

Translating Vietnam Practicing the Post-War Art of Literary Translation

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Abstract. This essay argues for the development of a consensus regarding best practices in the field of literary translation, with particular emphasis on the translation of Vietnamese texts into English. After reviewing the problems that would need to be understood on the way to such a consensus, the essay looks at three particular areas in which it might be applied: translation theory, building institutions, and, finally, the use of literary translation to promote cross-cultural understanding in the context of globalization. Drawing on his experience as a poet, translator, co-translator, and editorial consultant at Nhà xuất bản Thế Giới, as well as the translation theorists Edith Grossman and David Bellos, the author attempts to frame a discussion of literary translation that will be helpful to authors and translators of literary texts, with the ultimate beneficiaries of our heightened understanding of translation being the readers for whom such texts are produced.

Keywords: Translation; Literature; Vietnam; Vietnam Studies.

As translators of poetry and fiction, the first word we will should think about translating is *translation*. It may be true, as Marianne Moore suggests that “business documents and schoolbooks” contain a kind of poetry, but translators of those highly useful kinds of texts can perhaps be forgiven if they do not worry too much about the nature of translation and just get on with the job. But if we are going to practice the art of literary translation, we should begin by understanding in some detail what we mean by the term. This is more complicated than it may at first appear and particularly so when the two languages involved have been violently slammed together by history, as have Vietnamese and English.

It is also necessary to recognize that in any act of translation, there are always two sides,

commonly designated as *source* and *target* languages, and that there is no guarantee that speakers and writers of the source and target languages will agree about the nature, purposes, or conditions of translation, especially when those languages are spoken by former combatants.

In the Anglophone and Francophone worlds, the verb “to translate” has the same etymological roots, meaning, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “to bear, convey, or remove from one person, place or condition to another; to transfer, transport...” The word derives from French and ultimately Latin. The prefix *trans* - is a preposition imported from Latin that is almost always combined in compound nouns and verbs with the meaning across, “to or on the farther side of, beyond, over.” I go into this perhaps pedantic detail because I think we need to be clear about the cultural assumptions we bring to the task of

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translation and because I do not want to assume that Anglophone and Vietnamese writers and translators always share the same sets of assumptions regarding the art of literary translation. Specifically, it is possible that different parties to a translation - especially when audiences are included - may have a different expectations regarding what a translation should sound and feel like. Another reason to focus at least briefly on the meaning of *translation* is that translators (and readers) can easily become trapped by the metaphors they use to describe what happens in the act of translating a text from one language into another. I can still recall our mutual distress when I showed a young editor at *Thế Giới* a poem I was working on translating. "But that's not what it says in Vietnamese," he said. "No," I said, "but that's what it means." He was a young man of good education and, more importantly, good will, but his view of the translator's job was quite different from mine. I don't think my young colleague would have argued for *dịch từng chữ*, word-for-word translation, but he clearly expected me to have "brought across" something more literal than I had done in my translation.

In his provocative study of translation, *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?*, David Bellos points out that in European languages all sorts of different activities and products are covered by the terms *translate* and *translation*, but that Japanese, for example, divides these acts and products into many types and refers to them with a proliferation of terms, warning the Western translator not to assume his or her ideas about translation are universally valid across cultures (24-28). What then do we mean - writers and translators and audiences in our various configurations - when we say that to translate is to "bear" or "convey" or "transfer" *something* from "one person or condition to another," as the *OED* has it? What is the thing that is being brought across from one language to another - and from one cultural context to another? Perhaps more importantly, how is our

understanding of translation affected by the metaphor of "bearing across"? Bellos writes:

Etymologies obscure a central truth about the way we use language and, among them, truths about translation. So let's be clear: a translator "carries [something] across [some obstacle]" only because the word that is used to describe what he does meant "bear across" in an ancient language. "Carrying across" is only a metaphor, and its relation to the truth about translation needs to be established, not taken for granted. There are lots of other metaphors available in many languages including our own and they had just as much right to our attention as the far from solid conceit of the ferry operator or trucker who carries something from A to B (29).

Prof. Bellos goes on to suggest a different metaphor for translation that is even more ancient than the one we have been discussing, dating back to ancient Babylon:



This cuneiform script represents the Sumerian phrase "language turner," pronounced *eme-bal*, that is, someone who turns one language into another; the same metaphor was current in ancient Greek and Latin, and in contemporary English, as "when a teacher asks a student to turn a sentence into German" (29-30).

In my own limited experience of working on translations of contemporary Vietnamese poetry, this metaphor represents what it felt like to "do translation." In my work on "Ten Vietnamese Poets" (*Poetry International* 2001), I did my best, in collaboration with my Vietnamese colleagues, to turn Vietnamese poems into poems in (American) English. I am also fond of R. Parthasarathy's metaphor for translation: he speaks of a poem in one language being "reborn" in another (60). In Vietnamese, too, there are other possible metaphors for translation. The word *dịch* has, if I am not misreading my dictionary, the secondary meaning of "change, shift, mover over, make

room” and a tertiary meaning of “liquid, fluid.” Of course the final meaning listed is “pestilence.” I suppose we have all encountered pestilential translations from time to time, but it is obviously not what we aspire to!

There are, of course, aspects of a literary text that cannot be directly reproduced in translation. This is a truth the translator must learn to live with, especially when translating poetry. The soundscapes of Vietnamese and English are radically different. John Balaban, in his essay, “The Poetry of Vietnam”, writes, “. . . of course, to lose this aspect of the poetry in translation is devastating to its beauty, something “like drawing a bucket of water”, to use the metaphor of the contemporary writer Nguyễn Khắc Viện, “from a well where the movement is mirrored and unavoidably losing the silvery shine of her light” (33). The capacity for punning in a monosyllabic tonal language like Vietnamese, for example, is nearly infinite, a quality that gives Vietnamese poetry a texture of sound and meaning impossible to even approximate in English. The translator must simply let go of the desire to convey the sound of the original poem. Nevertheless, a translator who is also a poet can create analogous effects in the target language. This is one of the reasons John Balaban’s versions of *ca dao* are so effective. In “Translating Vietnamese Poetry,” Balaban quotes the Russian poet Akhmatova’s translator Max Hayward, who writes:

The poet as translator lives with the paradox. His work must not read like a translation; conversely, it is not an exercise of the free imagination. One voice enjoins him: “Respect the text!” The other simultaneously pleads with him: “Make it new!” He resembles the citizen in Kafka’s aphorism who is fettered to two chains, one attached to earth, the other to heaven (Balaban 76).

In the same essay, Balaban quotes the American translator Tony Barnstone’s notion that there is “a poem behind the poem” and writes that it is the translator’s job to find or “retrieve” that poem. This suggests a commonality at the deepest level of all human

languages; such a common “pure language” is a matter of theoretical debate that goes beyond the mostly practical concerns of this essay.

Some have argued that translation is impossible and the English language translator faced with a difficult text in Vietnamese might despair. Even a master like Balaban has, he writes, been defeated by some of Hồ Xuân Hương’s poems and he omitted them from his translation of her work in *Spring Essence*, calling them “irretrievable in English” (14). Impossible, if not worse. There is, in one view, something disreputable about the whole business of translation. The 18th century English novelist Henry Fielding says of a character that “The Rogue had gotten a trick of translating out of the Shops as well as out of the Languages,” equating the act of translation with shoplifting. And the great lexicographer and man of letters Samuel Johnson is quoted by his biographer Boswell as having said, “Poetry cannot be translated; and, therefore, it is the poets that preserve languages.” Nearer our own time, the American poet Robert Frost famously said that “Poetry is what gets lost in translation.” Perhaps we should quietly fold our tents and steal silently into the night. Finally, there is the Italian pun (*traduttore / traditore*) that conflates the translator with the traitor, which I see from my *Từ Điển Việt Anh* has made its way into Vietnamese in the phrase “dịch là phản”⁽¹⁾.

But we do not steal away. Translation persists. In a lovely essay on the process of working with translators of his own work, the Italian novelist and literary theorist Umberto Eco writes, “The job of translation is a trial and error process; very similar to what happens in an Oriental bazaar when you are buying a carpet. The merchant asks 100, you offer 10 and after an hour of bargaining you agree on 50.” I like this image because it suggests both resistance and possibility. To say that translation is impossible is

⁽¹⁾ Though the historical linguistics of Vietnamese is far beyond my competence, I suspect that this phrase is a relatively recent import to Vietnamese, probably arriving with the French in the 19th century.

at best a gross exaggeration; at worst, it is pretentious humbug masking cultural prejudice, often masking xenophobia. Neuroscientists now tell us that both our perceptions of the external world and our memories are reconstructions made on the fly out of hints and gists by our central nervous systems and principally coordinated and presented to consciousness by a complex interplay of systems in the brain. The target-language translator of a poem or story finds him - or herself engaged in a similar process: out of the hints and gists from the original text and its cultural context, the translator must half-discover and half-build a new poem or story in a new language.

Now that we have looked at the ambiguities hidden inside the term *translation*, it might be useful to ask why translation is necessary—to investigate, however briefly, what purpose it might serve. David Bellos notes that, historically and geographically, translation has not been the norm (11-16). Many cultures have gotten on fine without worrying about translation and all its attendant difficulties. Geographically isolated cultures have not needed translation, making do with a single tongue; polyglot cultures such as India have taken the opposite approach, with most people speaking several languages; many empires—ancient Rome, ancient China, for example—have simply imposed the language of the conqueror on subject peoples, whose own languages went underground or in some cases simply disappeared. Language and translation are inevitably affected by the political and historical contexts they inhabit.

To narrow the focus: Why, at the start of the 21st century, should Vietnamese writers and Anglophone translators concern themselves with translation? What purposes are served, here and now, by translation from Vietnamese into English? The American critic Tim Parks writes that fiction writers working in the world's "smaller" languages often do not feel successful unless their work is translated into English. Writing in the New York Review Blog, Parks argues that.

As a result of rapidly accelerating globalization we are moving toward a world market for literature. There is a growing sense that for an author to be considered "great," he or she must be an international rather than a national phenomenon. This change is not perhaps as immediately evident in the US as it is in Europe, thanks to the size and power of the US market and the fact that English is generally perceived as the language of globalization, so that many more translations go away from it than toward it. However, more and more European, African, Asian and South American authors see themselves as having "failed" if they do not reach an international audience.

Is this true for Vietnamese fiction writers? Poets? I don't know, but I am suspicious of the generalization. It seems to me that overcoming Colonialism and winning the American War have tended to strengthen the self-confidence of Vietnamese artists and intellectuals. This is an area of discussion where I hope to be informed and enlightened by my Vietnamese colleagues.

It may be somewhat easier to understand why American writers of the Vietnam generation took an interest in translation. Whether they were veterans of the war or not, American intellectuals and artists felt compelled to understand both what had driven their country to war and the country upon which war had been waged. By translating the works of Vietnamese writers, this first postwar generation, perhaps, hoped to understand Vietnam in a way that their leaders during the war had so clearly failed to do. This legacy even now continues to affect American writers and translators, though as memories of the war fade, new and perhaps more normal motives for translation are emerging. It is only with the generation of my students, now in their twenties, that Vietnam can be a country again for Americans, instead of a war.

Making note of the economic and political imbalance between the global North and the global South, though he is writing specifically of translating Tamil or Sanskrit texts, R. Parthasarathy enjoins the Anglophone translator

from Anglicizing his translation and insists that the translator respect the integrity of the languages from which he translates: "Nor must he suppress or iron out the linguistic idiosyncrasies that are native to the languages. Both Tamil and Sanskrit are older than English by several hundred years and have a literary tradition that is in no way inferior to that of English. In this business of translation, there is no room for shortchanging or counterfeiting" (58). The same, clearly, can be applied to translation from Vietnamese to English.

In collaborative translation, the target language member of the team must proceed with the utmost humility submerging as much as possible his own cultural perspectives in order to inhabit the cultural universe of the source text. After engaging in this conscious process of self-effacement, the target language translator must call upon his or her linguistic resources in the struggle to find analogies that will make sense to the target audience. At the same time the source language translator needs to cultivate the virtue of generosity, that is, a willingness to let go of his or her own cultural materials so that they may be carried over into a new cultural and linguistic context.

In this essay, I want to begin a conversation about the nature, purposes, and conditions of literary translation from Vietnamese into English. There are of course many other sorts of translation, but I am a poet and teacher of literature, so I will keep my focus almost exclusively on the translation of imaginative literature, mostly poetry, with which I am most familiar, but also fiction - what is sometimes called "creative writing." In what follows, my gaze will be divided between, first, several actual works of literature in translation, which will serve as examples of various approaches, and, second, the institutions and cultural practices that make those translations possible. Any act of translation minimally requires a text in one language that is transformed by one or more translators into a text in a second language, but in almost every case (especially in translations of contemporary works), cultural

institutions inevitably enter into the process. Anyone who has worked in the field of literary translation will understand the degree to which publishers, writers' associations, universities, and other cultural players enter into the process.

I would like to proceed empirically, examining a range of translation models and applying them to current practices in a series of brief case studies. To that end, I have put the following matrix together to help me clarify my own thinking about these issues. I am fully aware of its provisional nature. I hope that by looking at some of the ways in which texts, translators, institutions, and audiences have interacted over the last half century or so, it might be possible to arrive at a tentative list of "best practices" and then to consider how we might go forward.

Examples

1. John Balaban's *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương*; Rewi Alley's *Lament of the Soldier's Wife* [Chinh Phụ Ngâm].

2. Martha Collins' *The Women Carry River Water* by Nguyễn Quang Thiều and *Green Rice* by Lâm Thị Mỹ Dạ (with Thúy Đình).

3. Linh Dinh's *Three Vietnamese Poets*; Nguyễn Đình Thi's *Chí Phèo* by Nam Cao; Song Kiều's short story anthology, *Golden Autumn* (VNA).

4. Nguyễn Khắc Viện & Hữu Ngọc's monumental and pioneering anthology, *Vietnamese Literature*; Linh Dinh's *Night Again: Contemporary Fiction from Vietnam*; John Balaban & Nguyễn Quý Đức *Vietnam: A Traveler's Literary Companion*; Rosemary Nguyễn's *The Cemetery at Chua Village: Short Fiction* by Đoàn Lê [sic]; VNA Publishing House's short story anthology *Through Vietnam's Eyes*; Foreign Language Publishing House's *Oranges of Love and other Vietnamese Stories* Kevin Bowen, Nguyen Ba Chung, and Bruce Weigl's *Mountain River: Vietnamese Poetry from the Wars*.

5. Ezra Pound's versions of Chinese poetry, etc.; Huy Cận's "imitation" of Whitman.

6. Huỳnh Sanh Thông's *The Song of the Soldier's Wife* [Chinh Phụ Ngâm] & many other translations.

A Matrix of Literary Translation Models

	Translator(s)	Lit Prac?	Languages Spoken	Translator(s) Source / Target	Audience Focus Source / Target
1.	One person ⁽¹⁾	Yes	Bilingual	Native speaker of target language	Target
2.	Two people	Yes	Different languages bilingual)	native (+/- One native speaker of target language, one of source	Target
3.	One person	Yes	Bilingual	Native speaker of source language; fluent in target language	Source or target
4.	Several people ⁽²⁾	Mixed	+/- Bilingual	Mixed native speakers of source & target languages	Source or Target
5.	One person	Yes	No	Native speaker of target language	Target
6.	One person	No	Bilingual	Native speaker of source language	Source or target

Case 1: John Balaban's translations of Hồ Xuân Hương (and of ca dao)⁽²⁾ strike me as being as close to perfect as it is possible for a translation to be. Balaban, so far as I know, is the American translator with the greatest mastery of Vietnamese (there may be others I'm not aware of) and he is a fine and widely recognized poet in English. He has lived and traveled widely in Vietnam and is deeply committed to its people and culture. Published by a small non-profit press, Copper Canyon, dedicated to American poetry and translations of poetry, Spring Essence, is beautifully designed to present Hồ Xuân Hương's poems in the best possible format. The text is not only bilingual, printing the quốc ngữ texts, but also,

for the first time in an English translation, including the chữ nôm in which the poet composed her work. Most American reader, of course, will not be able to read the Vietnamese, but presenting it serves at least two purposes: The book meets the highest standards of scholarship and will be of use to Western scholars of Vietnamese literature and culture, but at the same time, the clear and elegant translations into English might entice not only American poets but general readers as well to learn something about the Vietnamese language, its writing systems and history, which are so intimately connected to Vietnamese history. If the book were widely distributed in Vietnam, it would perhaps be useful to scholars of nôm, as well as Vietnamese poets and general readers with an interest in English. Of course, what makes a translator like John Balaban so valuable is the same thing that makes him nearly unique.

Case 2: Martha Collins has been involved with translation from Vietnamese into English for many years and has produced two fine

⁽¹⁾ To say "one person" in almost every case I am familiar with is an idealization. Balaban, for example, does not read the nôm script of the original poems and graciously acknowledges assistance from a range of Vietnamese scholars. Most solo translators rely on native speakers for nuance, idiom, and cultural reference.

⁽²⁾ This by far the most common contemporary model and I have noted only a few exemplary and characteristic texts above.

collections by individual Vietnamese poets, *The Women Carry River Water* by Nguyễn Quang Thiều and *Green Rice* by Lâm Thị Mỹ Dạ. In the first book, she worked directly with the poet, who is fluent in English and in the second case with Thúy Đình, who provided what are sometimes disparagingly called “cribs” in English - direct, non-poetic versions of the poems that, when combined with the translator’s knowledge of Vietnamese language and culture, are used to produce the English versions. This model of translation is well-suited to producing translations of a single writer and seems particularly well-suited to contemporary literature because in many cases the author (whether working directly with the translator or through an intermediary) is available for consultation. In preparing the translations for the “Ten Vietnamese Poets” feature that was published in *Poetry International* in 2001, I was able to work with both Lý Lan and Hoàng Hưng.

Case 3: Linh Dinh has been, over the last decade, an indefatigable exponent of contemporary Vietnamese fiction and poetry in English (and Italian) translation. It has long been an article of faith unchallenged in the West that a literary translation must be finished by a native speaker of the target language (and I would still accept this as a rule of thumb), but, clearly, Linh Dinh and several other Vietnamese translators, by the quality of their work, call this rule seriously into question. When his *Three Vietnamese Poets* was published by a small press in 2001, I found the translations awkward and made the erroneous assumption that the awkwardness was the result of the translator not being a native speaker of English. (In fact, Linh Dinh came to the US as a teenager and is more fluent in English than many of the American undergraduates I teach.) I posted some critical comments about the poems in an online forum that were, quite simply, wrong. Linh Dinh had faithfully reproduced the harsh and difficult Vietnamese into harsh and “ungrammatical” English, which was exactly the right choice. In this, he follows

R. Parthasarathy’s injunction, mentioned earlier, that the translator not “suppress or iron out the linguistic idiosyncrasies that are native to the [original] language”. Translators whose “home” language is English need to read R. Parthasarathy and Linh Dinh very carefully and approach their source texts with far more humility than I have sometimes done.

It must be noted, too, that Vietnamese translators have been making very good translations into English for at least sixty years. I have in my possession an old and very beat-up copy of Nam Cao’s *Chí Phèo and Other Stories* published by Thế Giới [as Red River / Foreign Languages Publishing House] in 1983. The paper is crumbling and the binding is coming loose, but I treasure this book, both for the quality and interest of Nam Cao’s prose, but also for the excellent quality of the translation. The translation is uncredited, though there is a signed introduction by the poet and novelist Nguyễn Đình Thi, who may, I suppose be the translator. Thế Giới also published collections of contemporary fiction in good English translations in the 1980s, though perhaps not always with the writers’ knowledge. My friend Lý Lan was surprised when I told her I had read one of her early stories in such an anthology, titled *Oranges of Love*. The translations in these volumes contain small errors of word choice, idiom, and diction⁽³⁾, but are otherwise quite remarkable, perhaps because the translators were themselves creative writers. This is an important point that I will return to.

Case 4: The fourth line of the matrix of translation models represents by far the most common approach, especially for extended works or poetry or prose. Commonly, while there may be a chief translator or coordinator, several translators will work on a volume or an

⁽³⁾ Odd mistakes do crop up, as in the VNA anthology *Golden Autumn*, (tr. Song Kiều), in which the word “secular” in title of the story by Y Ban, “A Moonlit Market Under a Secular Mulberry Tree,” should almost certainly be replaced with its opposite, “sacred,” but I do not have the Vietnamese text, so I cannot be sure.

anthology. There are many examples from both Vietnam and the US and I will highlight only a few. One could devote an entire study to such collaborative efforts.

The most obvious place to start is surely Nguyễn Khắc Viện & Hữu Ngọc's monumental and pioneering anthology, *Vietnamese Literature*. Especially given the period it was compiled, immediately following the war, this volume represents an act of cultural optimism and perhaps bravery on the part of its editors and translators. It has all the virtues and a few of the faults of any such pioneering effort. The volume presents the broadest possible panorama of Vietnamese literary history using extensive notes and explanatory essays to make the whole history of Vietnam's literature available to Anglophone readers. There cannot have been very many native English speakers in Hanoi and even fewer Anglophone poets or fiction writers! None of the Anglophone editor-translators listed on the title page of *Vietnamese Literature* is a literary artist, so far as I know - one is a mathematician, another the wife of a diplomat, and so on. To say this is to take nothing away from their extraordinary efforts, but the result is sometimes that, while the literal sense of the Vietnamese has no doubt been adequately rendered, the luminosity of the original has been lost in translation. It would be a great service to World Literature for another team of translators and editors to undertake a new and updated edition of this text.

I only have space to elaborate briefly on a couple of other titles from the forth model in the matrix. Though much more narrowly focused than Hữu Ngọc's anthology, *Mountain River: Vietnamese Poetry from the Wars 1948 - 1993*, edited and translated by Kevin Bowen, Nguyễn Ba Chung, and Bruce Weigl seeks to accomplish similar cultural work. In this bilingual volume, two American veterans of the war who are also poets collaborated with a Vietnamese poet and scholar to present American readers with the actual words of their recent enemies, producing a work that is paradoxically both healing and confrontational,

presenting American readers with the human faces and most profound voices of Vietnam during a period of travail.

Case 5: This model, in contrast to the one I have just been discussing, is probably the least generalizable; I include it because it tests the very limits of what we mean by translation and because it has been both influential and controversial in the Anglophone world. As noted in the matrix, its greatest exponent was the American Modernist poet Ezra Pound, whose translations from Chinese were in fact made from Japanese transcriptions made by the American linguist Ernest Fenollosa. And yet Pound's versions of Li Po have more luminosity, clarity, and psychological acuity than virtually any other translations of the same texts⁽⁴⁾. (See Appendix 3.) In this model, it helps to be a genius. An even more radical example of this kind of "meta-translation" might be Huy Can's long poem "A Greeting to All Peoples," written in French by a Vietnamese intellectual, but borrowing heavily on the style of the 19th century American poet Walt Whitman. The poem was delivered at a conference in Cuba in 1968 at the height of the American War and is not, of course, a translation in any traditional sense; nevertheless, it recreates some of the light that radiates from Whitman's verse in order to offer a "translation" of the Vietnamese struggle for independence to an international audience.

Case 6 (Translating the Chinh Phụ Ngâm): I placed Rewi Alley's translation of this key text from Vietnamese literature in the first line of the matrix while putting Huỳnh Sanh Thông's much more faithful version of the poem in the sixth and final line. The matrix

⁽⁴⁾ The University of Illinois Modern American Poetry website has seven versions of Li Po's "The River Merchant's Wife," all of them more literal than Pound's famous and influential poem: http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/pound/othertranslations.htm; Pound's poem can be found at the Poetry Foundation's website: <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/177163>.

does not “grade” models of translation from better to worse, but tries to untangle different translation practices from each other in order to arrive at a set of principles we can apply to our work as translators, work in which we try to give a new birth to Vietnamese poems and stories in English. Alley’s translation is in the first line because he is 1) a native speaker of the target language and 2) a literary artist, though perhaps a minor one. Huỳnh Sanh Thông’s translation is placed in the final line because he is 1) a native speaker of the source language and 2) a scholar rather than a poet. Each translation has its own strengths and its own weaknesses. We can learn a great deal from both.

The *Chinh Phụ Ngâm*, one might say, was almost born as a translation. Composed in Chinese by Đặng Trần Côn in the early part of the 18th century, the poem was almost immediately translated into Vietnamese by multiple hands. At least seven translations of the poem are still extant, though the one most Vietnamese readers know has traditionally been ascribed to Đoàn Thị Điểm, though most scholars now seem to agree that it was made by Phan Huy Ích. In any case, these translations used the *nôm* script and when the poem was transcribed into *quốc ngữ*, the text would have moved a bit further from the original, since *quốc ngữ* was never fully regularized. Both Rewi Alley and Huỳnh Sanh Thông have the great advantage of being able to read both Chinese and Vietnamese (though I am not sure Alley could decipher *nôm*). My concern here is not with the “accuracy” or either translation, but with their readability in English.

To the modern era, Alley’s translation seems more natural and might prove easier to read despite the fact than some readers might not think it sounds much like poetry—especially if those readers are accustomed to poetry with a strong metrical beat. Such a reader might prefer Huỳnh Sanh Thông’s version of the poem, with its strong metrical beat. While Alley’s version of the poem might be somewhat more approachable, its syntax is loose and unfocused, it gives up clarity and

rigor. Alley makes habitual use of a kind of galloping enjambment that I believe is both foreign to the Vietnamese and which quickly begins to sound awkward to an Anglophone reader familiar with modern poetic practice. When combined with the translator’s habit of stringing many clauses together with commas, the text quickly loses much of the quality I have been calling *luminosity*.

Huỳnh Sanh Thông’s English *Chinh Phụ Ngâm* is in many ways superior to Alley’s. It is based on the translator’s excellent scholarship and includes extensive notes that clarify matters that might be obscure to a contemporary reader. (The same translator’s introductions and notes to his *Anthology of Vietnamese Poems* are probably the single best introduction to Vietnamese poetry and poetics that exists in English.) But to my ear, the poem sounds old-fashioned, as if the translator was modeling his work on 19th rather than 20th century models of poetry in English; by maintaining a strict iambic meter, he is forced into the sorts of grammatical inversions that most Anglophone readers associate with an earlier era. If it is true that every generation needs to make new translations of the classics, one could argue that it is time for a new *Chinh Phụ Ngâm*.

I began by saying I hoped to offer some practical guidelines concerning translation of literary texts from Vietnamese into English and I originally thought that those guidelines would be the main part of my essay. I soon realized, though, that I needed to back up and reexamine my assumptions. Now that I have at least begun that process, I would like to conclude by offering the following five points. None of them are theoretical in nature, though I believe they follow from some of the theoretical ideas sketched in this essay:

- Especially in poetry, bilingual texts are to be preferred.
- When texts are not bilingual, it is imperative that diacritical marks in Vietnamese names and in words left untranslated be preserved.

- In general, make use of a target language translator or editor.

- Target language editor or translator ought to know some Vietnamese; more importantly, he or she should know a good deal about Vietnamese history and culture.

- In working with literary texts, the target language translator ought to be a literary artist in the genre being translated.

And finally, as a way of implementing some of these practices, I would like to informally propose the creation of a working group. Nothing so grand as an association—simply a collection of writers and translators with an interest in bringing Vietnamese literature into English and, perhaps, American and other Anglophone literatures into Vietnamese. My survey in this paper suggests that the most fruitful collaborations occur at the edges of institutional structures and a working group supported by Vietnamese and American

publishers and institutions of higher learning strikes me as the most promising approach. There is no single best model of translation; collaborations are necessarily *ad hoc*; resources are always scarce for literature (but not non-existent), but writers are resourceful—they have to be!—and so I would like to suggest the creation of a working group that could serve as a clearing house for writers and translators in Vietnam and the US. Initially, a simple listserve could function as a meeting place; perhaps in the future, if warranted, the group could establish a web page and archive to promote its activities and publicize the results of its activities. But the point is not the creation of a new organization, but to bring together writers and translators (and eventually audiences) in a spirit of humility and generosity. That will be, I think, our best hope for bringing the luminosity of Vietnamese stories and poems to the English-speaking world.

Appendix 1: Two Translations of a Poem by Phan Huyền Thư

Huế

Night slithers slowly into the Perfume River an elongated note breaks under the Trang Tien bridge
A Nam Ai dirge of widowed concubines fishing for their own corpse from a boat on the river
To be king for a night in the imperial capital go now, make a poem for purple Huế
Shattering symmetry voluntarily with a tilted conical hat an askew carrying pole eyes looking askance

Huế is like a mute fairy crying silently without speaking.

I want to murmur to Huế and to caress it but I'm afraid to touch the most sensitive spot on Vietnam's body.

[Tr. Linh Dinh]

Huế

Night shades silently over the Perfume River — a singing voice breaks out beneath Tràng Tiền Bridge.
In the lament of Nam Ai* the royal concubines widowed after their night with the king plied the river
picking up their own corpses.

The one-night emperors of the old capital go home to write poems for violet Huế

But the symmetry of the city is broken —

The inclined rim of a girl's *nón*, her tilted shoulder pole, eyes glancing furtively.

Huế--mute female spirit — cries inwardly without making a sound.

I want to speak in a low voice soothing Huế softly but fear to touch again this delicate place on the body
of Vietnam.

[Tr. Vàng Anh, Ngô Tự Lập, Joseph Duemer and Phan Huyền Thư]

Note: When originally published in *Poetry International* (Issue V 2001), the second translation bore the following footnote: The "Lament of Nam Ai" is a poem written by a royal wife for the premature death of her husband the king. The Perfume River runs through the old imperial capital of Huế in central Vietnam. Tràng Tiền Bridge is a modern bridge across the river. "One-night emperor" is a Vietnamese expression for the client of a prostitute. A *nón* is the traditional conical palm-leaf hat of Vietnam.

Appendix 2: Translating the Chinh Phụ Ngâm

1.

Thuở trời đất nổi cơn gió bụi
 Khách má hồng nhiều nỗi truân chuyên
 Xanh kia thăm thẳm tầng trên
 Vì ai gây dựng cho nên nỗi này

Trống Trường Thành lung lay bóng nguyệt
 Khói Cam Tuyền mờ mịt thức mây
 Chín tầng gương báu trao tay
 Nửa đêm truyền hịch định ngày xuất chinh

Nước thanh bình ba trăm năm cũ
 Áo nhung trao quan vũ từ đây
 Sứ trời sớm giục đường mây
 Phép công là trọng, niềm tây sá nào

Đường giông ruổi lưng đeo cung tiễn
 Buổi tiễn đưa lòng bận thê noa
 Bóng cờ tiếng trống xa xa
 Sầu lên ngọn ải, oán ra cửa phòng

Chàng tuổi trẻ vốn giọng hào kiệt
 Xếp bút nghiên theo việc đao cung
 Thành liền mong tiến bộ rỗng
 Thước gương đã quyết chẳng dung giặc trời

Chí làm trai dặm nghìn da ngựa
 Gieo Thái Sơn như tựa hồng mao
 Giã nhà đeo bức chiến bào
 Thét roi cầu Vị, ào ào gió thu.

[Đặng Trần Côn & Phan Huy Ích]

2.

When all through earth and heaven rise dust storms,
 how hard and rough, the road a woman walks!
 O thou that rulest in yonder blue above,
 who is the cause and maker of this woe?

In our Ch'ang-an drums beat and moonlight throbs.
 On Mount Kan-ch'uan fires burn and clouds glow red.
 The Emperor, leaning on his precious sword,
 at midnight calls for war and sets the day.

The realm has known 300 years of peace —
 now soldiers don their battle dress once more.
 At daybreak heralds speed them through the mists —
 the law outweighs what they may feel inside.
 Full armed with bows and arrows, they fare forth,
 from wives and children wrenching their numb hearts.

As banners wave and drums resound far off,
grief spreads from chamber door to mountain pass.

Born to a race of heroes, you, my love,
discard your brush and ink for tools of war.
You vow to capture citadels for the throne —
your sword will spare no flow of heaven's sway.

A man will win a horseskin for his shroud —
his life he'll drop in battle like goose down.
In war attire you leave and cross the Wei,
cracking your whip while roars the autumn wind.

[Huỳnh Sanh Thông]

3.

Everywhere is war: truly
a bad time for all women! even
as we do not understand the blue heavens
above, how can we know
why such things be? drums
roll incessantly along the Great Wall
making the very moonlight seem to tremble,
beacon fires reflect their scarlet
against Kansu mountain snows,
the throne hands down a sword of command
to its chosen general, midnight
and his orders to march are given,
after three hundred years of peace
comes the time when the trappings of war
are worn again by cortiers, now
from the palace gallops a messenger?
speeding the Army departure, soldiers
understand their orders, leaving
aside all affairs of home, with bows
and quivers of arrows slung from hips
they say farewell as they follow
their standards through the frontiers,
hollowly resounds the roll of drums
back into homes now left behind . . .

[Rewi Alley]

4.

War always. War by policy.
A bad time for women. The death of children.
Braying horns. Martial drumming.
The valleys full of moving armies.

The naked face of heaven looks down
on the signal fires along the frontier
& though the moonlight may seem to tremble
Heaven does not answer.

After three-hundred years of peace,
the throne hands down orders
naming generals & deploying battalions,
setting the order of battle.

Advisors & experts gather to advise
the government; towns & villages echo dryly
with the sounds of marching armies
& the grief of families torn apart.
Husband, twenty generations press you
to put aside your books & papers
& take up arms in the service of your country.
You understand the risks.

You know you may die in a far place
& be buried in the hide of your horse.
You understand you may never see your wife again.
Your child again.

I do not understand.
I only hear the crack of your whip carried
on the West wind as you urge your horse
over the Wei bridge.

Green water runs cold under the bridge
carrying away my hopes.
Husband I am with you even now
as surely as the moonlight falls on us both.
[Joseph Duemer]

Appendix 3

The River-Merchant's Wife: A Letter
BY EZRA POUND

After Li Po

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead
I played about the front gate, pulling flowers.
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.
And we went on living in the village of Chōkan:
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.
At fourteen I married My Lord you.
I never laughed, being bashful.
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.
Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours
Forever and forever, and forever.
Why should I climb the look out?

At sixteen you departed

You went into far Ku-tō-en, by the river of swirling eddies,
And you have been gone five months.
The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,
Too deep to clear them away!
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August
Over the grass in the West garden;
They hurt me.
I grow older.
If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,
Please let me know beforehand,
And I will come out to meet you
As far as Chō-fū-Sa.

Source: *Selected Poems* (1957)

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