of history the more questions one meets. Here, again, one can only state facts and raise questions, but before finding the adequate solutions might one not try to set the record straight?

## NOTES

Independent scholar, Paris. This essay was first presented as a paper at Euro-Viet III, Hanoi, 14–17 July 1998. I would like to thank Duy Tâm for the translation of this essay and Gisele Bousquet for her comments in its revision.

1. See the documentary entitled *Mot thời đang nhớ* (A Period Worth Remembering) produced in 1995 by the Liberation Society of Cinematographic Productions, which was dedicated to women, dead or alive, on the twentieth anniversary of the liberation of Saigon.

2. See Nguyễn Văn Kỳ, *La société vietnamienne face à la modernité: Le Tonkin de la fin du XIXe siècle à la Seconde guerre mondiale* (Vietnamese society confronting modernity: Tonkin from the end of the nineteenth century to the Second World War) (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995).

3. Phan Khoi, "Thu tìm sự liệu Việt Nam trong ngôn ngữ" (In search of the historic sources of Vietnam through the language), *Van Su Dia*, nos. 1–3 (1954). Nguyễn Văn Ngọc, *Tục ngữ phong dao* (Sayings and folk songs), 2 vols. (Saigon: Mac Lam, 1967).

4. Nguyễn Văn Ngọc, *Tục ngữ phong dao* (Sayings and folk songs) (Saigon: Mac Lam, 1967). Vũ Ngọc Phan, *Tục ngữ, ca dao, dân ca Việt Nam* (Sayings, folk songs, and airs in Vietnam) (Hanoi: Social Science Editions, 1978).

5. *Tan đĩnh Linh Nam chích quái, Vu Quỳnh*; Bùi Văn Nguyên dịch thuật, chú thích, dân nhập (Fantastic tales of Linh Nam). Hà Nội: Khoa học xã hội, 1993.

6. Tạ Chi Đại Truong, *Thần người và đất Việt* (Genies, man, and Vietnamese land) (Westminster, CA: Van Nghe, 1989).

7. This work is known to have been composed from more ancient scripts

and compilations of tales collected throughout the country. Its author says in the preface that he chose to leave aside those parts that he deemed did not conform with reality and were in his opinion too bizarre. At the end of the day, the writing of such a work, which has become a classic, answered a pressing call: to make up for the losses incurred during the war against the Ming.

8. Nguyễn Tu Chi, *La cosmologie muong* (Muong cosmology), with a preface by Georges Condominas (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), 23.

9. Mount Thai Son is located in China.

10. Dating Vietnamese proverbs is a complex subject. If one succeeds in solving the problem, it could open up new perspectives. As far as this particular proverb is concerned, one may deduce from the terms *vua* (king) and *chua* (lord) that the prohibition might have been enacted in a period when the power was shared by the Lê dynasty and the Trinh clan (i.e., the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries). At any rate, the prohibition of incest among certain members of the family is stated in the fifteenth-century Code of the Lê.

11. See Nguyễn Văn Kỳ, *La société vietnamienne*.

12. Maurice Godelier, *La production des grands hommes* (The making of great men), (Paris: Fayard, 1985).

13. As an example for the academic years 1938–39, there were 740 girls and 4,512 boys registered in the public high schools of the three regions (Tonkin, Annam, and Cochinchina).

14. G. Boudarel and Nguyễn Văn Kỳ, *Hanoi, 1936–1966: Du drapeau rouge au billet vert* (Hanoi 1936–1966: from the red flag to the green bill) (Paris: Autrement, 1997).

15. *Dan Ba Moi*, 26 October 1936.

16. David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 220.

17. *L'Annuaire statistique de l'Indochine* (the Annual statistics of Indochina) (Hanoi: Imprimerie d'Extrême-Orient Editeurs, 1937).

18. Nguyễn Văn Kỳ, *La société vietnamienne*, 261–82.

19. *Ibid.*, 337–55.

20. Dam Phuong was the first to encourage Vietnamese women to be aware of women's issues in society, to be educated, and to be organized. She was an activist and a writer. Many of her articles were published in the newspaper *Nam Phong*. Nguyen Thi Kiem, a poet known as Manh Manh, was one of the first publishers of the newspaper *Phu Nu Tan Van*. Thuy An, the pen name of Luy Thi Yen, was the publisher for the weekly newspaper *Dan Ba Moi*. During the uprising of Nhan Van Giai Pham (1956–58), she was accused of counter-revolutionary activities and sentenced to jail for having supported and participated in the Vietnamese Hundred Flowers Movement. See G. Boudarel, *Cents fleurs ecloses dans la nuit du Vietnam* (Paris: Bertoin, 1991). Nguyen Thi Khang was the publisher of the newspapers *Phu Nu Thoi Dam* and *Monde*.

21. Phan Khoi, "Thu tim su lieu Viet Nam."

22. See Dang Van Lung, Hong Thao, and Trần Linh Quy, *Quan ho: Nguon goc va qua trình phat trien* (*Quan ho: Its origins and evolution*) (Hanoi: Social Science Editions, 1978).

23. Lai Cua, *Une société sans père ni mari: Les Na en Chine* (A society with neither father nor husband: The Na of China), (Paris: PUF, 1997).

## GLOSSARY

<i>ca dao</i>	popular song
<i>cau</i>	uncle (mother's younger brother)
<i>cau doi</i>	parallel sentences
<i>cha</i>	father
<i>chau</i>	nephew, niece, or small child
<i>co</i>	aunt (father's younger sister)
<i>con</i>	child
<i>cong</i>	from Confucian ideology (could be translated as "merit, kindness")
<i>cuoi</i>	to take a wife (or husband)
<i>dan ba</i>	woman
<i>dan ong</i>	man
<i>dao</i>	way, direction
<i>duyen</i>	destiny, charm, and grace
<i>giac</i>	an individual or a group that is threatening to take power regardless of its geographical or ethnic origins
<i>hieu</i>	from Confucian ideology (could be translated as "filial piety")
Hùng	legendary Vietnamese dynasty
<i>kinh</i>	to respect someone
<i>lay</i>	to prostrate oneself, bow down to the ground
<i>loan luan</i>	incest
<i>long</i>	Sino-Vietnamese term for <i>dragon</i>
<i>me</i>	mother
<i>nghia</i>	from Confucian ideology (could be translated as "faithfulness, charity, devotion")
<i>rong</i>	dragon
<i>tam tong</i>	from Confucian ideology, a woman's three duties: as a child, to obey her father; as a wife, to obey her husband; and as a widow to obey her son
<i>tê</i>	ritual ceremony reserved for special occasions, for example, when the king pays his respects to Heaven or villagers pay their respects to the village deities or Confucius
<i>tho</i>	venerate
<i>tien</i>	immortal
<i>vo chong</i>	married couple, literally "wife-husband"