

## Nguyễn's *Tale of Kiều* as Post-colonial Classic

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One of the most intriguing features of the dawning 21<sup>st</sup> century has been the convergence of postcolonialism – understood in the broadest sense of the term, as a cultural condition, political conjuncture, and economic situation, all at once – with quite another concept-turned-periodization: namely, postmodernism. More is at stake here than the oft-remarked First Worldization of the Third World, the Third Worldization of the First, and the disappearance of the Second. What is at issue is the emergence of a multinational world-system very different indeed from its Cold War antecedents, everywhere from the geopolitics of the European Union to the economic might of East Asia, and from the rise of a post-American media culture to the construction of the informatic commons. In retrospect, much of the broad appeal of the postmodernisms and postcolonialisms was derived from their capacity to think beyond the usual categories of the Cold War – most famously, as Jameson's project of the cognitive mapping of the cultural logic of consumer capitalism, and as Spivak's meditation on the subaltern or Fourth World peoples who, although excluded from the demesne of the nation-state, understood the total system well enough to turn the latter's logic against itself, everywhere from the jungles of Chiapas to the riverbanks of the Narmada.

What we have lacked, however, are conceptual instruments capable of triangulating between the postmodern and the postcolonial, and thereby rising to the concrete level of the multinational. As late as the mid-1980s, the work of postcolonial thinkers such as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak remained firmly anchored in a specifically national political and cultural context, i.e. the desperate struggle of occupied Palestine and neocolonized India for national survival, and the identity-politics of a utopian Third World nationalism, respectively. Conversely, Fredric Jameson's thesis of postmodernism as the cultural logic of consumer capitalism took the hegemonic US media culture of the late 1970s as its starting-point – postmodernism was the halfway house, as it were, between theories of 1950-style Americanization and those of 1990s-style neoliberalization. Put another way, the leading theories of the 1980s were primarily accounts of the localizations which preceded globalization: Jameson's breakthrough essay on postmodernism, for instance, diagnosed the multinational corporate atrium out of the spatialized Thatcherism of the Bonaventura Hotel, while Spivak's subaltern crackles with the micropolitical energies of the neocolonial favelas – the destitute mass of female laborers, landless peasants, and Fourth World peoples spawned by decades of the most brutal neoliberal marketization, not yet conscious of their class identity or capable of organizing a project of resistance in the mold of Porto Alegre.

The hallmark of the 1990s, on the other hand, was the emergence of new types of multinational solidarity, capable of combating neoliberalism on its own global turf. The post-colonial reflections of Aijiz Ahmad, Gayatri Spivak, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Enrique Dussel were very much the transcendental pole of this resistance, precisely where the postmodern meditations of Fredric Jameson, Pierre Bourdieu and Slavoj Zizek carried the banner of the immanent resistance. A strikingly similar dynamic can be observed in the cultural field, where the stupendous achievements of post-colonial writers, directors and media artists such as Egypt's Naguib Mahfouz, China's Can Xue, Senegal's Ousmane Sembene, Iran's Abbas Kiarostami and Poland's Krzysztof Kieslowski demolished the prison-house of the Cold War media culture from

without, precisely where the radical postmodernisms of Germany's Heiner Müller, Ireland's Patrick McGoochan, Northamerica's William Gibson and Japan's Hayao Miyazaki bored into the mediatic infrastructures of the US Empire from within.

This is not to argue that the rift between postmodernism and postcolonialism, or more precisely, between theories of First World consumerism and theories of Third World neocolonialism, was a mere optical illusion or false problem. This rift marked a genuine social fault-line, the functional equivalent of what Fredric Jameson called, in a rather different context, the problem of the "vanishing mediator" in Max Weber's concept of rationalization. This latter expressed the insoluble ideological contradiction between the brittle class compromise of the Wilhelmine politics of iron and rye, and German capital's subaltern position vis-à-vis the British, French and American competition. Rationalization is, in short, what you get when liberal capitalism and its historical agent, the British Empire, reigned but no longer ruled over the world-system, and a rather different logic begins to assert itself over the world-market: the arrival of bureaucratized corporations and monopoly capitalism. The "vanishing mediator" of the multinational era, on the other hand, is without question the US Empire, which has declined from the undisputed economic and cultural hegemon of the Cold War era to the subaltern object of the multinational capitalism it once spawned.<sup>1</sup>

In order to measure the full extent of this decline, it's worth pausing for a moment to reflect on how thoroughly the era of monopoly capitalism (very roughly, the 1870s to the 1950s) was dominated by the United States. The high point was surely 1945, when the US accounted for almost 50% of global industrial output, generating three times as much GDP per capita than the UK and Sweden, eight times as much as West Germany, and ten times as much as Japan. With the assistance of the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates and the installation of the US dollar as world reserve currency, US military Keynesianism powered the world economy for the next thirty years, spreading Hollywood, shopping malls and automobilization across the globe.

All this changed in the post-1975 conjuncture, when two semi-peripheral regions of the world-economy – not Japan and Germany, but East Asia and Central Europe – began to catch up with their erstwhile US mentor, in fields ranging from autos to computers, banking to electronics, and machine-tools to telecommunications. Powered by a wide variety of corporatist and welfarist developmental states, East Asian and EU firms ranging from Sony and Nokia, to STMicro and Toyota, rose to global prominence by out-engineering, out-servicing and out-thinking their US competitors.<sup>2</sup> By the late 1990s, even that last bastion of US supremacy, namely the media and entertainment biz, suddenly had to contend with powerhouse EU media firms (e.g. Bertelsmann and Vivendi Universal) as well as East Asia's near-monopoly on the videogame industry (a field with an estimated \$49.99 billion in 2001 revenues, according to the Wall Street Journal).<sup>3</sup> This economic transformation went hand-in hand with a vast financial transformation: by 2001, the US had not only become the world's biggest debtor nation (to the tune of minus 2 trillion euros on its net international investment account, a figure equivalent to around 20% of US GDP), but had to import 400 billion euros per annum from East Asia and the EU, the dominant creditors of the world-system, to pay for its trade and current account deficits and keep its economy afloat.<sup>4</sup>

To make a long story short, the US is no longer the economic, financial or even cultural center of the post-Cold War world-system, a fact of inconceivable significance to cultural theory. For whatever their other differences may have been, both postmodernism and postcolonialism did share a common social geography and narrative metric: namely, US economic, political and cultural hegemony – or what we call US monopoly capitalism, the Cold War, and Americanization, respectively. Postmodernism derived its content from the immanent version of

this hegemony, i.e. the US mass media and communications infrastructure, precisely where postcolonialism focused for the most part on transcendental models of Americanization, i.e. the progressive nationalisms and internationalisms of the Second and Third World which reverse-engineered their very own Americanizations, as it were, in order to resist the encroachment of the US hegemon (e.g. the cultural innovations of Soviet and Third World cinema, as well as the political mobilizations of the anti-colonial movements, national revolutions, and Communist parties).<sup>5</sup>

Put bluntly, even at their most radically anti-American, postmodernism and postcolonialism remained all too Americentric, and we will go so far as to suggest that the all-purpose term “Eurocentrism” as a shorthand reference to imperialism ought to be shelved in favor of the more accurate “Americentrism”, “Anglocentrism” and “Francocentrism”, depending on the national imperialism in question (one could also speak of “Lusocentrism” and “Iberocentrism”). There may indeed be a kind of “eurocentrism” in the future, with a small “e”, based on the EU’s common currency and hegemonic might vis-à-vis the Maghreb and Eastern European regions, but this needs to be radically distinguished from 19<sup>th</sup> century colonialism and 20<sup>th</sup> century neocolonialism. What the current usage of Eurocentrism fatally occludes, in particular, is the history of the East Asian nation-states, and in particular the ghastly history of Japanese imperialism, as well as the long-running sub-imperialisms of feudal China vis-à-vis the cultures which became modern-day Korea and Vietnam – the local subvariants, in short, of Nippocentrism and Sinocentrism.

Nowhere are the unique vectors of East Asian nationalism and postcolonial identity more crucial than in Du Nguyễn’s [pronounced “nwahn”] magnificent verse novel, *The Tale of Kiều* (1813), the national epic of Vietnam. A high-ranking mandarin who personally witnessed the tumultuous birth of the Vietnamese nation-state, Nguyễn created a masterpiece equal to the greatest verse epics of Goethe and Schiller, but which has languished in relative obscurity due to all the usual colonial and neocolonial reasons (for one thing, the first English translation was not available until the 1970s; for another, Vietnamese language and culture remains vastly underrepresented in First World universities). What makes *Kiêu* especially interesting is its contemporaneity with the French and American revolutions, and in particular the moment of rupture or break between the revolutionary-national revolutions of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the processes of state-formation in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. the distance from the storming of the Bastille to the Napoleonic Code, or from the shots fired at Lexington to the drafting of the US Constitution.

As it turns out, the late 18<sup>th</sup> century was an equally momentous period in Vietnamese history as well, characterized by a thirty-year cycle of dynastic wars, peasant uprisings, Chinese invasions, wars of national resistance, and wars of national unification. The cycle officially began with the Tây Sơn rebellion in 1771, one of the first great peasant revolutions in world history. Unlike the peasant uprisings of the European Reformation, which were stamped out with extreme brutality, the Tây Sơn (named after the three brothers who led the revolt) soon grew into a national movement which toppled the ruling houses of northern and southern Vietnam, and even carried out a modest amount of land redistribution. This drew the ire of China’s Qing dynasty, which was pledged to support the traditional rulers; the Qing consequently invaded Vietnam with a massive army in 1788. Under the leadership of Nguyễn Huệ, the Tây Sơn demolished the invasion force in 1789 via a tactically brilliant Tet offensive. Although Nguyễn later crowned himself Emperor Quang Trung, he did not live long enough to consolidate his regime, and his death by natural causes in 1792 sparked a renewed round of civil war. The

conflict did not end until Nguyễn Anh, the only surviving member of one of the lesser south-eastern ruling families, established the Gia Long dynasty and the first administratively unified Vietnamese state in 1802.

This eventful political history was matched by an equivalent outpouring of literary innovation, something attested to by the work of Nguyễn's contemporary, Hồ Xuân Hương, the other indispensable Vietnamese poet of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, who carried out the sort of national revolution in the field of lyric poetry which *Kiều* accomplished in the realm of the verse novel.<sup>6</sup> Nguyễn interwove key strands of this historical period into the narrative fabric of *Kiều*, transforming an eclectic admixture of Confucian sayings, Buddhist and Taoist lore, classical Chinese literary forms and plebian Vietnamese poetry, proverbs, ballads and folklore into a true national epic, crackling with the energies of a Napoleonic thunderbolt.

What *Kiều* offers us, then, is an incomparable opportunity to rethink the development of national culture, nation-state formation, and cultural modernization from a multinational (that is to say, post-American) perspective. Viewed historically, few national cultures have ever emerged in precise lockstep with their corresponding political and economic infrastructures; Emerson and Thoreau composed their meditations on the American national character decades after the American Revolution, while Cao Xueqin's *Story of the Stone*, the great Chinese novel of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was written a hundred and eighty years in advance of China's emergence as a political nation-state in 1949. Perhaps the one author who can be said to have produced a canonic national aesthetics during an era of national revolution, namely Egypt's Naguib Mahfouz, one of the greatest novelists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is very much the exception which proves the rule: not only do Mahfouz's later works turn sharply against the official institutions of the Nasserite one-party state, but the stylistic trajectory from the realism of his Cairo trilogy to the startling modernism of *The Thief and the Dogs*, and finally to the full-blown postmodernism of *Adrift on the Nile* and *Miramar*, recuperates the 150-year span from Balzac to William S. Burroughs in the space of twenty years.

If Mahfouz offers an object-lesson in how centuries of past metropolitan aesthetics can be reappropriated by the periphery in a radical turn, then *Kiều* offers an intriguing example of how a work of art can, at the right time and place, anticipate centuries of future history, namely Vietnam's 150-year struggle against French, Japanese and American colonialism. This in turn raises all sorts of interesting questions about how one might periodize a text which seems so utterly asynchronous to its cultural time and place. Certainly, *Kiều* certainly strikes many of the same proto-national chords as Alexander Pushkin's verse novel, *Eugene Onegin*, while its involuted narrative structure bears more than a passing resemblance to the famously binomial protagonists of Weimar theater. But whereas Pushkin's work retrofitted the superstructure of the aristocratic marriage-plot with a utopian Russian national identity, and where Schiller reverse-engineered a preexisting Swiss national culture into the model nationalism of *William Tell*, Nguyễn will forge a uniquely Vietnamese national identity on the grounds of gender identity-politics. Not only is the central figure of the story is a woman, Kiều Thúy, but much of the plot revolves around a breathtakingly advanced denunciation of the gender roles and patriarchal clan relations of late Vietnamese feudalism. In effect, *Kiều* turned the familial into the political, more than a century before the cadres of the Vietcong would put the cultural insight into political practice, by telling peasants in the villages, "We are not your fathers; *you* are our mothers".

One of the key reasons for this startling modernity was the complicating factor of Vietnam's neighbor to the north, namely China. The territory of present-day Vietnam existed for a thousand years as a tributary province of various Chinese Empires, and it was only after

countless failed rebellions, each commemorated in copious detail by Vietnamese folklore, that an indigenous Vietnamese dynasty managed to throw off the yoke of the T'ang dynasty in the early tenth century AD. Since then, Vietnam has successfully resisted periodic invasions from China in 981, 1076, 1284, 1287, 1406, 1789 and, latest of all, 1979. This lengthy struggle for autonomy did not merely generate hostility towards the invader; it also permitted great swathes of China's examination system, ideographic alphabet and culture to be absorbed by Vietnam's indigenous scholar-gentry or literati, in much the same way that China's vast hydraulics systems, intensive rice horticulture, and river-mercantilisms centered around the Yellow River and the Yangtze were transplanted onto Vietnam's own Red River and Mekong valley-cultures.<sup>7</sup>

In geopolitical terms, Vietnam's position vis-à-vis China in 1813 was thus roughly analogous to the newly independent Latin American states vis-à-vis Spain and Portugal, the American southern colonies vis-à-vis Britain, or Haiti vis-à-vis France, and we will see later that there is a moment in *Kiều* which corresponds to the moment of Bolivarism. China was thus the first great counter-player, to borrow Erik Erikson's suggestive term, for Vietnam's autonomous development, a tradition which has continued until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the nom de guerre of Vietnam's greatest revolutionary, Ho Chi Minh, is a Chinese expression literally meaning "He Who Enlightens", and it is no accident that when Ho was arrested and interned by a regional Chinese warlord in the early 1940s while trying to cross the northern border, he wrote his famous prison poems in Chinese ideograms.

What this means in practical terms is that *Kiều's* relationship to Chinese culture is somewhat more complicated than, say, Pushkin's adaptation of the categories of late 18<sup>th</sup> century French melodrama, or Shakespeare's reworking of the history play into Elizabethan national drama. This is partly due to Nguyễn's skillful use of Chinese literary metaphors, tropes and similes, which ceaselessly shuttle from one proto-national culture to another, and partly because much of the plot is borrowed from an extant Chinese narrative, *The Tale of Chin, Yuen and Ch'iao*. Written under the pseudonym of Ch'ing-hsin Ts'ai-jen, and most likely published at some point during the Qing era, the work is a mediocre novel, but had the singular merit of furnishing Nguyễn with some of the key raw materials for his own classic. We are extremely fortunate to have Huỳnh Sanh Thông's excellent English translation of *Kiều*, which provides detailed annotations of Nguyễn's Chinese references and specifically Vietnamese innovations (I should note that in the quotations to come, I generally use the literal translation found in Huỳnh's notes, in order to highlight the complex interplay of Chinese and Vietnamese cultural registers). Consider the opening passage, which makes three significant allusions to the Chinese canon:

A hundred years – in this life span on earth  
talent and destiny are apt to feud.  
You must go through an event in which the sea becomes mulberry fields [bê-dâu]  
and watch such things as make you sick at heart.  
Is it strange that who is rich in this is poor in that?  
Blue Heaven's wont to strike rosy cheeks from spite.<sup>8</sup>

The term "bê-dâu", literally "sea-and-mulberry", signifies a profound natural or social upheaval; no less an authority than Mao Zedong would commemorate the liberation of Nanking by the Red Army in April of 1949 with a poem which concluded triumphantly: "What marks the course of men/ Is the Flood-tides and Mulberry-fields".<sup>9</sup> What is striking here is *Kiều's* intensely subjective framing of this motif, that is to say, the well-nigh Shakespearian clash of plebian talent and

nobilitarian destiny, shorn of any theological intermediary between the two registers; no less significant is the direct appeal to the reader's heart, ironically contrasted to the heartlessness of the Heavens, a.k.a. the imperial bureaucracy. Last but not least, the seemingly innocent piece of folk wisdom, "who is rich in this is poor in that", conceals a canny piece of linguistic dialectics: as Huỳnh points out, Nguyễn uses the Vietnamese transcription of a Chinese literary adage here, namely "bĩ sắc tư phong" (meaning roughly, noone is perfect), rather than the indigenous Vietnamese phrase, which would be "được cái này mất cái kia" (literally, "[who] gets this, loses that").<sup>10</sup>

Presumably, the Vietnamese saying would have been too crudely materialistic for the purposes of the narrative, which stresses the importance of internalized or symbolic wealth, as opposed to a one-time profit or loss. It's worth remembering here that the wealth of China's dynastic cultures was extracted from agrarian-rents mediated by internal networks of river-valleys, as opposed to ocean-based trade. The traditional threat to Chinese dynasties, namely the semi-nomadic cultures based further in the continental interior, were occasionally a military threat, but never a technological or economic one. By contrast, Vietnam's coastal geography, combined with the rugged mountain terrain along its northern and western borders and the overwhelming presence of China, spawned a qualitatively different geographic unconscious – one far more attuned to maritime metaphors. Whereas the Chinese term for the nation is "chung-guo" – literally, "middle realm" – one of the key Vietnamese terms for nation or homeland is "nước", which can also mean "water", "streams", "rivers", and even "tide"; Nguyễn also deploys the more poetic "nước non" (literally, "hills and streams"), the Vietnamese equivalent of "countryside".

Nguyễn will do more, however, than just transform the symbolic currency of Chinese mountains and rivers into Vietnamese hills and streams; he will also undermine the Confucian gender ideology of Ming-era China, via a clever set of narrative inversions. *Kiều* does not begin with the village idyll or the stereotypical male protagonist of Chinese opera – the handsome young scholar, destined to fall in love with a fair maiden – but rather in the midst of that prototypical urban phenomenon, the crowd ("Fine men and beauteous women on parade/ horses and carriages like water, upper and lower garments like nen grass").<sup>11</sup> As evening approaches, the three siblings of the Vương family – *Kiều*, the eldest daughter; *Vân*, her younger sister; and *Quan*, their brother, the youngest of all – stroll by a grave, whereupon *Quan* recounts the sad fate of *Đạm Tiên*, a famous singer much admired in her day, who died suddenly before the arrival of a mysterious suitor:

From overseas a stranger came to woo  
and win a girl whose name spread far and wide.  
But when the lover's boat sailed into port,  
he found the hairpin had broken, the flower vase had fallen.<sup>12</sup>

This invocation of an ocean-going mercantilism gone awry, which in a different time and place might have provided the materials for a somber New England sea shanty or a Melville novel, is employed here for quite a different purpose. After writing a poem to commemorate *Đạm Tiên*, *Kiều* sinks into a mournful trance, the rough equivalent of the Romantic melancholy of a Rousseau, or the suicidal gloom of Faust in his study. Waving aside the protests of her brother, *Kiều* insists on waiting for a sign from the deceased singer; their wait is rewarded by a mysterious whirlwind, which shakes the trees and leaves tell-tale footprints in the moss (as a

token of her gratitude, Kiều writes an old-style or “ku shih” poem, i.e. unregulated by length, tone or rhyme sequence). This whirlwind has the most uncanny resemblance to the clash of proto-national and nobilitarian registers in Kleist, pithily described by Heiner Müller as follows: “[Kleist’s] fundamental metaphor, in the force-field between Europe and Asia, is the pillar of dust, the trope of total acceleration at a standstill, the eye of the typhoon.”<sup>13</sup>

To be sure, the energies in question here are not those of a Prussian principality buffeted by the storm of the Napoleonic Wars, but rather a unified Vietnam just beginning to develop into an autonomous nation-state. Our first hint of this is the moment when Kim Trọng, the young scholar-hero straight out of the Chinese operatic canon, spies the Vương from afar, and finds himself instantly smitten with Kiều:

[He] caught a fleeting glimpse of the red shadows in the distance:  
spring orchid, autumn mum – a gorgeous pair!  
Beautiful girl and talented young man –  
what stirred their hearts their eyes still dared not to say.  
They hovered, rapture-bound, ‘tween wake and dream:  
they could not stay, nor would they soon depart.<sup>14</sup>

Nguyễn artfully counterpoints the opening motif of “red shadows” – literally, “bóng hồng”, a time-honored poetic trope meaning “a woman glimpsed at a distance”, i.e. from somewhere within the Confucian family enclosure – with a scandalous proto-national temporality: this is the deeply egalitarian self-identification of the last line, which erupts out of the hieratic enclosure in much the same way that the Kantian intuitions of national-juridical norms stormed out of sleepy 18<sup>th</sup> century Königsberg. But where Kant retrofitted the archaic superstructure of the Central European principalities with the juridical constants of a genuinely national (that is to say, British, French or American) legislative sphere, *Kiều* set the space of the Vietnamese mercantile clan in motion towards a Southeast Asian or proto-national mercantilism. The result is one of the first great representations of the national subject in Vietnamese literature:

Alone, in silence, she beheld Ch’ang-o’s shadow [i.e. the moon],  
her heart a raveled coil of hopes and fears:<sup>15</sup>

Once again, Nguyễn transforms a Chinese trope – Ch’ang-o is the goddess of the moon in Chinese mythology – into the perfect foil for Kiều’s blossoming subjectivity, mediated by the textile sublime of a handicrafts culture (e.g. “How strange, the race of lovers! Try as you will/ You can’t unsnarl their hearts’ entangled threads.”)<sup>16</sup> Kiều’s moment of introspection has significant affinities to Hồ Xuân Hương’s magnificent *Questions for the Moon*, which concludes with this provocative couplet:

Weary, past midnight, who are you searching for?  
Are you in love with these rivers and hills [nước non]?<sup>17</sup>

Whereas Hồ Xuân Hương’s moon projects a fantasmatic proto-national subject, Nguyễn’s version depicts a proto-national object, i.e. as background scenery in a decidedly non-European national landscape. As an aesthetic category, the early 19<sup>th</sup> century British and American landscapes were mediated by a relatively homogenous stratum of commercialized gentry and

frontier yeomanry, something apparent everywhere from John Keats' retrospective nightingale to Thoreau's New England egalitarianism, all the way to the sovereign vistas of Pierre-Charles L'Enfant's building-plan of Washington, DC. By contrast, the aesthetics of the Vietnamese landscape of the day were mediated primarily by the literati and its associated feudal hierarchies, and only secondarily by a budding merchant class. It is therefore the deep-seated crisis of literati culture, wracked by twenty-five years of civil war and social upheaval, which turns out to be the sticking point in Kiều's premonitory dream:

[Đạm Tiên speaks:] "Well, ten new subjects our League Chief just set:  
again please work your magic with a brush."  
Kiều did as asked and wrote – with nymphic grace  
her hand dashed off ten lyrics at one stroke.  
Đạm Tiên read them and marveled to herself:  
"Rich-wrought embroidery from a heart of gold!  
included in the Book of Sorrow Songs [collection of poems written by those with severed  
entrails],  
they'll yield the palm to none but win first prize."<sup>18</sup>

Đạm Tiên's ghost returns as a quasi-Hegelian Spirit or internalized psychological drive, at the same moment that Kiều's dream-interpretation of her own poem displaces the actual poetic performance. In Hegelian terminology, Đạm Tiên is the national-literary Spirit dressed in the garb of the peasant spirit-world; in sociological terms, she takes on some of the key functions of a national literary sphere, namely the editor, publisher and literary critic. The price Nguyễn pays for this advance is the obsolescence of the literati poetic tradition, something obliquely registered by Kim's longing for his veiled muse:

He drained the cup of gloom: it filled anew –  
one day without her seemed three autumns long.  
Silk curtains veiled her windows like dense clouds,  
and toward the rose within he'd dream his way.  
The moon kept waning, oil kept burning low:  
his face yearned for her face, his heart her heart.  
The study-room turned icy, cold as copper –  
brushes lay dry, lute strings hung loose on frets.<sup>19</sup>

By retrofitting a series of climatic signifiers (autumn, clouds, moon, and the tactile sensation of the cold) with the implied equivalence of the face for face and heart for heart, this passage does more than simply privilege 19<sup>th</sup> century meteorology over Buddhist theology. What is at stake is the emergence of national identity in the first place. If the Weimar theater had the option of projecting a utopian German cultural nationalism in advance of an actual German nation-state – the most famous example is Faust's national-revolutionary (read: Napoleonic) speculation, which is redeemed in Gretchen's provincial coin – Nguyễn faced the rather different situation of narrating a nation-state in advance of its corresponding nationalism. The historical antinomy here was that the Tây Sơn rebels could defeat the Chinese Empire but were unable, due to the underdevelopment of Vietnam's mercantile class vis-à-vis the European colonial powers, to replace the dynastic system of clan allegiances with a nation-building Absolutism.<sup>20</sup> Nor was

there the East Asian equivalent of a British or American identity-politics which might have served as the symbolic counter-player to the Chinese Empire of the day; the closest candidate, Japan, would not emerge from its self-imposed seclusion until the Meiji Restoration, well after the occupation of Vietnam by Imperial France.

Nguyễn's first step towards resolving this aesthetic (but also political) problem will be the nationalization of the mercantile clan. This is broadly hinted at by the dwelling Kim rents next to Kiều's family compound: not only is the house owned by a merchant away on business, but its ritual name is Thúy (literally, "kingfisher", but also Kiều's family name).<sup>21</sup> What may seem to be a clumsy or heavy-handed fable of alienation is in fact a sophisticated refunctioning of clan identity-politics. Elsewhere in the poem, the standard pseudonym for Kiều's mother is "nha huyên", which literally means "the house [where grows] the day-lily",<sup>22</sup> while the comparable term for her father is "xuân-dương" ("the house [where grows] a fragrant cedar").<sup>23</sup> By literally and figuratively alienating the family name to a location outside of the family compound, Nguyễn generates a narrative space equidistant from the hieratic marriage-plot and the mercantile marketplace alike. This is a significant step beyond the mercantile framework of Cao Xueqin's late 18<sup>th</sup> century classic, *Story of the Stone*, and one can argue that Kim's chamber is halfway between the secluded literati study and the semi-public Enlightenment salon. Nguyễn's next move is to relocate the ritual exchange of equivalences within the context of a powerful gender ideology:

Her words untied a knot within his breast –  
to her he passed gold bracelets and red scarf.  
"Henceforth I'm bound to you for life," he said.  
"Call these small gifts a token of my love."  
In hand she had a sunflower-figured fan:  
she traded it that instant for her pin.<sup>24</sup>

The female raveled coil and the male knot converge in the melodramatic trope of the heart, i.e. a gender ideology mediated by national-judicial rather than clan-familial coordinates. This trope, in turn, permits Nguyễn to fashion a rudimentary national allegory. In the astonishing conclusion of this passage, Kiều not only crosses over from her family compound into Kim's room – an utterly scandalous act for a woman of her time – but single-handedly transforms the Chinese watercolor sketch of misty mountain pines into a primordial national postcard:

Brush rack and tube for poems on his desk –  
above, there hung a sketch of pale green pines.  
Frost-bitten and wind-battered, they looked real:  
the more she gazed, the more they sprang to life.  
"It's something I dashed off just now," he said.  
"Please write your comments, lending it some worth."  
Her nymphic hand moved like a lashing storm  
and penned some quatrains right atop the pines.<sup>25</sup>

Kiều's poetic brush-stroke countersigns the Vietnamese landscape like an emblematic national seal, as Nguyễn's meteorological metaphors coalesce into the sigils of an early national realism. The content of this realism is the freely-sworn pledge, which is not quite the formal market

contract but no longer the hieratic injunction or familial vow:

Both wrote a pledge of troth, and with a knife  
they cut in two a lock of her long hair.  
The stark bright moon was gazing from the skies  
as with one voice both mouths pronounced the oath.  
Their hearts' recesses they explored and probed,  
etching their vow of union in their bones.  
Both sipped a nectar wine from cups of jade –  
silks breathed their scents, the mirror glassed their selves.<sup>26</sup>

Given that the silk garment and the mirror were elite luxuries in the Vietnamese society of the day, it's significant that the passage refers to a specifically nobilestarian rather than mercantile or Ur-bourgeois reflexivity. This slippage marks one of the fundamental narrative fault-lines of *Kiêu*, namely the cleft between the poem's proto-national forms and the archaic types of regional-mercantile content at its disposal. By highlighting the antinomy between an external or socially-sanctioned appearance (mandarin dress) and internal self-appearance (nobilestarian status), the conjunction of the silk and the mirror names the double crisis of Vietnamese society: the cultural bankruptcy of the mandarins in the face of peasant uprisings from below, and the political subalternity of the nobilestarian elites vis-à-vis a Gia Long dynasty imposed from above.<sup>27</sup> This is also the secret of *Kiêu*'s lute performance, which hovers on the very borders of a national musical aesthetics:

Clear notes like cries of egrets flying past;  
dark tones like torrents tumbling in mid-course.  
Andantes languid as a wafting breeze;  
allegros rushing like a pouring rain.  
The lamp now flared, now dimmed – and there he sat  
hovering between sheer rapture and deep gloom.<sup>28</sup>

Meteorological form and mercantile content converge in the mercantile speculation, transforming Kim and *Kiêu* into premonitory icons of the national audience and national performer, respectively. What is not yet clear, however, is how such proto-national forms can be expected to generate an authentically national content, given the underdeveloped and inchoate status of the Vietnamese nation-state. One subtle hint is the moment where Kim's wooing goes too far, and *Kiêu* reproves him with a lecture somewhere between a literati recitation and a Reformation-era sermon.<sup>29</sup> This seemingly minor detail is the first tremor in a micropolitical earthquake, which will demolish the tottering edifice of the literati tradition and clear the path for its national successor. *Kiêu*'s fateful parting words to Kim crackle like the East Asian thunderbolt between Joan d'Arc and Madame Bovary:

“As long as hills and streams endure, come back,  
remembering her who is with you today.”<sup>30</sup>

Subjective transience converges with objective duration in the moment of national remembrance, something underlined by the driving repetition of the preposition “còn” in the couplet's internal

rhyme scheme (“Còn non còn nước còn dài/còn về còn nhớ đền người hôm nay”). Mercantile quantity does not rise to national quality, however, until the fateful event recorded some seventeen lines later: the Thúy family is arrested by corrupt bailiffs, triggering Kiều’s heroic decision to rescue her kinfolk by selling herself into an arranged marriage (even worse, her purchaser, a certain Scholar Mã, is up to no good). What is most extraordinary about the sequence is its impressive wealth of economic detail: among other things, we learn that a silk-trader (i.e. a commercial competitor) was responsible for downfall of the Thúy clan; that the bailiffs are motivated primarily by greed and not ideology; and that arranged marriages have long become a fertile site of investment opportunities.<sup>31</sup> To make a long story short, the mercantile speculation crash-lands in the grisly realities of national expropriation.

Kiều’s spectacular self-sacrifice thus has two significant consequences, both of which turn on the category of gender. First, Kim can be safely whisked off-stage, thereby cementing Kiều’s role as the central protagonist. Second, the disruption of the mercantile clan permits the category of gender to be pried loose from the nobilest household, permitting Kiều’s literal and figurative alienation to symbolize the noxious effects (as well as utopian potential) of the cash nexus. By symbolically pawning the mercantile clan’s family silver, Nguyễn gambles everything on the gold standard of a national identity-politics:

Pity the child, so young and so naïve –  
Misfortune, like a storm [va gio tai bay], swooped down on her.  
To part from Kim meant sorrow, death in life –  
would she still care for life, much less love?  
A raindrop does not brood on its poor fate;  
a leaf of grass repays three months of spring.<sup>32</sup>

The subtle framing of Kiều’s subjective reaction against the objective backdrop of the masculine storm (“va gio tai bay” literally means “disaster that comes flying on the wind”, and can refer to social or natural events) and the feminine raindrop (“hạt mưa”) does more than set meteorology in motion towards the politics of gender.<sup>33</sup> It signals the birth of a genuinely national character-system, founded on a plebian politics of sisterhood as opposed to the hieratic politics of brotherhood. In fact, Nguyễn will construct a whole series of female counter-players, ranging from the ghostly Đạm Tiên all the way to the benevolent Giac, who collectively guide, motivate and otherwise shepherd Kiều on her epic journey through Vietnamese society. Each of these counter-players anchors, in turn, a local hieratic space or institution, against which Kiều can be defined as a subject: Đạm Tiên’s divination of the future thus provides the temporal backstop for Kiều’s once-in-a-lifetime musical performance; Vân’s marriage is the necessary counterpoint to Kiều’s subsequent exile; Ma Kiều’s trust enables Kiều to rescue herself from Sớ Khanh’s treachery, and so forth. This is why Kiều’s plea to her sister to marry Kim in her stead is not the regression to an archaic clan-identity it might seem to be, but rather a step towards national history:

“You have long days of spring ahead – please heed  
The call of blood, redeem my pledge [lời nước non] for me”<sup>34</sup>

The phrase “lời nước non” literally means “the word [I swore in sight of] streams and hills”, i.e. the oath of clan loyalty turns into the pledge of national fidelity. This significantly raises the

stakes of the success or failure of *Kiều's* character-system, in the sense that the more a national cultural logic asserts itself over and above the dictates of the local clan-identity, marriage-plot, or literati trope in question, the greater the need for mediations capable of binding such local materials to the national pledge – or put another way, the greater the need for a working category of national allegory.

The key limitation of the counter-players is that they cannot fulfill this allegorical function: they are neither the Mephistophelean agents of a belated nationalization, nor the Shakespearian figures of nationalisms yet to be. As a result, *Kiều* will increasingly take on the reflexive subjectivity of the objective locality in question, thereby transforming the hieratic rite into the national Event. The trial run for this strategy was the leap from *Đạm Tiên's* literati sphere to *Kiều's* musical performance, which momentarily transformed the rented house into the national concert-hall. Nguyễn goes still further with the next counter-player: the leap from *Vân's* marriage-pledge to *Kiều's* exile generates not only the space of a ritual national expropriation, a.k.a. the brothel, but also the agents of that expropriation, namely Scholar *Mã* and Madame *Tú* – the quasi-allegorical personifications of gluttony and avarice, respectively. Nguyễn takes this opportunity to deliver one of the great denunciations of primitive accumulation ever written:

Mere hazard, undesigned, can bring things off:  
Sawdust and bitter melon met and merged.  
They pooled resources, opening a shop  
to deal in powder and sell perfume [i.e. engage in prostitution]  
Country and town they scoured for “concubines”  
whom they would teach the trade of play and love.<sup>35</sup>

“Sawdust and bitter melon” is a uniquely Vietnamese term for two swindlers who unknowingly hoodwink each other, and there is a sense in which the unconsummated affair between *Kim* and *Kiều* represents the ideal of egalitarian exchange, *Mã* and *Tú's* consummated transaction epitomizes the reality of unequal exchange. That said, we need to be very careful about overhastily equating these exchanges with the national marketplace or identifying the brothel with the national factory, and not just because no true system of manufacture existed in the Vietnam of the day. The above passage underlines one of the central paradoxes of nation-state formation in early 19<sup>th</sup> century East Asia: namely, the relative abundance of domestic capital, combined with a crying scarcity of external outlets for profitable reinvestment (a.k.a. overseas colonies). While a great deal of mercantile wealth was transmuted into sophisticated forms of symbolic capital via the literati system, an ever-increasing portion was indirectly exported to the European colonial powers, via the unequal exchange of silver coinage or agrarian commodities (tea, opium, cotton) for metropolitan guns, textiles and manufactures. The result was the slow-motion compradorization of East Asian mercantile capital, which felt increasingly obliged to squeeze the peasantry – one of the contributing factors of the Vietnamese peasant rebellions of Nguyễn's day.

This has its literary expression in the rift between the striking psychological realism of *Kiều's* soliloquies – her prenuptial swoon, in particular, is practically a textbook example of Freudian hysteria<sup>36</sup> – and the allegorical figure of Scholar *Mã*, whose commodity lust has more in common with the 17<sup>th</sup> buccaneer than the 18<sup>th</sup> century French or British libertine.<sup>37</sup> Simply, no preexisting national-judicial register is available which could triangulate between mercantile wealth and nobilitarian privilege in the manner of, say, Cervantes' anonymous village priest who

mediates between Quixote's extravagant speculations and Sancho Panza's peasant pragmatism in the first half of *Don Quixote*. Nguyễn's first step towards creating such a register will be to recuperate two of the archetypes of literati poetry, namely the seasonal flood and the pastoral landscape, from the standpoint of Kiều's scandalously feminine subjectivity. The result in the first case is the literally and figuratively double-edged symbol of the knife, which foreshadows the emergence of Kiều's autonomous corporeality ("Yes, and if and when the flood [nước] should reach my feet / this knife may later help decide my life").<sup>38</sup> The result in the second case is the intriguing variant of the picaresque, appended to Kiều's exile:

She traveled far, far into the unknown.  
Bridges stark white with frost, woods dark with clouds.  
Reeds huddling close while blew the cold north wind;  
an autumn sky for her and her alone.<sup>39</sup>

The temporal sequencing of the imagery – bridges/frost, woods/clouds, reeds/wind, autumn sky/solitary figure – transforms the hackneyed materials of the literati sketch into the national realism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century panorama. The paradox is that this symbolic national frame does not yet contain a national subjectivity, something most evident in Kiều's dramatic arrival at the brothel, and her unsuccessful suicide attempt – a gesture which will resonate in the annals of East Asian culture for centuries to come.<sup>40</sup> The key point to remember here is that Kiều's act temporarily forestalls her enslavement, but does not really change anything: she has merely been transferred from one hieratic prison to another. This is confirmed by the covert references to the previous counter-players during Kiều's near-fatal swoon: Đạm Tiên briefly reappears as the offscreen presence who reminds Kiều of her karmic debts, while Vân's pledge similarly reappears as Madame Tú's devious promise (soon to be broken) that Kiều will be married off instead of forced into prostitution.

All in all, the true breakthrough of national allegory does not occur until somewhat later, when Nguyễn invents the Vietnamese version of the Western European landscape and panorama, namely the national seascape:

She sadly watched the harbor in gray dusk –  
whose boat was that with fluttering sails, far off?  
She sadly watched the river flow to sea –  
where would this flower end, adrift and lost?  
She sadly watched the field of wilted grass,  
the bluish haze where merged the earth and clouds.  
She sadly watched the wind whip up on the cove  
and set all waves a-roaring round her seat.  
Hemmed in by foreign streams and alien hills, [những nước-non]  
the exile cried her grief in sad quatrains.<sup>41</sup>

What lends this passage its extraordinary power is the structural deployment of the folk song as a rhythmic and symbolic frame. The static repetition of the chorus ("She sadly watched...") not only counterpoints the subtle progression of the visual imagery from least to most abstract, it transforms Kiều's experience of personal exile into a symbolic national diaspora. This suggests, in turn, that the most expansive vista of them all – namely, the boundless expanse of the Pacific

Ocean – is the untranscendable horizon and narrative limit-point of the story, or to paraphrase Bourdieu, the global field of the world-market against which the habitus of national allegory can be read.

Things are not quite this simple, however, for two main reasons. First, the trading routes of the Pacific had already been conquered by the European colonial powers, and the Gia Long regime's traffic with the West was extensive enough to ensure that it was simply not possible to depict the ocean as an objective void or non-national space in the manner of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.<sup>42</sup> Second, such an interpretation glosses over the crucial problem of Chinese nation-state formation, a process which was advanced enough to produce China's first great national novel – Cao Xueqin's *Story of the Stone* – in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, well ahead of its East Asian neighbors. This comparative advantage in cultural capital had a directly economic counterpart, namely the existence of a sizeable community of expatriate Chinese merchants living in Vietnam, who formed a local merchant caste.

The easiest way to grasp what is at stake here is to return to an analogous moment in the history of the Western European novel, namely the moment in the second half of *Don Quixote* when the picaresque is set in motion towards the metropolis of Golden Age Barcelona. Cervantes' key narrative innovation here is the dissolution of the mediating trope of the priest, and the corresponding transformation of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza into full-fledged bourgeois (rational, calculating, autonomous) subjects, capable of everything from quasi-judicial denunciations of the plagiarized Quixote text to the task of running an enlightened government. This striking sublation of the habitus of Hapsburg Absolutism by a national literary field, however, is simply not a viable strategy in the context of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Vietnamese society bereft of a mercantile port city, an entrenched Absolutism, or colonial surplus-rents.

Nguyễn's solution is hinted at by the final couplet of the above passage, and the juxtaposition of the "foreign hills and streams" and the quatrains of traditional poetry. This is a subtle reference to Vietnam's traditional antagonist and cultural model, namely China, and it is no accident that subsequent events turn upon the problem of the Chinese writing-system. Still locked up in the brothel, Kiều is befriended by a certain Sớ Khanh, who declares his affection and suggests they run off together, by sending her a note with the two Chinese ideograms, "hsi yüeh" (which can be further broken down into the characters "nien i jih hsü tsou", or "flee on the 21<sup>st</sup> day, hour of the dog").<sup>43</sup> Though they escape at the appointed time, she is quickly recaptured by the pursuing brothel-keepers and beaten almost to death by Madame Tú. To save her life, Kiều vows to become a full-fledged prostitute, uttering a line which has become a national proverb ("How can an eel mind muddying its head?").<sup>44</sup> In fact, the madam relents only when a fellow brothel-worker, Ma Kiều – the third counter-player – steps forward to vouch for her.

What raises this scene to the level of national melodrama is Ma Kiều's subsequent revelation that the entire escape was a theatrical stunt, staged by Sớ Khanh (whose name, incidentally, has become the standard Vietnamese epithet for a conniving Don Juan) and Madame Tú to break Kiều into service. Sure enough, Sớ Khanh brazenly saunters into the brothel a few weeks later, as if nothing had happened. But when he threatens to assault Kiều for slandering him, she fights back with the only weapon she has: she presents his original note as evidence, and sways her fellow brothel-workers to her side with a dramatic speech – one of the first great depictions of national mobilization in Vietnamese literature.<sup>45</sup> The triple mobilization of the written word – employed first as a means of communication, second as a means of betrayal, and thirdly as a means of self-defense – forms a veritable Hegelian triad, wherein Ma Kiều's words of solidarity (spoken Vietnamese) and Sớ Khanh's letter of betrayal (written

Chinese) are sublated in the document of juridical evidence.

The upshot of the entire episode is that Kiêu has finally become the national juridical subject we have been looking for, i.e. she is transformed from the mere object of hieratic expropriation into the equivalent of an indentured craft-laborer. This is nowhere more obvious than the passage where Madame Tú gilds the art of the oldest profession with the newest rhetoric of accumulation:

The mirror of the moon was shining bright –  
Madame Tú sat down by Kiêu and lectured her:  
“The trade of love, my girl, takes care and pains,  
and we who ply it must know all its tricks.”  
“I am the toy of winds and storms,” Kiêu said.  
“If I must give my body, so be it!”  
The bawd continued: “Men are all alike:  
They’ll get their money’s worth or won’t come here.  
There are more things to love than meet the eye  
and ways to cope with men by day or dark.  
Know these by heart – learn seven ploys to catch  
and hold a man, eight ways to please in bed.  
Play love with them until you’ve played them out,  
till heads must swim, till hearts of stone must spin.  
Now flirt with eyebrows, now coquet with lips.  
Now sing the moon, now sport among the flowers.  
There you have it, our house’s stock in trade:  
learn it and be a mistress of our craft!”<sup>46</sup>

The mercantile symbol of the mirror-like moon and Kiêu’s reference to the proto-national storm bracket a henceforth semi-autarkic accumulation process, a.k.a. the allegorical sale of female bodies to male customers who are not quite nobiletarian patrons but not yet coldly calculating entrepreneurs. Inasmuch as the labor of these female bodies, in turn, consists of equally allegorical theatrical performances, the entire scene comes scandalously close to a self-indictment of the literati in the dynastic system.

This will be confirmed in spades by Kiêu’s second great love-interest, namely Kỳ Thâm Thúc, the spendthrift scion of a well-to-do merchant family. Whereas the affinity between Kim and Kiêu played itself out in terms of a utopian national temporality, the bond between Kiêu and Thúc follows a specifically spatial logic, wherein the politics of semi-autarkic accumulation are set in motion towards the thematic material of the dynastic household. One of the first results is the plebianization of various lyric forms, which are drained of their hieratic content and transformed into decorative elements:

Moon and flower, flower and moon loving each other passionately:  
on a spring night, how can one quell the heart?  
Of course, when sound and spirit [thanh-khi] meet, one tie  
soon binds them in a knot none can yank loose.  
They’d stay together, exchange peaches by day and plums by night.  
First it was still an affair of the moon and wind, later it became a matter of stone and

bronze.<sup>47</sup>

It is significant that the textile metaphor of the knot or woven fabric is transposed onto the proto-national abstraction of “sound and spirit”, the ellipsis of a Chinese poetic metaphor referring to like meeting like. We already know that the early Vietnamese nation-state did not have the option of extrapolating a politics of national identity from an oceanic colonialism (the British solution), or interpolating one from the surplus-rents of the river-valley (the Chinese solution). Nguyễn opts for an unexpected third possibility: this is the geographic intermediation between the ocean and the river-valley, namely the coastal region or shoreline.

This is the genesis of a whole series of coast-related metaphors which anchor Kiều’s allegorical subjectivity in the space of the national marketplace, everywhere from romantic accolades (“A woman’s charms, O waves that topple city walls / that tumble homes and topple halls like toys!”)<sup>48</sup> to the outrage of Thúc’s father at his son’s infatuation (“Over a peaceful earth the waves now surged”).<sup>49</sup> This in turn lends retroactive depth to Kiều’s previous lament, “How can an eel mind muddying its head”: while the image is rooted in the concrete experience of fishing in estuaries or shorelines, the metaphor has the spatial connotation of some sort of coastal zone of accumulation, halfway between the fishing village and the mercantile entrepot. No less interesting is the explicit confluence of money with the category of aesthetic appearance, hinting at the historical agents of coastal accumulation:

Young Thúc, who squandered money with both hands,  
could spend his all on one seductive smile.  
The bawd would sleek Kiều’s hair, would paint her face –  
the stench of coins excites the blood with greed.<sup>50</sup>

Leaving aside the Freudian overtones of this olfactory characterization of money, the fundamental issue here is that the brothel’s semi-autarkic mode of accumulation – the exchange of craft-labor for merchant wealth – was meant to transform monetary wealth into symbolic wealth, i.e. surplus funds are reinvested in luxury goods for the brothel, as well as fresh brothel-workers. By contrast, Kiều’s affair with Thúc hints at quite a different logic of exchange, namely the exchange of symbolic wealth for symbolic wealth – something typified by the “lũ-shih” or T’ang-style poems they write for each other.

One of the most characteristic features of the second half of *Kiều* is the symbolic disruption, displacement or outright negation of poetic forms by a nascent prose realism. Kiều’s refusal to answer one of Thúc’s poems triggers a lengthy dialogue, wherein Kiều pours out her (quite prescient) fears and anxieties over her new career as a consort, while Thúc responds with a barrage of promises and pretexts – the displacement of the *lũ-shih* by that intriguing East Asian variant of the Western European bourgeois family melodrama, namely the concubine narrative.<sup>51</sup> Though the full flowering of this form would not occur until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it’s significant that Thúc’s own version of the national pledge (“Since we have known each other,” he replied, / “[for you] my heart has privately borne nothing but [a vow of love sworn in sight of] streams and hills”)<sup>52</sup> is upstaged by the space of coastal exchange:

[Thúc continues:] “Since I’ve already decided [to etch my troth in] stone and bronze,  
[I’ll] brave even the winds and the waves.”  
The two exchanged all secrets of their souls,

pledging their troth in sight of sea and hills.<sup>53</sup>

The exchange of sentiments which marked the zenith of Kiêu's romance with Kim ("Their hearts' recesses they explored and probed")<sup>54</sup> is supplanted by the exchange of secrets. The flip side of this newfound interiority is the belated arrival of a formal juridical sphere, in the guise of the prefect who arrests Kiêu at the behest of Thúc's enraged father. In contrast to the earlier bit character of Chung, the sympathetic literati who arranged for the release of the Thúc family, the prefect incarnates the symbolic economy of the dynastic sphere, as opposed to the commercial economy of the mercantile sphere. After a ferocious cross-examination, the prefect commands Kiêu to produce a poem entitled "The Cangue" to prove her merit. The result so astonishes and delights him, however, that he reconciles all the parties involved by decreeing a wedding for the lovers.

More is at stake here than the double irony of the poem's title – i.e. the fact that Kiêu had been put into shackles, while her only possible means of escape was to evoke her unfreedom on the written page. From a structural point of view, the final poem is Kiêu's belated return volley, the *lũ-shih* which completes the previously disrupted exchange of poems. But the volley does not return to Thúc in its original form: the oral delivery of the original poem has been supplanted by its written expression, while its spontaneous reception accedes to the canonizing or critical reading. Chinese poetic form has become Vietnamese prose content, something subtly underlined by the prefect's hyperbolic exclamation:

"It [Kiêu's poem] tops the height of the T'ang!' he cried in praise.  
"All gold [precious metal] on earth can't buy her gifts and charms."<sup>55</sup>

Not only is the metric of the T'ang dynasty, the revered model of the Vietnamese literati, implicitly devalued, but Kiêu's literary ability is raised to a position outside of the realm of mercantile accumulation – the founding moment of the autonomous or national literary field. This suggests, in turn, that Kiêu's shotgun marriage is more than just a didactic plot twist, but represents a full-fledged containment strategy, in Jameson's words, designed to quell the glaring contradiction between her allegorical national subjectivity and her status as a subaltern subject. This will be confirmed somewhat later, when we learn that the secret of Thúc's status was a fortunate marriage into the upper echelons of the literati order: his first wife, Hoạn, was the daughter of the head of the powerful Civil Office Board.

What ultimately dooms this strategy, then, is the same historical constellation which led Nguyễn to cast Kiêu as the central character in the first place: this is the historical failure of Thúc's social stratum, the upper mercantile elite, to generate a coherent nationalism or politics of national identity – or put another way, the inability of the literati to transcend the politics of dynastic rule. This is why Thúc's inability to tell Hoạn about Kiêu, the fatal silence which gives Hoạn the opportunity to wage her subsequent scorched earth campaign against her upstart rival, is not a personal character-flaw or weakness. Rather, it expresses the fundamental essence of the literati as a political entity: abject loyalty to the mightiest clan or dynastic faction.

Nguyễn will implicitly rejection of the dead-end of literati politics, by setting Kiêu's allegorical subjectivity in motion towards an equally allegorical dynastic space. This effectively nationalizes the materials of the dynastic drama, in much the same way that Shakespeare's theater nationalized the materials of the Reformation-era history-play. Henceforth, the drama of hieratic lineage will be upstaged by the drama of national succession. Kiêu's gloomy intuition of

the ocean depths provides the opening salvo of this campaign:

“The mistress of your household [i.e. Hoạn] – so I’ve heard –  
does what is proper, says what is correct.  
Oh, how I dread all such uncommon souls!  
It’s hard to plumb the ocean’s pits and depths.”<sup>56</sup>

This is not only the canny rewriting of a prior moment, which referred to the newlyweds in a folkloric context (“The bamboo and the plum tree lived together in one home [i.e. the lovers joined], / their love grew deeper, deeper than the sea”),<sup>57</sup> it is also the plebian inversion of the Heavenly abode of the gods. What is so fearsome about Hoạn, in short, is the fact that she cannot be read: the crisis of dynastic representation is echoed by the crisis of hieratic presentation. The flip side of this double crisis is, of course, the unprecedented aesthetic opportunity of national realism, and it’s no accident that when Thúc decides to return to Kiêu, his eager anticipation suddenly transforms the previously drab countryside into the majestic national panorama:

His horse flew him across strange streams and hills [nước non]:  
waters, all gleaming, mirrors for the sky,  
walls wreathed in sapphire mist, peaks gilt with sun.<sup>58</sup>

Quick as he is, Hoạn’s scheme of revenge is still quicker: the moment he departs, she dispatches two thugs named Hound and Hawk in a sailing vessel to kidnap Kiêu. Under cover of darkness, they sneak into the Thúc family compound and drug her into unconsciousness. Before carrying her off, however, they substitute an anonymous corpse for her body, and then burn down the library of the family compound, to convince the family of her demise.

This is by no means the petty mercantile or nobilitarian intrigue one might think. Just as the seascape anticipated the national panorama, so too does this mercantile deed anticipate the national drama of internment: when Kiêu is brought before Hoạn, the latter is sitting in state upon a regal throne, and promptly commands that the newcomer be brutally thrashed, renamed Flower, and assigned the menial duties of a household slave. This symbolic expropriation, renaming, and alienation of the national literary corpus has a genuine historical precedent, namely the Chinese invasion and thirty-year occupation of Vietnam in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century, suggesting that Nguyễn is aiming at nothing less than the narrative of national occupation. This is confirmed by the dire scene of Thúc’s return, when Hoạn openly parades Kiêu before him, knowing full well he dare not transgress against the rules of the dynastic system by acknowledging his covert marriage. Kiêu’s response drives the nail into the coffin of the marriage-plot:

“As bride and groom we two were duly joined –  
she splits us into slave and master now.  
The face displays sweet smiles, but deep inside  
the heart will scheme to kill without a knife.”<sup>59</sup>

It’s important to stress that Hoạn is by no means a stereotypical villain, but is acting strictly according to the letter of dynastic politics, i.e. employing her clan’s symbolic hegemony to crush an interloper devoid of powerful connections or wealth. The key antinomy here is the dawning

recognition that slavery and domination are inherent in the hieratic marriage, or put another way, the fact that Hoạn's true heart and false face are the logical end-product of the marriage-system's true face and false heart. To be sure, the entire episode of internment is shot through with similar antinomies: Kiều's all-forgiving forbearance somehow draws the fire of Hoạn's all-consuming jealousy; the unexpected joy of Thúc's homecoming celebration degenerates into stage-managed humiliation; and even Kiều's musical talents are transformed into a means of heaping further humiliation on the former couple.

The one enabling moment of resistance to the marriage-system, on the other hand, is delivered by a sympathetic stewardess – the fourth counter-player – who appears on the scene and gives Kiều a crash course in dynastic politics:

She'd give Kiều tea or medicine for her wounds,  
and some advice on how to stay alive:  
“Accept whatever happens, good or ill –  
a willow or a rush, though, should take care of its frail self.  
Perhaps you must atone for some past sin,  
but malice brought you here, and not pure chance.  
Beware – around here there are ears on walls even as there are chinks in wattles.  
If you see your old friend, you look away,  
or lightning bolts will strike you from the blue.  
When wronged, can bees and ants demand redress?”<sup>60</sup>

“Bees and ants” is a standard metaphor for downtrodden commoners, a significantly plebian reference, while the reference to chinks in wattles is the Vietnamese equivalent of “the walls have ears”. This functional paranoia comes very close to the rationalized paranoia of the market-based subject, who is either constantly on the prowl for a profit-making opportunity (the capitalist version of the story), or constantly impelled to sell their labor-power to the marketplace (the proletarian version of the story), and we will see later how Nguyễn resurfaces the caste registers at his disposal with class identities.

For the moment, however, it's worth pointing out that the stewardess has identified the key weakness of the dynastic system: this is its dependence on the identity-politics of clan alliances. To survive, Kiều must take care of herself, which means casting off her clan affiliations. Kiều will immediately put this advice into practice, by serving as a model servant and carefully avoiding any open confrontation with Hoạn, while biding her time for a chance to turn the tables on Hoạn. This finally occurs when Hoạn, still eager for more information, grills her about her past, and pressures Thúc to force her to speak. Kiều responds by writing a carefully edited prose account of her past – the first explicit reference to a work of prose narration in the entire work. Where Kiều's imaginary poem swayed Đạm Tiên, her lute-playing swayed Kim, her fidelity swayed Chung, her note swayed the brothel-workers, and her poem swayed the prefect, her artful prose account sways Hoạn, to the point that she permits Kiều to become an attendant at a Buddhist shrine, i.e. her menial duties as a household servant accede to the task of copying and reciting religious texts. This is, of course, the classic posture of the exiled literati forced to retreat from dynastic politics to the monastery, and it is here that Kiều's lack of formal literati status pays its greatest dividends. Instead of retreating to the magical wish-fulfillments of the spirit-world, along the lines of *Journey to the West*, Nguyễn mobilizes the trope of the exiled literati against the institution of the literati proper. As soon as Hoạn is away on a visit, Thúc arranges to

visit Kiêu's shrine and delivers the following news:

“Oh, I would brave all perils and all risks  
to stay with you, in death if not in life.  
But to my forebears I still owe an heir –  
I'll clench my teeth and cut our bond in two.  
I let stone break and bronze fade [i.e. break my vow] – could my next hundred lives  
redeem the shame of one pledged word unkept?”  
She said: “A cypress boat that rides the waves  
May float or sink as fortune will dictate.  
While I was floundering in the swamp of vice,  
how could I ever hope to live till now?  
It is my part to play a drop from a downpour  
that falls at random as spectators watch.”<sup>61</sup>

The cypress boat is a classical Chinese metaphor for a frail craft in constant danger of capsizing, but the role reversal of the discussion is startlingly modern: all the tears and hand-holding cannot hide the obvious fact that Thúc is selling her out. Not only does his personal pledge turn out to be printed on worthless nobiletarian paper, but he does not make even a token effort to help her flee or otherwise shield her from Hoạn's wrath. But when Hoạn unexpectedly walks in on the pair, the impending bankruptcy of the literati caste is leveraged into another currency altogether: a sympathetic housemaid, the fifth counter-player, whispers to Kiêu that Hoạn had secretly watched her entire conversation with Thúc from start to finish. This is the emergence of a full-fledged national performativity, located halfway between the Shakespearean spectator and the national readership of Richardson's *Clarissa*. Kiêu's response is an admixture of horror, fascination, and what can only be described as covert professional respect:

“I'll never look upon her like again.  
That was true self-command, that was pure sham.  
The merest thought of her will make the flesh creep.  
Where else to find a woman of such depths?”<sup>62</sup>

Put another way, the spectators Kiêu previously invoked are now endowed with their appropriate content: the national performance finally has its nascent literary audience. Hoạn's ambiguous narrative role thus strongly parallels the German philosophical term of “Schein” or appearance, that conceptual abstraction which is somehow realer than reality itself; only where the latter registers the arrival of paper money and the national credit economy, the former signals the arrival of a national critical sphere – the realm charged with judging whether or not a performance is authentically national.

Faced with this double betrayal by her former sponsor and her arch-nemesis, seemingly at her wits end, Kiêu does the single bravest thing she has ever done. Rather than passively embracing her fate, she grabs a few precious items from the altar and flees from the shrine – the double negation of the monastic retreat and the literati exile alike. The result is this dazzling moment of early realism such as the following:

Through wooded hills, sand trails immersed in mist;

cockcrow from moon-lit huts; fresh marks of shoes  
on dew-soaked bridge. Along the path, at night,  
a girl braved wind and weather walking on.<sup>63</sup>

All the relevant national aesthetic categories put in an appearance here. In the background, the invariable bridge is framed against the national panorama of hills and streams, while a new aesthetic register – the moon-lit huts and pathless sand-trails – complements Kiều's solitary footsteps. The scene has the density of an early urban center, something reconfirmed somewhat later, when Kiều tells the prioress of a nearby shrine that she is an itinerant mendicant from the capital city – the first outright lie she has ever told, and her first attempt to cloak her identity.

What is lost during the transition to this realism, of course, is the henceforth unrealistic possibility of clinging to an earlier identity-politics, whether of monastic or literati derivation. The initial symbol of this transition was Đạm Tiên, who appeared first as a localized ghost and only later as an otherworldly emissary and counter-player. The prioress, a kindly woman named Giác Duyên, will play a similar double role as a bit character and, much later, as the sixth and final counter-player. Giác's initial function is hinted at by the gifts which Kiều presents to Giác: a golden bell and silver gong, i.e. monetary values which take the form of hieratic gifts, and it would not be an exaggeration to claim that their relocation from Hoạn's shrine to that of Giác follows the logic of a commercial transaction: the withdrawal of symbolic capital from the mercantile sphere and its redeployment in the theological realm. Giác, in short, is the distant but recognizable prototype of the money-changer or banker.

But when a passing pilgrim stops and recognizes the golden bell and silver gong as Hoạn's property – the symbolic reassertion of the power of the clan over the power of the theological institution – Giác tells Kiều she must flee, unwittingly consigning her to the clutches of a certain Madame Bạc, who promises to shelter her. Alas, Bạc turns out to be the dismal repetition of Madame Tú, duping her into yet another a bogus arranged marriage (the husband promptly hustles Kiều aboard a ship, sets sail, and sells her into a brothel at a distant port). From the standpoint of a mature Western European realism, this turn of events defies belief, simply because we know Kiều is far from dumb and has already gone through this charade once before. Given the heavily allegorical substructure of early Vietnamese realism, however, this sequence makes perfect sense: Kiều is not a rationalized individual subject, seeking to maximize her personal benefit on a competitive marketplace. Rather, she is an allegorical figure meant to embody the marketization of Vietnamese society in the first place. Her trajectory traces out a circuit of symbolic exchange, linking the mercantile clan to the first brothel, to the upper literati household, to the dynastic household, to the monastery, and finally to the second brothel. The result is an X-ray of the phases of primitive accumulation: the disaster which impoverishes the rural agrarian producer; the prostitution which symbolizes rural primitive accumulation; the marriage which symbolizes the literati office; the family intrigue which symbolizes dynastic appropriation; and the monastic retreat which symbolizes the theocratic speculation. On closer inspection, the second brothel is not a retreat to rural primitive accumulation, but a step forwards to the space of urban accumulation: at the unnamed port city, Kiều is sold at a competitive auction, hinting at the existence of multiple brothels locked into market competition with each other.

Just as Defoe's *Moll Flanders* maps out the geopolitical space of English agrarian capitalism – Flanders is born in Colchester, moves to London, and eventually makes her fortune in the American colony of Virginia – so too does *Kiều* track the prehistory of the Vietnamese

national market from the countryside to the commercial trading-post or entrepot, and finally to the port facility where the surplus-value of the entire river-valley begins to concentrate. It is here, in a social space which is not yet a city but no longer a village, that Kiêu will meet her third and final romantic partner. This is none other than Tù Hải, the staunch hero who will become the icon of the national revolutionary:

A tiger's beard, a swallow's jaw, and brows  
as thick as silkworms – he stood broad and tall.  
A towering hero, he outfought all foes  
with club or fist and knew all arts of war.  
Carrying heaven on his head and trampling the earth, he lived in the world,  
he was Tù Hải, a native of Yüeh-tung.  
On rivers and lakes he was used to the pleasure of roaming at large,  
Carrying a sword and a lute as half a load on each shoulder and plying one oar through  
hills and streams.  
In town for fun, he heard loud praises of Kiêu –  
love for a woman bent a hero's will.  
He brought his calling card to her boudoir –  
thus eyes met eyes and heart encountered heart.  
“The heart and bosom have met,” [i.e. “Two kindred souls have joined”] Tù said to  
Kiêu.<sup>64</sup>

What might seem to be a straightforward action hero is, in reality, one of the most elaborately constructed anti-colonial ruses of all time. Tù's portrait is based on a legendary Chinese rebel from the T'ang era, Huang Ch'ao, and the seventh and eighth lines of the passage quoted above (i.e. lines 2173-2174 in the original) are even an ellipsis of one of Ch'ao's poems. Given that Vietnam won its historic independence during the latter part of the T'ang era, roughly a century after Huang Ch'ao's rebellion, one might argue that Nguyễn is turning the poetic heritage of the T'ang era against itself. What complicates this reading, however, is the fact that Huang Ch'ao was a literati, while Ch'ing-hsin Ts'ai-jen's version of the story casts Tù as just another roving merchant. But Nguyễn's protagonist is neither a merchant nor a literati; nor is his military prowess linked to service in a nobile or dynastic household. In fact, the details of Tù's family background are left utterly blank – a scandalous absence which is the flip side of a new kind of national presence. The clearest evidence for this is the line, “Carrying heaven on his head and trampling the earth”, the forthright plebianization of the figure of the Emperor, suggesting that Tù's narrative role is roughly comparable to Prussia's Frederick II, Russia's Peter the Great, or Japan's Tokugawa Ieyasu – i.e. the exemplar of a nation-building Absolutism.

What displaces the lesser authority of the mercantile bill of sale and the literati writ, on the other hand, is that far less spectacular but equally important phenomenon, the Habermasian public sphere. This is apparent everywhere from the public reputation which attracts Tù to Kiêu in the first place, all the way to the egalitarian equivalence of the heart-for-heart and the glance-for-glance (the belated realization of the national affinity of Kiêu's romance with Kim, cf. footnote 19). The result is that Kiêu is suddenly endowed with positively Kantian powers of critical judgement, enabling her to descry the future national hero from the run-of-the-mill customer:

“Within I crave the touchstone for the gold –  
but whom can I turn to and give my heart?  
As for all those who come and go through here,  
am I allowed to sift real gold from brass?”<sup>65</sup>

In the framework of national allegory, *Kiêu* is thus the axial hinge between the gilded or decorated touchstone – halfway between the sacred family shrine and the merely sanctified domestic sphere or hearth – and the juridical sphere charged with regulating the mercantile exchange-net. This suggests, in turn, that the freely-chosen union of the lovers (“Two minds at one, two hearts in unison – / Unbidden, love will seek those meant for love”)<sup>66</sup> is something like the utopian alliance of the national shrine and the Absolutist monarch – the formula of a revolutionary politics which will shake the dynastic system to its foundations.

What stamps *Kiêu* as one of the transcendent works of world literature is its capacity to endow the category of national form with its corresponding political content, or put more concretely still, to unite *Kiêu*’s allegorical national subject with *Từ*’s utopian national government. We will go so far as to suggest that the usual biographical interpretation of Nguyễn as a political *Kiêu*, i.e. a self-effacing literati nostalgic for the old order, who expressed his dissatisfaction with the new masters in poetic form, needs to be supplemented by the insight that *Kiêu* is very much a political Nguyễn. Whatever Nguyễn’s nominal dynastic allegiances may or may not have been, his aesthetic work is a powerful critique of the dynastic system as a whole.

This critique begins with the clarion call of an all-embracing national mobilization, which will transform the dynastic concept of the heavens as well as the earth. The sky – the ultimate signifier of dynastic authority – is now the dwelling-space of the roc (“...he tore himself away and left – / wind-winged, the roc [bằng] soared to hunt the skies”),<sup>67</sup> a giant bird straight out of Chinese mythology which has roughly the same heroic resonance as the American eagle or the European hawk. Nguyễn will immediately rein in the nobilitarian overtones of this metaphor, however, by deploying a rather different avian metaphor:

After the wild goose [hông] vanished into space,  
she kept her eyes fast set on heaven’s edge.  
In silence she was waiting, night and day  
when through the region roared the flames of war.  
Gray phantoms, fumes of slaughter leapt the skies  
as sharks roved streams and armored men prowled roads.<sup>68</sup>

The Vietnamese meaning of the wild goose is the diametric opposite of the English expression “wild goose chase”, and refers to someone who soars above the crowd by virtue of individual initiative (the English equivalent would be “flight of an eagle”). The earth undergoes a similar plebianization, as the roads turn into a logistical network of supply routes and military encampments, while the reference to sharks roving in streams hints at the infiltration of oceanic processes of accumulation into the village economy.

In the long sweep of East Asian history, this passage represents a profound rupture from the storied litanies of military stratagems, feats of valor, and epic battles handed down by the Chinese classics of *Bandits of the Marsh* and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. The reason is that Nguyễn’s battalions are marching to a plebian rather than a martial tune: when *Từ* sets out on his journey, for example, his first act is to triangulate between the sea and the sky, symbolically

plumbing the lowest depths and highest reaches of Vietnamese society (“He gazed afar on sea and heaven, then / he leapt into the saddle with his sword”).<sup>69</sup> Conversely, Kiều’s refusal to stir from her new household and her unshakable faith in Tù’s eventual return echoes the centuries-old determination of Vietnamese peasants to hold on to their ancestral lands despite famine, war or natural disaster.

The eventual reuniting of the lovers thus amounts to the unification of Absolutist form with its national-allegorical content (Tù’s apt remark: “When fish and water [nước] meet, / it’s love!”). This breakthrough generates two new social spaces: the national assembly and the national juridical system. The first is clearly centered around Tù’s court, though one can argue that the arrival of Hoạn’s stewardess and Giác as honored guests represents the allegorical transfer of authority from the dynastic and hieratic realms to a nascent public sphere. The sphere of justice, however, is Kiều’s domain. It is striking that instead of simply commanding her enemies to be brought forth, she binds the common soldiers to her, by taking the time to convince them as to why they should be acting on her behalf in the first place:

Kiều briefed all soldiers, swearing them to act;  
All, outraged, vowed to execute her will.<sup>70</sup>

The model nationalism of the national shrine generates the plebian national oath. The flip side of this oath is the ritual abjuration or denunciation of the oath-breaker, displayed when Scholar Mã, Madame Tú, Sớ Khanh, and Madame Bạc and her nephew are all brought forth and then punished according to the letter of the oaths they once swore before Kiều, before proceeding to break. At the same time, Kiều showers a surprising degree of mercy on Hoạn and Thúc. The latter is simply forgiven, while the former is given the privilege of not only hearing the charges against her, but offering a personal defense. Terrified out of her wits, Hoạn inadvertently saves her own life by revealing that she did not pursue Kiều once the latter fled the shrine, and that her motives were entirely personal: “What woman, though, would gladly share her man?”<sup>71</sup> she blurts out, correctly identifying the concubine system itself as the source of the evil (significantly, no such clemency is shown towards Hound and Hawk, whose only real sin was to carry out Hoạn’s scheme).

There is no question, though, that the entire judgement episode represents an enormous leap forwards from the dynastic era. In Ch’ing-hsin Ts’ai-jen’s novel, Hoạn is viciously tortured (though not killed) and, in Huynh’s words, “Each of those condemned to death was executed in a special fashion, with all the gruesome details carefully and gleefully described.”<sup>72</sup> But in Nguyễn’s version, Hoạn is released unharmed, while the multiple executions are compressed into a single couplet, which emphasizes the horror of the scene. Most of all, Nguyễn takes pains to detail the audience’s reaction to the event, transforming the nobile revenge drama into the theater of a national-revolutionary justice, the rough equivalent of the spectacle of the guillotine during the French revolution: “All soldiers, crowded on the grounds, could watch / the scourge divine deal justice in broad day.”<sup>73</sup>

Given that Tù’s ascent to warlord status – as well as his salutary fall – is a thinly-disguised parable of the fate of the Tây Sơn uprising, it’s not terribly surprising that the limits of this revolutionary theater are the limits of the spontaneous peasant uprising as a political phenomenon. This runs deeper than the insight that Tù’s uncharacteristic decision to abase himself before the imperial authorities is meant to stress the unbroken continuity of dynastic rule and to gloss over its disruption by an incipient nationalism. The contradiction is nicely summed

up by Kiều's wishful thinking that she could still somehow rejoin the dynastic order:

“A lord's own consort, head erect, I'll walk  
and make my parents glow with pride and joy.  
Then, both the state above, my home below,  
I'll have well served as liege and daughter both.  
Is that not better than to float and drift,  
a cypress boat the waves and waters hurl about?”<sup>74</sup>

The irreconcilable historical contradiction here is that the power of the dynastic state as well as the profits of the mercantile home are based on the labor of peasant agrarian producers. To genuinely replace the solidarity of clan identity-politics with the abstract allegiance to a nation-state would require a massive reconstitution of society – a polite way of saying, the breaking of the literati monopoly on education and the hieratic monopoly on ideology, and the sort of revolutionary land reforms and mobilization of the peasant masses carried out by the Viet Minh. None of this was possible in Nguyễn's day, and one can argue that the symbolic implosion of Tù's reign and Kiều's juridical power (“Oh, strange affinity of two wronged souls! / As she collapsed, he too fell down with her”)<sup>75</sup> accurately registers the historical irony that the Tây Sơn could defeat the former Vietnamese dynasty as well as the external threat of the Chinese Empire, but could not uproot the dynastic system as a whole.

What Nguyễn will do next, however, represents one of the most audacious acts of narrative subversion ever undertaken on the written page. Instead of accepting the return of dynastic order and singing the praises of the new ruling clique, he will broaden his unwittingly guerilla campaign, by transforming one of the key indexes of Chinese culture – namely, the rift between the imperial center and the barbarian periphery – into a national geography. The stage is set by Kiều's audience with the victorious mandarin, Lord Hồ:

The lord forced Kiều to wait on him – half drunk,  
he bade her play the lute she'd daily played.  
It moaned like wind and rain – five fingertips  
dripped blood upon four strings. When gibbons howl,  
cicadas wail, they cannot match such grief.  
Hồ listened, knitting brows and shedding tears.  
He asked: “What are you playing there? It sounds  
like all the world's dark sorrows rolled into one.”  
“My lord, this tune's called Cruel Fate,” she said.  
“I wrote it for the lute when I was young,  
in days long gone. But now, of cruel fate  
you have a victim under your own eyes.”  
Entranced, he heard her; spellbound, he watched her.  
O miracle, love disturbed an iron mask!<sup>76</sup>

In this pungent satire of the Gia Long restoration, Hồ is little more than a drunken, vainglorious oaf, tone-deaf to the intricacies of Kiều's text. He humors her request to bury Tù, and then proceeds to have a one-night stand with her, before brusquely consigning her to a tribal chieftain via an arranged marriage. Kiều's performance is more than a lament, it is a protest against the

hieratic category of fate which later bears fruit. Filled with remorse for Tù's loss, and spurred into action by the prospect of yet another forced marriage, Kiều takes her fate into her own hands, by writing a farewell poem and then casting herself into the river.

Given the structural importance of the river-valley to Vietnamese culture, one can argue that Kiều's act symbolizes the dissolution of national allegory into the stream of natural history. Certainly, her closing words echo Tù's fateful gaze into the ocean and sky, only where Tù ventured outwards, Kiều will turn inwards ("To waves and skies let me entrust my heart").<sup>77</sup> Most significant of all, the mirror – previously a nobilestarian or mercantile trope – suddenly flashes with an extraordinary new image:

For fifteen years, how often she held up  
a mirror where all women see themselves!<sup>78</sup>

At this moment, Kiều has not only rejected the entire spectrum of gender roles in the dynastic order, she has also repudiated the entire social geography of that order, ranging from the imperial center and the barbarian periphery. What takes the place of the clan-solidarity, however briefly, is the imputed solidarity of all women in all social stations, both high and low. Though this solidarity vanishes as quickly as it appears, its after-image lingers on in the form of Giác's rescue squad. Informed by a prophetess of Kiều's future doom, Giác assumes the role of the sixth and final counter-player, by casting a net across the river and waiting patiently for Kiều's arrival. In particular, the scene of the rescue rewrites the conclusion of *Journey to the West* in a secular vein, i.e. whereas Tripitaka's soul is cleansed of its corporeal form at the gates of the blessed realm, Kiều's reawakening symbolizes the resurrection of the national flesh. As if to confirm this, Đạm Tiên puts in a final appearance, this time as the cameo voice-over of Nguyễn himself:

“Who can match your true heart, despite past sins?  
Heaven has noticed it: a loving child,  
you sold yourself; an altruist, you saved lives.  
Your country [nước] and your people [dân] you served well.  
Such hidden merits have now tipped the scale.  
Your name's now struck from the Book of the Damned –  
your poems writ in sorrow I'll give back.”<sup>79</sup>

The first usage of “nước” in an explicitly national context is accompanied by the startlingly modern notion of serving the people (“dân” means “citizen”), as opposed to a dynastic lord or nobilestarian elite. The aesthetic work redeems itself, by becoming Kiều's individual property or, more precise, her personal history – a history which reflects, as we know, the political history of all women in a virulently patriarchal society. It is here, in a space which is no longer the traditional river-valley but not yet the Pacific Rim entrepot (“A vast, vast space around – tides rose and fell / from dawn to dusk within a cage of clouds”),<sup>80</sup> that Nguyễn will invent the idea of the national past.

One of the hallmarks of the Gia Long era was an outpouring of sociological and political works which sifted through the dynastic past, in an attempt to think through the foundations of the new regime (most famously, Phan Huy Chu's magisterial historiography, *The Classified Survey of the Institutions of Successive Courts*).<sup>81</sup> and Nguyễn's own concept of national temporality will be relayed by two intriguing literary innovations. The first is the narrative

caesura after line 2738, which turns the clock back fifteen years and recounts the travails of Kim's decades-long search for Kiều. One of the interesting side-effects is the emergence of a quasi-journalistic realism, apparent everywhere in the precise, concrete observations of Kim's mourning process, the details of his marriage to Vân, not to mention sundry details such as the squalor of the Thúy residence, shortly after Kiều's disappearance:

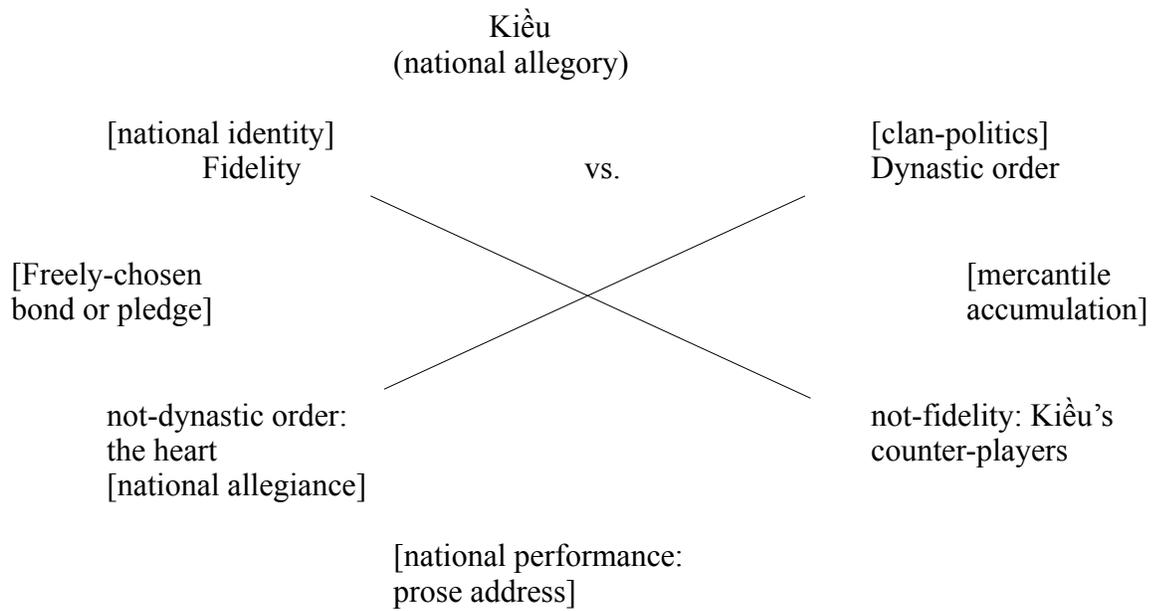
A tattered hut, a roof of thatch, mud walls;  
reed blinds in rags, bamboo screens punched with holes;  
a rain-soaked yard where nothing grew but weeds:  
the sight distressed and shocked him all the more.<sup>82</sup>

The second innovation is the emergence of formal strategies of historical narration, exemplified by the various subaltern clerks who gradually fill in the details of Kiều's trajectory, piece by piece. In particular, clerk Đô's account compresses nearly three thousand lines of poetry, intrigue and adventure into a mere twenty-two lines – a minor masterpiece of prose narration.<sup>83</sup> Finally convinced that she has passed away, Kim and the Thúys set up a riverbank shrine in honor of her memory – a shrine which Giác inadvertently runs into, thereby fulfilling her narrative function as the agency of Kiều's return.

When the past finally catches up with the present, the result is the bittersweet realism of Kim and Kiều's long-delayed romantic adventure: he immediately wants to marry her, rendering her a concubine (he has already married Vân). She initially refuses, and agrees only on the condition that they live together as friends instead of lovers.<sup>84</sup> This ambiguous compromise between the concubine system and the marriage-contract corresponds to the equally ambiguous expansion of the state apparatus during Gia Long's reign, which preached the ideology of conservative restoration while practicing a surprisingly advanced royal mercantilism (the Gia Long dynasty undertook huge settlement projects in the Mekong river-valley, commissioned a wealth of national histories, and carried out a sophisticated land measurement program).<sup>85</sup> Though the arrival of French colonialism would derail Vietnam's fledgling Absolutist state, it's worth pointing out that this ambiguity does generate one final micropolitical moment: this is Giác's disappearance, or the moment that the last remnants of the hieratic order fall into national history. The living community of religion vanishes, leaving behind only the ruins of Giác's hut; the Thúys construct an expensive temple, but the spirit which dwells therein is that of commercial accumulation. Nguyễn's last words testify to the fragility of that spirit:

In talent take no overweening pride,  
for talent and disaster form a pair.  
Our karma we must carry as our lot –  
let's stop decrying Heaven's whims and quirks.  
Inside ourselves there lies the root of good:  
the heart outweighs all talents of this earth.<sup>86</sup>

The national heart now outweighs both literati talent and nobilitarian destiny. This can be mapped out semiotically as follows:



## Endnotes

1. The formal parallels between the decline of the British Empire during the Victorian era, and the decline of the Pax Americana during the neoliberal era, have a precise geopolitical content, and that is the mediating role of the global semi-peripheries. Just as Manchester liberalism and the gold standard were founded on Britain's vast pool of overseas investment, whose single greatest outlet was a semi-peripheral America which later become the new metropole, so too were Wall Street neoliberalism and the US dollar standard founded on the restructuring of the defeated Axis powers into industrial semi-peripheries, which later become the nucleus of a new set of metropolises in their own right. The parallels extend deep into the theory-market: where Nietzsche, the exiled theorist of semi-peripheral Wilhelmine Germany, lamented the death of God from the vantage point of wealthy, commercialized Switzerland, the post-structuralisms of the Francophone semi-periphery and the Indian diaspora lamented the death of the Hollywood signifier from the similarly ambiguous terrain of the US university system.

2. The classic literature on the political economy of Central Europe and East Asia are: Peter Katzenstein's *The Politics of Corporatism*, a wide-ranging study of postwar Austria, Germany and Switzerland; Alice Amsden's *South Korea: Asia's Next Giant*; Robert Wade's *Governing the Market*, which analyzes the Taiwanese boom; and Robert Friedman's *The Misunderstood Miracle*, on Japan's industrial policy. One of the best analytical works on the political economy of the US decline is Doug Henwood's *Wall Street*, which lays out the internal weaknesses of Wall Street-style capitalism in compelling detail.

3. Pat Maio, "Video-Game Industry is Seen Expanding At a Rapid Clip During Next Five Years." *Wall Street Journal*. Friday, May 25, 2001, page B7. The article cites a study by Informa Media Group PLC, which projects world revenues for 2001 as follows:

<u>Category</u>	<u>Billions US\$</u>
Arcades	\$13.86
Console software	\$9.64
Console hardware	\$9.19
Rental	\$3.14
PC software	\$7.12
Handheld software	\$2.89
Handheld hardware	\$2.73
Mobile	\$0.76
Online	\$0.57
Interactive TV	\$0.08

4. This data is from the Federal Reserve flow-of-fund accounts, available at <http://www.bog.frb.fed.us/releases/Z1/>.

5. It is no accident that the Francophone region in the 1970s produced so much postmodern theory, or that the Indian diaspora produced so much postcolonial theory in the 1980s; France in the 1970s, with its deep cultural networks and relatively underdeveloped media culture, was on

the outside of the Hollywood blockbuster looking in (nicely underlined by Derrida's notorious comment, that America *is* deconstruction). India's English-speaking professional elites could access the mediatic forms of US consumerism, something most obvious in the context of Bollywood and a thriving Indian film industry, but not necessarily the content of such, i.e. the high-tech service economy. A similar asynchrony is at work in the intellectual trajectory of Gayatri Spivak, who began her career by producing a superb translation of Francophone theorist and fellow diasporan Derrida, and who later became an academic based in the US.

6. Hương's work is available in English in an excellent new translation: *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương*. Trans. John Balaban. Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2000.

7. One little-known consequence of this history is that well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Vietnamese rulers routinely paid symbolic annual homage to the Chinese Emperor, so as not to unduly antagonize the giant to the north, a practice finally abolished by the French colonial administration. The one hundred years of French colonialism, not to mention the twenty years of what the Vietnamese call the American War, were relatively brief interludes in this two-thousand-year history; China's flagrantly ill-conceived invasion of Vietnam in 1979 was, alas, something like a return to historic norms.

8. Nguyễn Du. *The Tale of Kiều*. Trans. Huỳnh Sanh Thông. Binghamton: Yale University Press, 1983. (3: Lines 1-6)

9. Mao Zedong. *Reverberations*. Transl. Nancy Lin. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co., 1980 (43).

10. *The Tale of Kiều*. (169)

11. Ibid (5: lines 47-48).

12. Ibid (5: lines 67-70).

13. The entire passage is well worth quoting in full: "After the flight of departure into history out of the greed of the dramatist for catastrophes, which perhaps, as the psychoanalysts maintain, come from a distorted relationship to life, but who could live undisturbed, in view of the daily catastrophes, except an idiot or a saint, again back to the very disturbed Kleist, for whom the fragile institution of the world was the condition of his existence as an author and ultimately the grounds for dissolving himself as a person. His fundamental metaphor, in the forcefield between Europe and Asia, is the pillar of dust, the trope of total acceleration at a standstill, the eye of the typhoon. The Mongol onslaught was a fundamental European experience, refreshed in the East by the Soviet occupation, still and anon a memory, beyond the confidence of the senile Hindenburg, when the great brakesman of the Russian steam-roller at Tannenberg promoted Hitler, as his chosen son, into power. Even the definition of Meister Eckhardt GOD IS THE WASTELAND seems inspired by the dream of the break-in of the ridden steppe into the world of established German manufactures: God is the Other, death comes from Asia. The grave of Genghis Khan is undiscoverable: the Mongols had the habit of riding at length over the graves of

their leaders, until they were indistinguishable from plowed earth.

From the viewpoint of the stutterer Kleist: from the gradual preparation of thoughts during speaking to the gradual preparation of silence during speaking. In 1961 the pillar of dust turned into concrete, corrective against the whirlwind of the continents. After its fall Europe stands unsheltered, exposed to the four winds.” Heiner Müller. *Germany placeless. Remarks on Kleist*. Speech given at reception of the Kleist-Prize, 1990. This is my own translation.

14. *The Tale of Kiều*. (11: lines 165-166)

15. *Ibid* (11: line 178).

16. *Ibid* (15: lines 243-244).

17. Hồ Xuân Hương. *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương*. Trans. John Balaban. Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2000 (111).

18. *The Tale of Kiều*. (13: lines 205-214)

19. *Ibid* (15: lines 247-256).

20. One can argue that such a solution was simply not possible at that historical juncture, in which case the Tây Sơn era was the exception which proved the general adage that peasant uprisings do not translate into national mass movements. One need look no further than the immediate predecessor of the Tây Sơn, Nguyễn Hữu Chinh, a.k.a. Quan He or “Prince Porpoise”, who led a peasant rebellion in 1740s but was eventually arrested in 1751. For its part, the Gia Long regime put down any number of local peasant revolts, while the arrival of French colonialism in the 1840s forever derailed any possibility of an indigenous Absolutism. That said, we urgently need a long-range comparative survey of East Asian nation-state formation comparable to what Perry Anderson has provided for early modern Europe. See: Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*. NLB: London, 1974.

21. The word for kingfisher, Thúy, is also Kiều’s family name:

He lacked for nothing – trees and rocks, a porch  
inscribed in vivid gold: “Kingfisher [Thúy] View”.

The porch’s name made him exult inside:

“It must be Heaven’s will that we should meet!” *The Tale of Kiều*. (17: lines 279-282)

22. *Ibid* (13: line 224).

23. *Ibid* (29: line 534).

24. *Ibid* (21: lines 353-358).

25. *Ibid* (23: lines 393-404).

26. Ibid (25: lines 452-454).

27. There are intriguing parallels here to the category of aesthetic appearance or “Schein” in the German national philosophical tradition: “Schein” has the additional meaning of a financial bill or note, and therefore names the contradiction between use-value and exchange-value (what a commodity is, versus its price tag).

28. *The Tale of Kiều*. (27: lines 481-486)

29. This is a polite way of noting that she is smarter than he is. Kim’s response is a classic piece of Enlightenment ideology: “The voice of sober reason gained his ear/ and tenfold his regard for her increased.” Ibid (29: lines 523-528).

30. Ibid (31: lines 557-558).

31. The depth of this anti-commercial outburst is extraordinary. Two passages condemn the bailiffs in explicitly monetary terms:

Then, like bluebottles buzzing through the house,  
they [the bailiffs] smashed workbaskets, shattered looms to bits.  
They grabbed all jewels, fineries, personal things,  
scooping the household clean to fill greed’s bag.  
Ibid (31: lines 581-584).

Somewhat later:

Lawmen behaved that day as is their wont  
wreaking dire havoc just for money’s sake.  
Ibid (33: lines 598-599).

Consider the scene between Mã and the marriage broker:

The broker said: “She’s worth her weight in gold! [vàng: precious metal]  
But in distress they’ll look to your big heart.”  
They haggled long and hard, then struck a deal:  
the price for her, four hundred and some liang.  
Ibid (35: lines 645-648).

Nguyễn adds two near-proverbial comments of his own:

When cash is ready, what cannot be fixed?  
Ibid (35: line 652).

When money’s held in hand it’s no great trick  
swaying men’s hearts and turning black to white.  
Ibid (37: lines 689-690).

32. Ibid (33: lines 615-620).

33. As Huỳnh notes, this is an allusion to a well-known folk poem which laments the dismal fate of women: “My body is like a drop from a downpour./ It may fall into a well or into a flower garden./ My body is like a drop of falling rain./ It may land inside a mansion or end out in a slushy field.” Ibid (180). Much later in the poem, Kiêu states forthrightly: “It is my part to play a drop from a downpour / that falls at random as spectators watch.” Ibid (101: lines 1961-1962).

34. Ibid (39: lines 732-733).

35. Ibid (43: lines 811-816).

36. That said, her blood went wild, her spirit swooned:  
all breath fell hushed, both hands grew cold as ice.  
The parents rose at once from their deep sleep –  
the household was astir inside and out.  
They bustled fetching some tisane, some drug:  
she wakened from her faint, still wet with tears.  
Ibid (41: lines 757-766).

37. [Mã gloats to himself:] “I view rare jade – it stirs my heart of gold!  
The kingdom’s queen of beauty! Heaven’s scent!  
One smile of hers is worth pure gold – it’s true.  
When she gets there, to pluck the maiden bud,  
princes and gentlefolk will push and shove.  
She’ll bring at least three hundred liang, about  
what I have paid – net profit after that.  
A morsel dangles at my mouth – what God  
serves up I crave, yet money hate to lose.”  
Ibid (45: lines 824-832).

38. Ibid (43: lines 801-802).

39. Ibid (49: lines 911-914).

40. One of the hallmarks of East Asia’s media culture is the internalization of the violence of export-platform industrialization into a supercharged corporeality, visible everywhere from the acrobatic heroes of Hong Kong’s *wuxia* films to the oversized monsters of Toho’s Godzilla epics. Ang Li’s feminist parable *The Butcher’s Wife* (1981) employs the knife as a similar symbol of authority, while the heroine of Yimou Zhang’s *Red Sorghum* (1987) uses a scissors to defend herself against her leprosy-stricken husband – the allegorical self-defense of the Chinese peasantry against the ancien regime.

41. *The Tale of Kiêu*. (55: lines 1047-1056).

42. While the first Jesuit missionaries arrived in Vietnam in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the key impetus in the colonization process was the arrival of French missionary Alexander Rhodes (1591-1660) in Vietnam in 1624. Rhodes created quốc-ngữ, a phonetically-based alphabet for the Vietnamese language using Roman letters, and proceeded to write the first ever Vietnamese-Latin-Portuguese dictionary (published in 1650-1656, following his return to Europe). Vietnam's first national script, called "nom", was loosely based on Chinese characters, and *Kiêu* is widely considered to be the masterpiece of nom literature. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the French colonial authorities mandated the use of quốc-ngữ, which Vietnam uses to this day.

43. Ibid (57: lines 1079-1080).

44. It's worth noting that her vow, backed rhetorically by the trope of "hills and streams", appeals to Madame Tú's commercial pragmatism:

She [*Kiêu*] said: "This little woman left her home  
to trek through hills and streams [*nước non*] and founder here.  
Now in your hands you hold my life or death.  
Brought to this pass, my person's reached an end.  
What care I for myself? My fate is set.  
But your investment would you really risk?  
How can an eel mind muddying its head?  
Hereafter I'll forget my maiden shame."  
Ibid (61: lines 1141-1148).

45. Ibid (63: lines 1179-1188).

46. Ibid (63: lines 1199-1216).

47. Ibid (67: lines 1285-1290).

48. Ibid (69: lines 1301-1302).

49. Ibid (73: line 1405).

50. Ibid (69: lines 1303-1306).

51. The "lü-shih" is a regulated verse form immortalized by the T'ang dynasty, a period widely considered to be the apex of Chinese literati poetry. For the full dialogue between *Kiêu* and *Thúc*, see: *ibid* (71: lines 1335-1360).

52. Ibid (69: lines 1329-1330).

53. Ibid (71: lines 1366-1368).

54. Ibid (25: line 451).

55. Ibid (77: lines 1455-1456).

56. Ibid (77: lines 1483-1486).

57. Ibid (73: lines 1381-1382).

58. Ibid (83: lines 1602-1605).

59. Ibid (95: lines 1813-1816).

60. Ibid (91: lines 1749-1758).

61. Ibid (101: lines 1951-1962).

62. Ibid (103-105: lines 2004-2007).

63. Ibid (105: lines 2029-2032).

64. Ibid (113: lines 2167-2178).

65. Ibid (115: lines 2187-2190).

66. Ibid (115: lines 2205-2206).

67. Ibid (115: line 2230). Note that the transition from the *bằng* to the *hồng* has its 20<sup>th</sup> century echo in a poem by Mao Zedong, written during a period when he was still a Chinese nationalist and had not yet joined the Communist Party. Mao uses the term “*kunpeng*” to describe a friend going to Japan, whose status as the first East Asian nation to become a Western-style industrial power rendered it as something of a model for progressive-minded Chinese (the *kun* is the mythical fish that the *peng* or roc is supposed to turn into):

Your leaving inspires me to lift up my voice in song,  
Henceforth the *kunpeng* will hit the waves and start its journey.

The waters of Lake Dongting and the Xiang River have risen to meet the skies,  
And the great warship will dash straight eastward.

Mao Zedong. “Seeing Off Tate Uichiro on His Journey to the East,” Spring 1918. *Mao’s Road to Power*. Edited by Stuart Schram. Volume I (165). 1992.

68. *The Tale of Kiều*. (117: lines 2247-2252)

69. Ibid (115: lines 2215-2216).

70. Ibid (119: lines 2307-2308).

71. Ibid (123: line 2370).
72. See Huỳnh's footnote for line 2378 of the poem in: Ibid (202).
73. Ibid (123: lines 2395-2396).
74. Ibid (129: lines 2481-2486).
75. Ibid (131: lines 2535-2537).
76. Ibid (133: lines 2567-2580).
77. Ibid (135: line 2634).
78. Ibid (137: lines 2643-2644).
79. Ibid (141: lines 2716-2724).
80. Ibid (141: lines 2735-2736).
81. See Alexander Woodside, Chapter 10: "The Relationship Between Political Theory and Economic Growth in Vietnam, 1750-1840", in: *The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies*. Edited by Anthony Reid. St. Martin's Press: NY 1997 (250).
82. *The Tale of Kiều*. (143: lines 2767-2770).
83. Ibid (149: lines 2889-2910).
84. Of love and friendship they fulfilled both claims –  
 they shared no bed but joys of lute and verse.  
 Now they sipped wine, now played a game of go,  
 admiring flowers, waiting for the moon.  
 Their wishes all came true since fate so willed,  
 and of two lovers marriage made two friends.  
 Ibid (165: lines 3221-3223).
85. "The eclecticism of the Nguyen rulers comes from the fact that they tried to absorb the criticism which the disorders of late eighteenth-century Vietnam had made current even before Phan Huy Chu so brilliantly codified it in 1819. Between 1805 and 1836 the first two Nguyen emperors carried out the most ambitious land measurement programme in Vietnamese history, preparing land registers [dia ba] for some 15,000 to 18,000 villages and hamlets from north to south, of which more than 10,000 have survived. In these land registers there undoubtedly lies a sort of master code of rural Vietnamese history for the early 1800s, yet to be revealed to us. But these land registers must be seen in terms of the political theory which lies behind them, as limited parts of the political quest for transcendence rather than just functional censuses of a semi-modern type and no more. What they were was as important as what they did. They were

part of the symbolic capital of imperial authority which the Nguyen rulers had to produce, in hitherto unimaginable quantities, in order to deny totalistic clerical critics the change to show that there was a tension between such rulers' omniscient administration with sympathy for the different circumstances of 'self-nourishment' of each Vietnamese whose 'teeth had sprouted'.

The growing intensity of the struggle to produce the symbolic capital of authority, in parallel with economic growth, may be seen in Vietnam also in the fact that – as a Vietnamese scholar has recently pointed out – the Nguyen rulers reversed the order of priority of Vietnamese cultural institutions as established by the Le dynasty before them. In contrast to the Le emperors, they exalted their court Institute of National History [Quoc su quan] above their court Imperial College [Quoc tu giam] within the structure of their central government.” Alexander Woodside, Chapter 10: “The Relationship Between Political Theory and Economic Growth in Vietnam, 1750-1840”, in: *The Last Stand of Asian Autonomies*. Edited by Anthony Reid. St. Martin's Press: NY 1997 (265).

86. *The Tale of Kiều*. (167: lines 3247-3252).