



Vũ Hoàng Chương and Drunken Poetry

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Vũ Hoàng Chương (1915-1976) was born into a wealthy and well educated family in the province of Hưng Yên (North Vietnam). His father was a chief of district, well versed in Confucian studies and traditional literature. His mother was knowledgeable about Chinese characters and played traditional Vietnamese “đàn nguyệt”.

The future poet started to study Chinese characters at age 5, and was introduced to French at the age of 12. Four years later, he was enrolled into the prestigious Albert Sarraut High School in Hanoi (no small academic achievement for that period), from which he graduated with the French Baccalaureat Diplomas (1st and 2nd parts, perhaps rarer than a Ph. D. now), majoring in classical Greek and Latin, and in mathematics (1937-1938).

After a year stint in Hanoi Law School, he dropped out to work as an assistant inspector at the Railroad Company. He self-published his first collection of poem *Thơ Say* (Drunken Poetry, 1940) during this period. He went back to college to study mathematics for a year at the newly created Faculty of Sciences, then tried a new career in teaching at a private high school in the sea port city of Hai Phong. Soon he was back in Hanoi, creating a theater company with Chu Ngọc and Nguyễn Bính. Their first production in verse *Vân Muội* premiered at the Hanoi's Grand Opera House on 12-12-1942. In 1944, he married famous poet Đinh Hùng's sister.

During the period between 1944 and 1954, he remained active as a poet, a playwright and a teacher despite the political and military turmoils which engulfed the entire country.

In 1951, premiered the verse play "Tâm sự kẻ sang Tần" ("Confessions before mission to Qin") (1)

War against the French ended with the Paris Peace Accord of 1954, which divided Vietnam into a communist state in the North and a southern state considered to be a part of the Free World.

Vu Hoang Chuong moved to South Vietnam as a refugee in August 1954, and lived in Saigon until 1976. In 1959, his poetry collection "Hoa Đăng" (Flowered Lanterns) won the National Award for Poetry. Addicted to opium, he remained prolific in poetry, taught writing and poetry to the younger generation, and was the president of the South Vietnamese Pen Club (Văn Bút), representing it in international activities of the association.

South Vietnam lost its two decade long struggle against the North in April 1975. On 4-13-1976 the poet was arrested by the communist government. He died on 9-6-76, soon after he was released from prison because of a terminal illness.

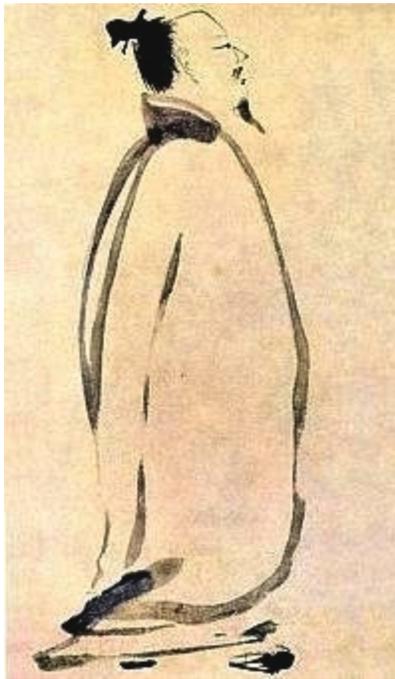


Fig 1: Li Bai (Lý Bạch)

Drunken Poetry

Inebriation is a favorite theme in poetry. Tang Dynasty Chinese poet Li Bai (701-762) died while trying to embrace the reflection of the moon in the Yangtze River. According to John C. H. Wu, no other poet has written as many poems about wine.

Life in the world is but a big dream;
I will not spoil it by any labour or care.
So saying, I was drunk all the day,
Lying helpless at the porch in front of my door (2)

In the same tradition, Nguyễn Công Trứ (1778-1858), a famous Vietnamese poet, but also a consummate Confucian scholar, administrator and warrior, also advised us to use wine and poetry against "the loop of fame and money" (Thoát vòng danh lợi):



Fig 2: Nguyễn Công Trứ

Three cups of wine to put off fame and money till later
A gourd of poetry to enjoy with moon and wind (3)



Fig 3: At the age of 16, inspired by Jules Verne's novel "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea", Rimbaud wrote "Le bateau ivre", a 100 verse poem describing the drifting and sinking of a boat with vivid and psychedelic like imageries. It was sent to Verlaine, who soon after became his lover.

However, given Vu Hoang Chuong's background in French style education and his period when Western, especially French poetry was imitated and emulated by the new generation of Vietnamese poets, the concept of a "drunken boat" by French poet Rimbaud (1854-1891) in "Le bateau ivre" might have been a more immediate inspiration, though Rimbaud's intoxication was apparently not of the alcoholic variety:

And from then on, I bathed myself in the Poem

*Of the Sea, infused of stars, and lactescent,
Devouring the azures green; where pallid flotsam
And entranced, a drowned man, dreaming, sometimes sinks:*

*Where, go out all at once bluenesses, deliriums
And rhythms slow beneath the glimmerings of day,
Stronger than alcohol, vaster than our songs,
The bitter rednesses of Love are seething!... (4)*

Soon after the appearance of "Drunken Poetry", literary critics Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân, in their landmark book "Thi Nhân Việt Nam (Poets of Vietnam, 1941) about the new Vietnamese poetry "thơ mới", wrote:

"Vũ Hoàng Chương intends to continue the ancient tradition of great East Asian poets: the drunken tradition. He is drunk in everything, in alcohol, in love, in songs, in romance. He even outdoes his predecessors with things newly imported: drunk in opium, drunk in ballroom dancing. So many kinds of inebriation nourished by a much greater kind: poetic inebriation. Vu Hoang Chuong wants to get drunk to make poetry....Besides, his inebriation is moderate. Inebriation without decadence; although the distance between the two is not a long one. But decadence and inebriety both carry a sense of weariness. This weariness was already present in ancient poetry. However, there is here a particular hint of bitterness, spite and tragedy.

Vu Hoang Chuong discusses marriage with contempt. He only considers it as a carnal union, a dirty thing that has spoiled so many beautiful dreams of youth:

*Two bodies intertwined in their passion,
A little innocence left is just buried.
When they wake up, mud from this earthly world
Has engulfed more than half of their souls.*

*(Hai xác thịt lẫn vào nhau mê mãi,
Chút ngây thơ còn lại cũng vừa chôn.
Khi tỉnh dậy buồn nhớ nơi Hạ giới
Đã dâng lên ngập quá nửa linh hồn)*

Unfortunately, liberated from marriage and other constraints, he has never found happiness, but only loneliness.

*In the immensity out there, beyond infinity
A drunken boat, lost in the night.
(Mênh mộng đâu đó ngoài vô tận
Một cánh thuyền say lạc hướng đêm.)*

That drunken boat is indeed the poet himself and his life. In short, his only hope is to forget..."



Phương xa

Vũ Hoàng Chương

Nhỏ neo rồi thuyền ơi! Xin mặc sóng
Xô về đông bay dạt tới phương đoài
Xa mặt đất, giữa vô cùng cao rộng,
Lòng cô đơn, cay đắng hoạ dần vơi.

Lũ chúng ta lạc loài, dăm bảy đứa,
Bị quê hương ruồng bỏ, giống nòi khinh,
Bể vô tận xá gì phương hướng nữa,
Thuyền ơi thuyền! theo gió hãy lên đênh.

Lũ chúng ta đầu thai nhảm thế kỷ.
Một đôi người u uất nổi chơ vơ,
Đời kiêu bạc không dung hồn giản dị
Thuyền ơi thuyền! Xin ghé bến hoang sơ.

Men đã ngấm bọn ta chờ nắng tắt,
Treo buồm cao cùng cao tiếng hò khoan.
Gió đã nổi, nhịp giăng chiều hiu hắt,
Thuyền ơi thuyền! theo gió hãy cho ngoan.

Faraway

Anchors aweigh already! Let the waves
Push our boat eastward and throw it to the west
Far above the earth, in space infinite,
In our lonely soul, bitterness will wane.

Our lost gang, half a dozen of us,
Abandoned by our land, scorned by our kins,
Directions, who cares, the sea is infinite,
Oh boat! just wander along with the wind.

We were reborn in the wrong century.
A bunch of outcast living in melancholy,
Snobbery rules, no place for simple souls,
Oh boat! please find us an unspoiled haven.

Soaked in wine we wait for the sun to die,
We raise our sails and our voices chanting.
The wind has risen, rhythmic in the desolate evening.
Oh boat! follow the wind, be obedient!
(Translated by Hien V. Ho)

Appendix: Vũ Hoàng Chương's works and publications in South Vietnam:

7-1959: Hoa Đăng, published by Văn Hữu Á Châu .

1960 His previous collections Thơ Say (Drunken Poetry, 1940) and Mây (Clouds,1943) regrouped into a new book "Mây" (Clouds)

Cảm Thông (with the English title "Communion") , a collection of 6 poems written after his travel to Europe, and 9 selected older poems; translated and published by Nguyễn Khang.

New editions of "Vân Muội", "Trương Chi", "Hồng Diệp" (1944), published by Nguyễn Đình Vượng.

1961: Tâm sự kẻ sang Tần, a verse drama, published by Lửa Thiêng.

"Tâm tình người đẹp"(with a French translation titled Les 28 étoiles by Belgian poetess Simone Kuhnén de la Coeuillerie). Published by Nguyễn Khang.

1962: Poetry collection TRỜI MỘT PHƯƠNG, published by the author.

3-1963 Thi Tuyển (Collection of Poems, with French translation by Simone Kuhnén de la Coeuillerie) published by Nguyễn Khang.

7-1963 Lửa Từ Bi (Fire of Compassion), in honor of Venerable Thích Quảng Đức, who self-immolated by fire in protest against the government; published in the collection Lửa Từ Bi, by the group Thanh Tăng.

7-1966: "Ánh Trăng Đạo" (Moonlight of the Way), published by Nha Tuyên Úy Phật giáo. German translation DIE ACHTUNDZWANZIG STERNE published in 10-1966 by Hoffmann Und Campe, Hamburg, Germany. Translator: Austrian poet Kosmas Ziegler.

1968: "Nhị Thập Bát Tú" (28 Star Constellation) volume I, published by Văn Uyển; Volume II, by Lửa Thiêng.

"Cành Mai Trắng Mộng", published by Văn Uyển.

1970: "Ta đợi em từ ba mươi năm" (I have waited for you for 30 years), published by An Tiêm, Sài Gòn (2 printings). 2nd edition in California, USA

"Tân Thi" (New Poems), published by Nam Chi, Saigon

Notes:

(1) The title refers to Jing Ke [Kinh Kha], a swordsman sent by Crown Prince Dan Yan [Thái tử Yên] to the State of Qin in a failed attempt to assassinate King Zheng [Trang Vương, future Tần Thủy Hoàng] in 227 BC).

(2) "Waking From Drunkenness in a Spring Day"; translation by Arthur Waley, cited by Wikipedia.

Vietnamese translation (unknown translator)

Ở đời như mộng lớn
Làm chi cho nhọc mình!
Suốt ngày say khướt mãi
Lăn ngủ mái hiên đình
Tỉnh dậy trông sân trước
Chim hót khóm hoa xinh
Ngẫm hỏi ngày nào đấy ?
Gió xuân vọng tiếng oanh
Cám cảnh toan than thở
Thấy rượu lại nghiêng bình
Hát ngao chờ trăng sáng
Hết khúc đã quên tình

Sino-Vietnamese transcription:

Xử thế nhược đại mộng,
Hồ vi lao kỳ sinh!
Sở dĩ chung nhật túy,
Đồi nhiên ngoạ tiền doanh.
Giác lai miên đình tiền,
Nhất điệu hoa gian minh.
Tá vấn thử hà nhật,
Xuân phong ngữ lưu oanh.
Cảm chi dục thán tức,
Đối tửu hoàn tỵ khuynh.
Hạo ca đãi minh nguyệt,
Khúc tận dĩ vong tình.
(3) Hẹn với lợi danh ba chén rượu,

Vui cùng phong nguyệt một bầu thơ,
(4) English translation by Alexandre Rodallec.

Original French version:

*Et dès lors, je me suis baigné dans le Poème
De la Mer, infusé d'astres, et lactescent,
Dévorant les azurs verts; où flottaison blême
Et ravie, un noyé pensif parfois descend :*

*Où, teignant tout à coup les bleuités, délires
Et rythmes lents sous les rutillements du jour,
Plus fortes que l'alcool, plus vastes que nos lyres,
Fermentent les rousseurs amères de l'amour !*

References:

- 1) Đặng Tiến. Vũ Hoàng Chương (1915 - 1976) (Đặng Tiến is a literary critic and historian based in France.)
- 2) Trần Tuấn Kiệt. Thi-Ca Việt-Nam Hiện-Đại 1880-1865. Published by Sống Mới, Saigon, Vietnam. Reprinted in USA.
- 3) Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân. Thi nhân Việt Nam.1941

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