



Western Connecticut State University  
WestCollections: [digitalcommons@wcsu](mailto:digitalcommons@wcsu)

---

Faculty Papers

History and Non-Western Cultures

---

Fall 2005

## Women and Mythology in Vietnamese History: Le Ngoc Han, Ho Xuan Huong, and the Production of Historical Continuity in Vietnam

Wynn Wilcox Dr.  
WCSU, [wilcoxw@wcsu.edu](mailto:wilcoxw@wcsu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.wcsu.edu/historypaper>



Part of the [Asian History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Wilcox, Wynn Dr., "Women and Mythology in Vietnamese History: Le Ngoc Han, Ho Xuan Huong, and the Production of Historical Continuity in Vietnam" (2005). *Faculty Papers*. 1.  
<https://repository.wcsu.edu/historypaper/1>

**Women and Mythology in Vietnamese History:  
Lê Ngọc Hân, Hồ Xuân Hương, and the Production of  
Historical Continuity in Vietnam**

Wynn Wilcox

**Three Myths about Two Vietnamese Women**

Lê Ngọc Hân (1770–99) and Hồ Xuân Hương (c. 1770–1822) are two of the most well known female writers of premodern Vietnam. Despite their different social stature (while Ngọc Hân was a princess and queen, Xuân Hương operated at the fringes of the literary world), both women occupy important roles in Vietnamese literature and history. There are references to them in anthologies of Vietnamese poetry, histories of Vietnam, the names of Vietnamese buildings and streets, and the halls of the Vietnamese women's museum and history museums. In other words, both women occupy an important place in the pantheon of Vietnamese national heroes and in the sites where the continuities of Vietnamese nationalism, of past and present, are produced.

Yet an examination of the historical record of these two women makes their vaunted place in the Vietnamese nationalist tradition seem strange. Despite their ubiquity, we actually know relatively little about either of them. What we know of Ngọc Hân's ideas is limited to her two famous but short poems: a funerary oration and a gravestone inscription (both of which are subject to the formulaic conventions of their genre) for her departed husband, the Quang Trung emperor (c. 1753–92, r. 1788–92). While Xuân Hương was a prolific poet, her poems have survived only in poetry collections published nearly a century after her death, and what little is known about her life comes predominantly from the poems attributed to her. In other words, while both of these women have attained great importance in both Vietnamese historiography and Vietnamese literature, they have gained this position only relatively recently, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that very little is known about them.

Since 1954, the year that marked the beginning of two decades of division between North and South Vietnam, publications about both women have appeared in greater numbers than before. Both Xuân Hương and Ngọc Hân have appeared as part of what Patricia Pelley has called “a new canonical version of the Vietnamese past” that Marxist historians in North Vietnam constructed. In this context, their writing was used as evidence of the progressivism of the Tây Sơn dynasty (1771–1802), which these historians regarded as a precursor to Vietnamese communism.<sup>1</sup>

In this essay, I argue that these two women have risen to prominence in the Vietnamese historical and literary canon during this period at least in part because of debates over three central myths perpetuated about them. First, in North Vietnam, historians perpetuated the myth that Ngọc Hân and Quang Trung were madly in love with one another. The second myth is precisely the opposite of the first: in South Vietnam, magazines circulated the fable that Ngọc Hân, far from loving her husband, secretly hated him to the point that she poisoned him. Finally, particularly in North Vietnam, historians have perpetuated the myth that Xuân Hương wrote during the Tây Sơn dynasty, rather than during the Nguyễn dynasty. Therefore, northern historians argued, she was representative of the Tây Sơn's purported progressive protosocialism, and thus she could be associated with the Tây Sơn's expression of the anti-Chinese, antifeudal will of the Vietnamese people.

To say that these are myths is not to categorize these three stories as being in opposition to the facts that we know about Ngọc Hân and Xuân Hương. Bruce Lincoln has suggested that we view myth as a narrative that conveys a special form of social authority, as “a discursive act through which actors evoke the sentiments out of which society is actively constructed.”<sup>2</sup> Lincoln distinguishes history and myth not on the basis of the factuality of history and the fiction of myth, but on the basis that myths acquire “the status of paradigmatic truth” in that they set a structure or model through which “one may effectively mobilize a social grouping.”<sup>3</sup>

In promoting these myths about eighteenth-century Vietnamese history, scholars attempted to invest stories about the past with meaning as paradigms for the future. They presented Lê Ngọc Hân and Hồ Xuân Hương as writers who could lend legitimacy and authority to their own modern versions of Vietnam, through legitimating either the Republic of Vietnam in the south or the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north. These three myths can be traced to the 1954–75 period, during which Vietnam was divided between north and south. This was precisely a time when constructing a new society seemed particularly crucial. Moreover, these myths are about another time of division, the Tây Sơn wars (1773–1802), during which the Tây Sơn dynasty, led by the Quang Trung emperor in Hanoi, fought the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945), led by Nguyễn Ánh (r. 1781–1820, from 1802–20 as the Gia Long emperor) from Saigon.

Because they were worried about the continuity or even the survival of their version of the Vietnamese nation, historians and literary critics harkened back to the Tây Sơn era and produced myths to try to assure themselves that their version of the Vietnamese nation would be the one that would survive. As a consequence, scholars in North Vietnam took pains to identify themselves with the Tây Sơn dynasty because they regarded the Tây Sơn as protosocialist precursors to their own government. Thus, they regarded the Tây Sơn as the last legitimate dynasty, a dynasty with equitable policies that kept the will of the people in mind.

These scholars pointed to Lê Ngọc Hân as evidence of the continuity and legitimacy of the Tây Sơn. Since she was a princess in the Lê dynasty, which had preceded the Tây Sơn, Ngọc Hân was offered as evidence of the continuity of the Tây Sơn with the Lê. Furthermore, the myth of her love for

the Quang Trung emperor provided these scholars with a symbol of the love and affection they presumed all Vietnamese should have for Quang Trung.

Furthermore, northern scholars from the 1960s on have looked on Hồ Xuân Hương's frank social criticisms and sexually provocative verse as representative of the Tây Sơn's progressive policies, which they identify as being particularly Vietnamese, and they have contrasted those policies with the feudal and illegitimate policies of the Nguyễn. This mythological device allowed them to gloss over the fact that the Tây Sơn were defeated by the Nguyễn by emphasizing that the true will of the Vietnamese people, as expressed by Hồ Xuân Hương during the Tây Sơn era, was driven underground by the Nguyễn dynasty, only to appear again under the leadership of the Việt Minh.

In contrast, some southern Vietnamese writers, literary critics, and historians sought to assert the legitimacy of the modern South Vietnamese state by casting the Nguyễn dynasty as its allegorical precursor. By casting aspersions on the Tây Sơn rebels and affirming the authority of the Nguyễn in the past, these scholars could affirm their desire to defeat the north in their present. Thus, when a Saigon scholar put forth the notion that Lê Ngọc Hân had poisoned the Quang Trung emperor and secretly married the Gia Long emperor, he was laying out a myth that struck at the heart of southern Vietnamese society. They were proposing that Lê Ngọc Hân had bestowed the symbolic legitimacy of the Lê dynasty not on North Vietnam's favorite emperor, Quang Trung, but on an emperor who had unified Vietnam from Saigon, Gia Long. Thus, they were implying that South Vietnam had a continuous line of legitimacy back through the Lê dynasty.

Not all historians or literary critics on either side of the seventeenth parallel believed in or perpetuated the myths that were being circulated in academic journals and popular newspapers. But the mere fact that these myths were being tossed about gives us a crucial insight into identity and legitimacy in North and South Vietnam, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s: in both Hanoi and Saigon, scholars were staking out claims to the moral authority of their respective regimes through the legitimacy given by these two women writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. These two women thus gave both sides an analogy with the past through which they could assert that amid all the turmoil of the 1950s and 1960s, what they considered their

Vietnam would emerge as the victorious party, since their Vietnam had continuity with the past.

### **The Case of Lê Ngọc Hân**

The princess Lê Ngọc Hân is one of the most romanticized royal figures in Vietnamese history. This is not surprising when one considers the rather astonishing details that can be positively established about her life. In 1786, the middle of the three brothers who founded the Tây Sơn dynasty, Nguyễn Văn Huệ, who would eventually become the Quang Trung emperor, defeated the Trịnh clan, who were then ruling on behalf of the Lê emperors. As part of a negotiation to keep his throne, the penultimate Lê emperor, Lê Cảnh Hưng (posthumously Lê Hiến Tông, r. 1740–86), gave Nguyễn Văn Huệ his twenty-first daughter, Ngọc Hân, to marry.

At the time of Lê Ngọc Hân's marriage, she was only sixteen. Her involvement in the political events of the next few years must have placed her in an unusually awkward position. After the death of her father later in 1786, the new Lê emperor, Ngọc Hân's brother Lê Chiêu Thống (also known as Lê Mẫn Đế, r. 1787–89), attempted to rebel against Nguyễn Huệ and restore the older Trịnh/Lê relationship; Nguyễn Huệ defeated the Trịnh/Lê sources. He was crowned the Quang Trung emperor in 1788.

In response to what they saw as the Quang Trung emperor's usurpation of the rightful Lê throne, in 1789 the Qianlong emperor of China sent an invasion force of 200,000 soldiers to reclaim Thăng Long (modern-day Hanoi) for the Lê. In one of the most famous battles in Vietnamese history, the Chinese general was routed by Tây Sơn forces and committed suicide to avoid the shame of returning to China defeated. The bodies of the dead Chinese soldiers were heaped in a mound so high that a hill still exists in what is now the Đống Đa area of Hanoi.<sup>4</sup>

While we have few records of how Ngọc Hân felt about the events of her life between 1787 and 1789, we do know that she was crowned empress in 1789 and that she and Quang Trung had two children, a son and a daughter, together. Ngọc Hân's legend, however, says much more about her. Did she love the Quang Trung emperor? Did she murder him in a fit of jealousy? These powerful fantasies have come to inhabit the historical symbolization

of Ngọc Hân in two very different contexts: North Vietnamese revolutionary history and Saigon in the 1960s.

### **Ngọc Hân as the National Lover: The Northern Myth**

Wives of Vietnamese emperors have rarely become the subject of histories of Vietnam. Though their existence and their names are often noted in major imperial sources such as *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* (*The Historical Records of Great Viet*) and *Đại Nam Chính Biên Liệt Truyện* (*The Biographies of Notables of the Great South*), their existence rarely warrants more than passing mention in more recent historical compilations. Why is it, then, that in the twentieth century literary critics and historians have repeatedly written essays and books on her life and work?

Part of the explanation, to be sure, lies in the sheer tabloid-worthy sensationalism of her story. No doubt Ngọc Hân's life bears some interest in itself, and having to become the wife of the man who had overthrown her clan put her in a fascinatingly liminal position. Little attention is ever paid, however, to the crucial ideological role that the existence of Ngọc Hân plays. The existence of Ngọc Hân provided Marxist Hanoi historians with a narrative device to provide continuity in the transition between the Lê and the Tây Sơn. Her supposed love for Quang Trung provides one of the most central devices in the efforts of Marxist historians of the 1950s to legitimate Quang Trung's regime, and thus (for he has become the central representative figure for the Tây Sơn movement) the Tây Sơn regime in general.

These new arguments about the importance of Lê Ngọc Hân as a writer and her relationship with the Quang Trung emperor first appeared in the journal *Tập San Nghiên Cứu Văn Sử Địa* (*Journal of Literary, Historical, and Geographical Research*) in the mid-1950s among a slew of articles praising the Tây Sơn dynasty in general and the Quang Trung emperor in particular. As Pelley has pointed out, for the so-called new historians from Hanoi, the Tây Sơn era was a crucial period in the development of revolutionary history and literature and was an important predecessor for the new society that they were attempting to build in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. These scholars suggested that "the August Revolution of 1945 marked the completion of what the Tây Sơn had begun some 150 years before."<sup>5</sup>

As articles on the Tây Sơn began to explode onto the pages of *Văn sử địa*, scholars began reevaluating the importance of Lê Ngọc Hân. In February 1956, the preeminent literary critic and historian of the Tây Sơn era, Văn Tân (writing under the pseudonym D.M.), devoted nearly half his article on Tây Sơn literature to Ngọc Hân. In the article, Văn Tân articulated a myth that would prevail in Hanoi literature about Lê Ngọc Hân for decades to come: that her importance in Tây Sơn literature lies in her true and undying love for the Quang Trung emperor and in her ability to express the remorse of a nation over Quang Trung's untimely death in 1792.<sup>6</sup>

In his analysis, Văn Tân comments on her known written works, which consist of two famous poems: “Tiên Thánh Thăng Hà Hoàng Hậu Ai Văn” (“The Funerary Love Oration of the Empress on the Occasion of the Emperor’s Death”), otherwise and more commonly known as “Ai tư văn” (“Funerary Love Oration”), and “Tế Quang Trung Đế Văn” (“Stele Inscription of the Emperor Quang Trung”).<sup>7</sup> These two poems are designed to highlight the relationship between Quang Trung and Ngọc Hân as one full of *tình cảm* (sentiment), a bond of feelings between husband and wife that has an important place in Vietnamese literature.<sup>8</sup> The introductory sentences of “Ai tư văn” read:

Wind blows gently through my old quarters  
 As my orchids gradually wither away  
 The smoke wafts over your mountainous tomb  
 And I see in the distance your imperial carriage drifting away.  
 How did it come to be that I would moan like this?  
 Why must our marriage be cut short?  
 It is so tragic and sad that  
 My grief could overflow the ocean and cover the sky.<sup>9</sup>

After quoting the poem in full, Văn Tân makes the following argument about the meaning of Ngọc Hân’s words:

The love that Lê Ngọc Hân shared with King Quang Trung was true love; that is why her poetry is so moving and doleful. This is truly a large portion of the explanation. Ngọc Hân cherished Quang Trung so much that she was ready to die so that the King could live! It is enough to bring tears to one’s eyes to think that she was not only able to show clearly the



agony of a wife that has lost her husband, but also the worry of a people who have lost their leader, since everyone knows that the death of King Quang Trung was one of many of the things that marked the beginning of the end for the Tây Sơn dynasty.<sup>10</sup>

In this interpretation, Văn Tân deftly links the deep feelings that he believes Ngọc Hân expresses toward her departed husband in this funeral oration with the anxiety that the Vietnamese nation feels at Quang Trung's death. Văn Tân invites us to see Ngọc Hân's "agony" as a kind of symbol for the feelings that the Vietnamese nation as a whole has at the death of its emperor and the impending demise of the Tây Sơn dynasty.

Văn Tân's interpretation of Ngọc Hân's suffering as representative of the worries of the nation at the end of Quang Trung's life fits in well with his overall interpretation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the 1950s as the rebirth of the Tây Sơn dynasty. To Văn Tân, Quang Trung was the last legitimate ruler of Vietnam. The Vietnamese people were forced to endure 150 years of oppression under the rule of the Nguyễn dynasty (1802–1945), whose rulers became willing collaborators with French imperialists. As Văn Tân notes in his seminal and still influential 1958 monograph on the Tây Sơn dynasty, *Cách Mạng Tây Sơn* (The Tây Sơn Revolution):

In the year 1792, King Quang Trung died, and the representatives of the reactionary feudal traitor Nguyễn Phúc Ánh [Gia Long] seized the opportunity to attack the Tây Sơn and thus to turn back the clock on history and to allow the door to be open for gangs of imperialist invaders. But despite everything that was tried by the feudal reactionary traitors and the imperialist colonizers, they were only able to seize and retard the growth of Vietnamese history for 150 years (1802–1954). In 1954, after the great victory at Điện-biên [Dienbienphu], the Vietnamese people, under the leadership of the vanguard of the party, were able to recover the independence that our nation had in the past. Throughout this land, the Vietnamese people are continuing developments that King Quang Trung had to leave incomplete.<sup>11</sup>

To Văn Tân, the separation of Vietnam into north and south by the American/Diệm regime was a continuation of the feudal retrogression of Vietnamese history started by the Nguyễn during the Tây Sơn wars two

hundred years before, while the Hanoi regime under Hồ Chí Minh was continuing the progressive policies that Quang Trung had begun but could never complete.<sup>12</sup> Lê Ngọc Hân's role in this story is clear: through her love for Quang Trung and her grief on the occasion of his death, she serves as a symbol of the Vietnamese people's grief and of the hope for the progress of the Vietnamese nation that was being resurrected in North Vietnam after 1954. Thus, Văn Tân constructed a myth of Lê Ngọc Hân that bolstered the legitimacy of North Vietnam's claims to represent the will of the Vietnamese people by linking the feelings of the people, metonymically represented by Lê Ngọc Hân's grief, to Quang Trung and ultimately to Hồ Chí Minh.

Văn Tân's analysis of Lê Ngọc Hân is crucial because he was recognized as not only one of the leading members of the official Institute of History in Hanoi but also the leading expert among Hanoi scholars on the history and literature of the Tây Sơn dynasty. As such, Văn Tân's interpretation was modified only slightly by later scholars, who still cast the sentiments Ngọc Hân expressed in "Ai Tư Vãn" as evidence of the strong bond of love between husband and wife. This interpretation is largely based on the poem's seeming sentimentalism, gendered metaphors, and the appeal to predestined and eternal love. It is also an interpretation of her poetry that has stood the test of time. Writing in 1986, literary critic Nguyễn Lộc articulated a slightly stronger version of Văn Tân's interpretation of nearly three decades before:

In "Ai tư vãn" Ngọc Hân evokes the memory of her love for Quang Trung. Ngọc Hân speaks of the worries when the king became sick, and her feelings of great and mournful anguish before the death of the king. . . . One could say that the words that Ngọc Hân wrote about Quang Trung are not only very heartfelt and moving, but also at the same time they could be read as the most accurate and objective assessment of appreciation about him.<sup>13</sup>

In this passage Lộc makes explicit the structure of transference through which Ngọc Hân's love becomes symbolic of the love of the nation. Otherwise, it would seem strange for Lộc to call a kind of love "objective," since love is usually understood as the most quintessentially subjective and affective emotion possible. Here, Ngọc Hân's love is objective in the sense that, within the structure of Vietnam as Lộc understands it, her love is a

universally felt characteristic. It is merely a display of what all Vietnamese should feel for the Quang Trung emperor.

Attempting to determine if Ngọc Hân actually loved Quang Trung would be a fruitless, and essentially rather meaningless, task. It should suffice to say, however, that historians cannot merely appeal to “Ai tư vãn” as evidence that Ngọc Hân really did love the Quang Trung emperor in the way that this myth would suggest. It is rarely noted, for example, that neither of Ngọc Hân’s poems would likely have been written in a sudden amorous epiphany. They were both written on the occasion of Quang Trung’s funeral, and both poems belong to rather formulaic genres: the eulogy and the gravestone inscription. This does not mean that Ngọc Hân’s feelings were disingenuous, but it does mean that her poems fall well within the expectations of the genres for her to be mournful and for her to recount Quang Trung’s accomplishments.

Late-eighteenth-century literature is blessed with a number of famous eulogies, such as Phạm Thái’s (1777–1813) appreciation of Trương Quỳnh Như and the Gia Long emperor’s (r. 1802–19) and Prince Cảnh’s (1779–1801) famous eulogies for their ally the bishop Pierre Pigneau de Béhaine (1740–99).<sup>14</sup> Ngọc Hân’s eulogy shares many basic features with one or all of these eulogies: the use of natural features such as the sky or the heavens as metaphors for grief; proclamations of love; and concluding statements beginning with exclamations such as “alas!” or “what a pity!” In short, Ngọc Hân’s eulogy follows the set pattern of its genre; therefore, it should not be overestimated as evidence of her attachment to Quang Trung.

Moreover, some literary scholars have even called into question the authenticity of the poems. Nguyễn Cẩm Thúy and Nguyễn Phạm Hùng, for example, suggest substantial similarities in the structure and language of Ngọc Hân’s two poems and the writing style and poetry of the influential Tây Sơn literatus Phan Huy Ích (1751–1822).<sup>15</sup> Their position, however, may merely be a reflection of the sexist assumption that women of the eighteenth century could not have written good poetry. They do not acknowledge the possibility, for example, that the similarity between poems attributed to Ngọc Hân and those understood to be by Ích could just as easily be interpreted as an indication that the real author of Phan Huy Ích’s poetry is Lê Ngọc Hân.

Nevertheless, no appeal to the objective reality of Ngọc Hân’s love for Quang Trung can deny that for this love to be figured in the national myth

as a kind of structural representative of a *tình cảm* between Quang Trung and the Vietnamese nation, Quang Trung's relationship with Ngọc Hân must be unique or special in some way. Yet this is simply not the case. Quang Trung was married, at the very least, to three wives. One was a woman of the Phạm clan of Quy Nhơn, perhaps named Phạm Thị Liên, whom Nguyễn Huệ married well before the march of the Tây Sơn armies north. It is with her that the Quang Trung emperor had the most children: she bore him three boys and two girls, including the future emperor, Nguyễn Quang Toàn.<sup>16</sup>

Even more significantly, Đỗ Bang states that the illness of Quang Trung's wife of the Phạm clan led to Quang Trung's desperate search for a missionary or European doctor to take care of her. This search eventually led to Quang Trung's calling on the young and hapless Father François Joseph Girard (d. 1812), who had no medical training, to come to the court to save her in the spring of 1791. Unfortunately, by the time he arrived, she had already died.<sup>17</sup> Girard said in one of his letters that Quang Trung's wife of the Phạm clan was "the first of his wives" and, in another, that she was "regarded as the first" of his wives.<sup>18</sup> This is despite the fact that Ngọc Hân was the officially designated empress. Moreover, that Quang Trung would take the extraordinary step of searching the entire regime for a missionary who might know the practices of Western medicine indicates that the emperor was probably quite concerned about the health and welfare of his first wife.

Given the existence of Quang Trung's other wives and his apparent consideration (or even love) for at least one of the others, the myth of the singular love story between Ngọc Hân seems hard to sustain. But the power of this myth lies not in the truth or falsity of the claim that Ngọc Hân loved Quang Trung, but in this claim's power to lend symbolic authority to the assertion of scholars from Hanoi that their government was the reincarnation of the government of Quang Trung and that the love of the people for Quang Trung, represented by Ngọc Hân, was being reborn by the people's affection for the people's hero, Hồ Chí Minh.<sup>19</sup> The absence of Tây Sơn sources about Quang Trung's other wives allows Ngọc Hân to have the position of the national lover; her supposedly pure relationship with Quang Trung allows for the perception of the symbolic purity of the relationship between Quang Trung and Vietnam and thus results in a narrative that authenticates the government of North Vietnam as the true representative of the Vietnamese people.

The myth of Ngọc Hân as the national lover is not the only myth to support the connection between Ngọc Hân and a conception of the Vietnamese nation. Another, very different, myth arose in a very specific site of production: Saigon in the 1960s.

### Ngọc Hân as Legitimizing Symbol: The Southern Myth

In 1961, the Saigon writer Nguyễn Thượng Khánh claimed that he could prove that Lê Ngọc Hân was responsible for poisoning the Quang Trung emperor. Claiming to be a descendant of the Lê clan and more specifically a direct descendant of Prince Lê Duy Mật (1738–70), a figure notable in northern history for provoking a rebellion against the Trịnh lords in the first half of the eighteenth century, Khánh wrote in a series of issues of the journal *Phê Thông* (*Universalism*) that he knew of a secret document that had been passed down through his family but by 1961 was lost, which provided evidence that Ngọc Hân had in fact murdered her husband, the Quang Trung emperor. According to Khánh, Lê Ngọc Hân's motivation for killing her husband stemmed from an agreement between Quang Trung and the Qianlong emperor (1711–99) of China in which Qianlong was to give one of his daughters in marriage to Quang Trung. According to Khánh, “in a moment of anger and crazy with jealousy, Ngọc Hân put poison in Quang Trung's wine.”<sup>20</sup>

Then, Khánh claims that Ngọc Hân was actually motivated by patriotism. As Đỗ Bang points out, this claim seems to contradict the notion that the murder was committed in a jealous rage.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, Khánh argues that “when she heard the heart-rending news that the Quang Trung Emperor had asked for the hand of [the Qianlong emperor's] princess in marriage and had received it, then the Princess Ngọc Hân rose up with the reckless idea. I want to place Ngọc Hân's jealousy aside and use the word ‘patriotism’ to describe the deeds of Ngọc Hân.”<sup>22</sup>

In the editions of *Phê Thông* that followed, Khánh's argument received a great deal of criticism. Some descendants of Lê Duy Mật challenged Khánh's assertion that the secret family record that told of Lê Ngọc Hân's murder of the Quang Trung emperor had ever existed. In addition, several scholars have discredited Khánh's extraordinary claim that Ngọc Hân murdered the

Quang Trung emperor. One of the most influential critiques of Khánh's assertion came in the October 1961 issue of *Phò Thông*, in which the well-known historian Thiên Sinh pointed out several inconsistencies and inaccuracies in Khánh's article. Sinh explained that Khánh's asserted relationship to Ngọc Hân was not, in fact, a direct descendant, since Lê Duy Mật was not Ngọc Hân's brother and Lê Cảnh Hưng's son as Khánh had claimed, but was actually Cảnh Hưng's uncle. Among the most salient of his other criticisms was that the idea that Ngọc Hân's marriage incurred the resentment of the Lê clan, which is contradicted by the fact that her marriage to Quang Trung was by mutual agreement between the Lê clan and the future emperor.<sup>23</sup>

All of these criticisms serve to discredit Khánh's claim, although none of them disprove it. As Nguyễn Phương has pointed out, it is impossible to prove that the family document did not at one time exist, so it is impossible to either prove or disprove Khánh's claims.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps it would be more fruitful not to ask whether Khánh's assertion is true, but to ask why *Phò Thông* chose to publish Khánh's claim at the time that it did. After all, *Phò Thông* was a widely respected and influential magazine in 1960s Saigon. It was not generally known for publishing tabloid material or outlandish claims and often published scholarly articles. Why did *Phò Thông* choose to publish such a questionable claim in 1961? And why did Khánh come forward with his claim in 1961, rather than earlier in his life, or, assuming that the family record in question ever actually existed, when the evidence could be displayed for all to see?

By asking these questions, we can examine the question of Ngọc Hân's alleged murder of Quang Trung not merely in terms of its empirical accuracy but also in terms of its function as an allegory, as a national myth designed to legitimate the status of the Saigon government in 1961. This myth comes into focus more clearly if we consider it in conjunction with another rather far-fetched claim made about Lê Ngọc Hân: that in 1802, after the Gia Long emperor retook Phú Xuân, he was so taken aback by her that he married her. Though this claim was first made in the influential modernist Francophile review *Nam phong* (*Southern Wind*) in the 1920s, it was maintained as a popular story through French publications such as the *Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Huế* through the 1940s and in publications in Saigon in the 1960s.

Here the allegorical thrust of a particularly Saigonese nation-myth, enacted through Ngọc Hân, comes into focus. The idea that Ngọc Hân killed Quang Trung and married Gia Long not only refutes the central myth of Ngọc Hân as the symbolic national lover of Quang Trung but also grants a kind of legitimacy, through the process of marriage, to the Nguyễn dynasty. If Ngọc Hân killed the Quang Trung emperor, as Khánh asserts, her real loyalty was with the Lê, and not with the Tây Sơn. Moreover, if she did so in order to save the nation from Quang Trung, who can be seen as setting a course for Chinese domination through an ill-conceived marriage to the Chinese emperor's daughter, then the legitimacy of the nationalist myth of Quang Trung's supremacy is even more powerfully challenged.

Lending legitimacy to the Nguyễn regime was a crucial task for both those who participated in the French protectorate, such as Phạm Quỳnh, the Francophile editor of *Nam Phong*, and the writers and editors of the *Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Huê*. The legitimacy of the Nguyễn regime, which was founded as a result of a victory over what some would call the usurpations of the Tây Sơn rebels, was crucial to the protectorate because the existence of the Nguyễn emperor and the (sometime or asserted) cooperation of that emperor with his French friends formed the central mechanism for the justification of French rule over Trung Kỳ (Central Vietnam) and Bắc Kỳ (Northern Vietnam).<sup>25</sup>

If the Tây Sơn were seen as legitimate, then it would have been illegitimate for Nguyễn Ánh to take control of the Tây Sơn territory. If Nguyễn rule was illegitimate in 1802, then by extension it would be seen as having been illegitimate under the French protectorate. Thus the French, too, would lose a major ideological justification for their rule. Anticolonial writers and historians, who tended to valorize the Tây Sơn peasant rebellion and chastise the feudal Nguyễn, grasped this fact early on.<sup>26</sup> In this way, the myth of Lê Ngọc Hân's murder of Quang Trung and her marriage to Gia Long serves as a myth of continuity that legitimates both the participants in Nguyễn government under the protectorate and the participants in French colonization of Vietnam. It provides a resolution to the Tây Sơn crisis by using Ngọc Hân's body to assert the symbolic continuity of the Nguyễn dynasty with the Lê regime, thereby giving it the necessary means to assert its legitimacy.<sup>27</sup>

The murder and marriage myth also served the ideological purposes of the Saigonese intellectual elite of the early 1960s. Here, Ngọc Hân's supposed actions were translated from a myth of legitimacy of the Nguyễn and the protectorate to a justification of the Saigon government of the 1960s as the real Vietnamese government. In the Marxist Hanoi historiography of the 1950s and 1960s, the legitimacy of the Tây Sơn peasant rebellion provided a key example of legitimate historical *discontinuity* in the face of the continuity of Lê and Nguyễn feudalism. This discontinuity allowed the northern historians such as Văn Tân to posit a formal, romantic view of Vietnamese history with a revolutionary ideological implication, in which peasant rebellion, while not yet entirely successful, was always steaming under the surface of feudal regimes, waiting for the dialectical contradictions of the feudal mode of production to come to the surface and produce a lasting socialist revolution.

It is through these mechanisms that, in the 1950s and 1960s, some historians in both Vietnams posited the Tây Sơn as a symbolic representative of North Vietnam and Nguyễn Ánh as a representative of the legitimacy of South Vietnam. Thus, the Tây Sơn in both historiographical traditions came to be mostly represented by Quang Trung's reign in Thăng Long (Hanoi) between 1788 and 1792 and not by Nguyễn Nhạc's rule in Qui Nhơn between 1785 and 1793 or by the early Tây Sơn in the Saigon era. As K. W. Taylor has pointed out, this association seems very strange, considering that the Tây Sơn movement started in south-central Vietnam and essentially moved north.<sup>28</sup>

The myth of Lê Ngọc Hân's murder of Quang Trung, particularly when it is coupled with a marriage to the Gia Long emperor, discredits the Tây Sơn regime and lends legitimacy through continuity to the Gia Long emperor. For if Ngọc Hân is the symbolic representative of the Lê (as Nguyễn Thượng Khánh argues), then her murder of Quang Trung short-circuits her ability to serve as a symbol of the completion of the transition of the Tây Sơn from rebels to emperors. It also prevents her from acting as the national lover in the northern historiographical tradition. Her marriage to Gia Long confirms that it is he, and not Quang Trung, who is legitimate and a symbol of continuity, and thus also confirms that the Tây Sơn were illegitimate.



Thus, this myth about Lê Ngọc Hân arose in Saigon in the 1960s because it served for noncommunist Saigonese intellectuals the same function that the opposite myth about Lê Ngọc Hân served for their counterparts in the north. This myth serves to reinforce the claims of the noncommunist south to historical legitimacy by linking them to a figure universally recognized as a representative of the sentiment of the Vietnamese people, a woman who transcends the discontinuity of the Tây Sơn era.

A figure who was almost her contemporary, the well-known Hanoi poet Hồ Xuân Hương, was in some ways very different from Ngọc Hân. For example, her significance as a legitimating symbol for Marxist historians, particularly those from North Vietnam during the 1950s and 1960s, appears to lie in her role in *affirming* the discontinuity of the Tây Sơn regime with the feudal backwardness of the Lê and the Trịnh. She also appears, unlike Lê Ngọc Hân, to be a figure of active agency: she is important for the quality of her poetry and the vivid images that that poetry suggests. A closer look, however, suggests that things are not as simple as they appear. Hồ Xuân Hương's poetry is also interpreted by Hanoi historians of the 1950s and 1960s to serve their ideological purposes, and the treatment of her periodicity suggests that she is useful in another legitimating myth of the nation: the myth of a continuity between the Tây Sơn's antifeudal tolerance of women and the purportedly similar progressive policies of North Vietnam in the 1950s and 1960s.

### **Hồ Xuân Hương and The Fantasies of Periodization**

Hồ Xuân Hương is one of the most popular and well-known literary figures that Hanoi has ever produced. Her poems are famous for their frank style and their wordplay. The double entendres of her poetry are known for their not-too-subtle sexual allusions; for example, one of her most famous poems, "Jackfruit," refers to the traditional practice of offering local mandarins a jackfruit, but it is also ripe with sexual metaphors:

By nature in the past she was an overripe tree  
 Her fruit is coarse and her sections are thick  
 If the gentlemen loves her, then he should plunge his stake into her  
 Please don't touch her or her juice will run out on your hands.<sup>29</sup>

This poem is typical of Xuân Hương's style, in which double entendres are made within the regulations and rhyme schemes of the classical forms associated with *lục bát* (six-eight) poems. It is also typical in its stunningly frank allusions to sex instead of more classical and nonvulgar metaphors for sexual relations. The use of the jackfruit as a metaphor for woman seems designed to subvert the ideal of a restrained, moral woman by suggesting a feminine sexuality that overflows like ripe fruit underneath a thick and forbidding exterior. Just as when driving a knife into a jackfruit to test it for ripeness one may be surprised to find that it oozes with sticky sap, so one might be surprised to find similarities when entering into sexual relations with women.<sup>30</sup>

Hồ Xuân Hương is in many ways a very alluring figure. The sexual metaphors in her poetry, and indeed the mere existence and voluminousness of her *Nôm* (the writing of Vietnamese in traditional demotic script) poems, have captured the imagination of not only French and Vietnamese scholars but also the reading public in the United States. John Balaban's recent translations of her poems under the title *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương* caused the *Utne Reader* to exclaim with great hyperbole, "Sometimes books really do change the world. . . . this one will set in motion a project that will change Vietnamese culture."<sup>31</sup>

This kind of reaction to Hồ Xuân Hương's work indicates that her poetry is often seen as a protest against the status quo of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is thus a weapon against a narrative that privileges the concept of the predominance of Chinese, Confucian values in Vietnam, offering instead a vision of a Vietnamese woman who seems remarkably educated, free, and able to protest the injustices of her time. It is tempting, therefore, to read Hồ Xuân Hương as the antithesis of Lê Ngọc Hân. While Ngọc Hân is mostly a silent figure for whom history speaks, Xuân Hương has a clear voice; while Ngọc Hân is used to bring continuity and legitimacy to various fantasies of the nation and to smooth over the historical break caused by the Tây Sơn conflict, it would seem that Xuân Hương is the very essence of discontinuity. It is often supposed that she represents everything that the Trịnh and Nguyễn regimes do not: she is lascivious, they are repressed; she is realistic, they are formal; she is revolutionary, they are feudal.

It is sometimes not recognized, though, that this counternarrative or protest narrative serves the purposes of a particular myth of Vietnamese-ness that emerged in the journals of the Hanoi new historians in the 1950s and 1960s. So long as the oppression of women can be seen as Chinese by virtue of its being Confucian, then Hồ Xuân Hương is not actually representative of a break from the past. Rather, the interpretations of her writing by Hanoi literary critics and historians in the 1950s and 1960s constructed a myth of her as a symbol of Vietnamese-ness hidden under the surface of feudal oppression. For the new historians in the newly formed Democratic Republic of Vietnam of the 1950s and 1960s, Hồ Xuân Hương, like the Trưng sisters or Lady Triệu of Vietnam's Han past, represent in Vietnamese historical narratives an imagined continuous Vietnamese-ness that is constantly percolating underneath Chinese domination and its structural simulacra, the Lê and Nguyễn dynasties.

The workings of this myth can be seen most clearly when we consider how Xuân Hương is periodized by North Vietnamese scholars of the 1950s and 1960s. Though the actual dates of Xuân Hương's birth and death have never been clear, the most positive identification of the time in which she lived comes through her association with the early Nguyễn scholar Phạm Đình Hồ (1768–1839). Despite the fact that Hồ rose to a position of authority as a scholar after 1820, the literary critics and historians in Hanoi who began to write volumes about Hồ Xuân Hương consistently dated her poems to the late eighteenth century, putting them in the context of the Tây Sơn movement.<sup>32</sup>

The most influential scholar in promoting the myth that Hồ Xuân Hương should be seen as a representative of the culture of the Tây Sơn dynasty was the same scholar who brought us the myth of the national symbol of love between Quang Trung and Lê Ngọc Hân: historian and literary critic Văn Tân. In September 1955, Văn Tân wrote a lengthy essay discussing the value of Hồ Xuân Hương's works. Văn Tân's major objective was to highlight the antifeudal nature of her poetry; thus, he christened her the "most progressive" of all poets from the eighteenth century to the twentieth.<sup>33</sup> But most of his analysis was devoted to establishing a connection between Hồ Xuân Hương's poetry and the society in which she lived:

All rebellions against oppression, and the Tây Sơn rebellion in particular, not only break the feudal chains of politics under the Lê, Trịnh, and Nguyễn dynasties, but also break the chains of virtue and morality of the feudal regimes as well. This social situation is favorable enough for the oppressed people to express their opinions, aspirations, and feelings. Hồ Xuân Hương lived during these social circumstances.<sup>34</sup>

It takes a careful reader to notice that despite Văn Tân's obvious admiration for Hồ Xuân Hương's poetry, according to his interpretation, Hồ Xuân Hương does nothing to create social change. Rather than having any active agency as a cutting-edge writer, she is a product of her time. She is influenced by the changes of the Tây Sơn era; she does nothing to create those changes. Thus, despite the revolutionary nature of her poetry, or perhaps because of it, Xuân Hương serves not as an agent of change but as a figure who can represent the changes felt by the people during the Tây Sơn, and that is the main reason why her poetry "lives in the hearts of the people from the past until today."<sup>35</sup>

The key to this myth, promulgated in the 1950s but evident in some Hanoi scholarship through at least the 1980s, is that Hồ Xuân Hương wrote during the Tây Sơn period. Such an assertion allows scholars like Văn Tân to link her with the progressive policies of the Tây Sơn and by extension and analogy with the progressive policies of the modern Hanoi government. Nguyễn Lộc's explanation for this tendency is as follows:

The essence of optimism in Tây Sơn literature is that it is original, different, and easy to understand compared with the incompletely developed literature of the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries in general. It is therefore because of this that, although she has yet to have been solidly dated, nevertheless on the basis of a reading of her classic texts literature scholars generally have placed the *Nôm* texts of Hồ Xuân Hương in the Tây Sơn period. Objectively, however, it must be said that Hồ Xuân Hương is a very complex case. If we follow all of the texts that have been connected with her until now, then it is possible that she could be placed in periods as different as the mid eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup>

Despite admitting these problems, and citing the publication of the collection of *Nôm* poems attributed to Hồ Xuân Hương from the discovery of the manuscript *Lưu Hương Ký* in 1964, Nguyễn Lộc eventually decides to defer to common practice and include a substantial amount of Hồ Xuân Hương's poetry in his anthology of Tây Sơn literature because of the idea that Xuân Hương is representative of the Tây Sơn era.<sup>37</sup>

Nguyễn Lộc is not the only author to project a desire to place Hồ Xuân Hương in the Tây Sơn era. Hữu Ngọc and Françoise Corrèze accept the claim that Xuân Hương's interaction with Chiêu Hồ is evidence that she was a contemporary of Phạm Đình Hồ and even mention that she may have been born at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Yet despite their awareness that, at the very least, this would date much of Hồ Xuân Hương's adult life to the early nineteenth century, Ngọc and Corrèze still persist in referring to Xuân Hương solely as a figure of the eighteenth century. They claim that "the laugh of Hồ Xuân Hương cut through the end of the eighteenth century like a knife."<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Balaban has located Xuân Hương's ability to undermine the "male Confucian tradition" of Vietnamese poetry in her location "at the end of the decadent Lê dynasty."<sup>39</sup>

For Ngọc and Corrèze, Hồ Xuân Hương must be identified with the late eighteenth century, and not with the early nineteenth, because she must be put in the context of the Tây Sơn rebellion and the chaos following the collapse of the Lê dynasty. Thus, they note that Xuân Hương "lived in the troubled period of the eighteenth century when the posterior Lê dynasty was full of decadence. This period was marked by incessant wars and by the misery of the peasants, which drove them to revolt, and by the excess of mandarins and the accumulation of the difficulties of the tentacled bureaucracy."<sup>40</sup> The identification of Hồ Xuân Hương with the late eighteenth century functions, for Ngọc and Corrèze and for many other commentators, on Hồ Xuân Hương as a crucial narrative device. For if Xuân Hương were seen as an early Nguyễn dynasty figure, she would in a sense have been seen as "a woman after her time," because the Tây Sơn era is figured as the era of the blossoming of an antifederal regime with such enlightened policies as the propagation of *Nôm* and the partial redistribution of land.<sup>41</sup>

I am not arguing that Hồ Xuân Hương lived the entirety of her life in the nineteenth century and thus cannot be called an eighteenth-century figure

at all. In fact, recent research seems to make dating Hồ Xuân Hương's life perhaps an easier task than it was before. Duy Dao, who has examined the cadastral registers (*gia phả*) of the Hồ clan of Quỳnh Đôi as well as the anecdotal evidence that exists, suggests that Hồ Xuân Hương's dates can now be definitively set: according to Dao, she was born in 1770 and died in 1822.<sup>42</sup> Even older scholarship generally confirms that Xuân Hương's life can be dated to about the time that Duy Dao suggests.<sup>43</sup> The point is that the decision to call her an eighteenth-century woman, rather than an early-nineteenth-century figure, is hardly arbitrary.

In fact, though it is now generally confirmed that Xuân Hương's life spanned both centuries, if we were forced to date her work, the only solid evidence that exists to date not just her life but also her poetry would put her writing in the early nineteenth century. In the introduction to a collection of Hồ Xuân Hương's poetry titled *Lưu Hương Ký* (*Precious and Essential Records*), Phạm Đình Hồ mentions visits to Xuân Hương in the springs of the Đình Mão and Giáp Tuất years. That second time, she encouraged him to write an introduction to the *Lưu Hương Ký*.<sup>44</sup> Since the only Đình Mão year in Xuân Hương's lifetime corresponds to 1807 and the only Giáp Tuất year corresponds to 1814, we know that Xuân Hương's poetry and her relationship with Hồ was established during that time. Given that this is the only document that firmly dates her as an author, it would seem logical to consider her a nineteenth-century figure. To do so, however, would disallow the connection between Xuân Hương's alleged antifeudal outlook and the progressive policies of the Tây Sơn. Nowhere is this made clearer than in the outlandish claim that has been made in the past that Xuân Hương was in fact Quang Trung's cousin.<sup>45</sup> Though this claim is usually dismissed and discredited in most sources that mention it, that it is so often referred to is an indication of the power of the idea that Xuân Hương and Quang Trung were related.

Therefore, Vietnamese literary historians who place Hồ Xuân Hương's poetry in the Tây Sơn era do not merely have the empirical issues of accurately dating her life in mind. When she lived is just as important as what she wrote. Placing her in the Tây Sơn era enacts a powerful narrative myth of a hidden Vietnamese continuity that was repressed under the feudal and Confucian regimes of the Trịnh and Lê. According to this narrative, Hồ Xuân

Hương becomes a paradoxically typical figure; in a sense, this interpretation unintentionally implies that she was a woman of her times.

Any reading of her poetry, however, reveals the strangeness of this interpretation. After all, if Hồ Xuân Hương was just another historical character who is typical of the Tây Sơn era, then her poetry must support the Tây Sơn status quo and criticize only the past; that is to say, the Lê/Trịnh period. Alternatively, even if Xuân Hương was an early Nguyễn figure, then her poetry would indicate that she supported the regimes of the recent past and criticized her present. Her poems, however, do not find a government policy to support. They are critical of *all* oppressive legal institutions in northern Vietnam, without regard to past or present. For example, in the poem “Thơ Tự Tình” (“Lover’s Lament”), she writes: “Where are all the talented men?”<sup>46</sup> Without identifying any particular officials or dynasties, she mocks the feeble talents of young poets and scholar-officials, as she makes clear in the poem “Tiễn Người Làm Thơ” (“Entertaining the Departing Poets”): “Who will advise this gang of illiterates/that they should make their living by painting the pagoda walls?”<sup>47</sup> This poem, which is typical of her social criticism, takes aim at scholar-officials by pointing out their lack of talent and knowledge. But she does not refer to a particular era of scholars as being particularly lacking in these assets, nor does she ever single out the Tây Sơn era as a time when the scholar-officials were better prepared. Her social criticism reads more abstractly as a commentary on the general idiocy of the scholar-officials and their treatment of concubines. Nowhere in Hồ Xuân Hương’s work does one get the impression that the treatment of concubines and the behavior of scholar-officials was better in the Tây Sơn era than in the early Nguyễn.

The point that I am trying to make is not that Hồ Xuân Hương was not “a revolutionary poet,” as Hoa Bằng has called her, nor that she was not antifeudal, or that she was not an extraordinary woman by all accounts.<sup>48</sup> Rather, what I am suggesting is that, particularly since the 1950s and particularly in northern Vietnam, Hồ Xuân Hương’s record survives, is researched, and is well known because the myth that she is a Tây Sơn figure is a powerful legitimating device through which her antifeudal poetry can be linked to the purportedly enlightened policies of the modern Hanoi government. While texts in both *chữ Hán* (classical Chinese) and *chữ Nôm* (classical Vietnamese)

about other notable Vietnamese women (deities or not) such as Diêu Nhân, Hậu Thổ, Bà Liễu Hành, and princesses Ba and Diêu Thiên sit collecting dust in the Vietnamese archives, and while still more that may have existed in the past have now been lost or are stashed away in family records not to be unearthed, Xuân Hương's poetry thrives because it provides evidence for a historical narrative that veteran Hanoi new historians who got their start in the 1950s, such as Văn Tân and Nguyễn Lộc, have a desire to produce: of a continuous permissive Vietnamese-ness that effervesces behind the surface of a Chinese, Confucian feudalism.<sup>49</sup>

### **Conclusion: Gender and Myths of Continuity**

In the 1950s, Vietnamese were confronted with a rapid series of political, cultural, and social changes. After the Geneva Accords, Vietnamese were faced with two different states split at the seventeenth parallel. Faced with these new political realities, many intellectuals took on the responsibility of crafting new historical interpretations to legitimate the existence of their respective new states and to give the impression that the success of these states was guaranteed by their continuity with certain approved past heroes.<sup>50</sup> Crafting myths is essential to the production of new national identities, because "it is by embracing myths about the nation's creating that members perpetuate not only national myths but also the nation itself."<sup>51</sup>

Intellectuals from North Vietnam and South Vietnam alike played a role in shaping their new societies by crafting three unique myths. Two of these myths were northern myths: that Lê Ngọc Hân loved the Quang Trung emperor like the Vietnamese people loved him, and by extension loved the new Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and that Hồ Xuân Hương's anti-feudalism was a result of her writing during the Tây Sơn dynasty, and thus by analogy her writing could belong to the modern-day version of the Tây Sơn dynasty in Hanoi. And one was a southern myth: that Lê Ngọc Hân actually poisoned her husband the Quang Trung emperor and married his rival the Gia Long emperor. The purpose of this myth, I would argue, is to lend legitimacy to South Vietnam through the continuity given by Lê Ngọc Hân, a princess of the Lê dynasty, from the Lê to the Nguyễn and, ultimately, to South Vietnam, whose first head of state was the former Nguyễn emperor Bảo Đại.



These myths are far from universally agreed on; indeed, as historical arguments, they may represent the positions of only a handful of historians and literary critics today. Even at the time of their introduction, these myths were hotly debated: the idea that Hồ Xuân Hương's poetry should be viewed as a product of the progressive reforms of the Tây Sơn dynasty, perhaps the most enduring of the three myths, had its critics, even in 1950s Hanoi.<sup>52</sup> Yet the mere fact that these ideas were presented and debated in some of the most influential scholarly journals in both Hanoi and Saigon in the 1950s and 1960s, and that many of these opinions are still well known today, is indicative of their lasting power as ideas, as ways of thinking about the role of history in legitimating a new society.

In my opinion, it is no coincidence that in these three myths the figures that lend legitimacy and continuity to North and South Vietnam are women writers. As Tamar Mayer has pointed out, women are often central to the project of constructing new national identity, since "their centrality is also based on women's symbolic status" and is "connected to their reproductive roles."<sup>53</sup> Since women are symbols of reproduction, women are also often called on to serve to reproduce the nation or to act, in George Mosse's words, as "the guardian of the continuity and immutability of the nation" in times of crisis.<sup>54</sup>

In these three myths, Lê Ngọc Hân and Hồ Xuân Hương are being called on to act both as symbols of newly produced national identities in North and South Vietnam and as guardians of the continuity and consistency of such identities with the past. Through these myths, intellectuals from both North and South Vietnam are seeking to use Ngọc Hân and Xuân Hương as symbols of the legitimacy of each new nation and as guarantors of a link between these new nations and an idealized past of the eighteenth century.

Reasonable people may raise the objection that this essay focuses too much on the way that Hồ Xuân Hương and Lê Ngọc Hân have been manipulated and not enough on the light that they shed on the still relatively obscure world of women writers in premodern Vietnam. Yet it is important to remember both that the assumption in this objection is that historical materials about women in Vietnamese history are essentially reliable and that the historian's first task should be to inform the public about what those sources say about women. Present-day historians are reproducers of information who

translate, with the minimum of analysis required for the task of compilation and summary, the writings of the past into forms easily digestible for audiences of the early twenty-first century.

The problem with this approach is that it sentences historians to repeat the allegorical stances of their sources without reflecting critically about those sources. In the case of Lê Ngọc Hân, for example, any modern analysis that merely repeats what was found in the archival material that remains would end up naturalizing the claim for which the archive is already prefigured: that she is at the center of a legitimating myth of either the Tây Sơn or the Nguyễn. Which dynasty she legitimated would depend either on the historian's reading of the truth or on the historian's desire to form an allegory supportive of the current Vietnamese state or of the defunct Republic of Vietnam, but the nature of the archive would make it very difficult for the historian to come up with a narrative about Lê Ngọc Hân that could not be incorporated into these two stories. That is because the act of collecting information about her cannot be separated from the narratives produced about her. Both Lê Ngọc Hân and Hồ Xuân Hương attracted the most historical interest from the 1950s to the 1970s, and in this period documents about them were discovered. This was precisely the period that the allegories about them became most relevant—the period in which many Vietnamese struggled to find heroic figures who could connect their version of Vietnamese identity with an idealized past. One cannot presume that there can be a clear-cut distinction between doing real history and studying the ideological uses of history, since such an assumption in turn presumes that real history—just the facts—is not ideological. Knowledge of the real historical facts, such as they are, is commonly assumed to be an a priori condition for studying the uses of historical narratives. But, in fact, the opposite is true: the production of archives depends on the ideological relevance of the materials collected in the archives. Otherwise, the archives would not exist, and the governments, religious groups, and businesses that run archives would not tolerate the expense of keeping old materials.

Lê Ngọc Hân and Hồ Xuân Hương are indeed extraordinary figures in Vietnamese historiography. At least in part, however, their vaunted place in Vietnamese history results not only from their poetry but also from the way in which they have been deployed since the 1950s as the keys to the

mythological Vietnamese past. Since that time, they have been deployed as the keepers of Vietnamese legitimacy, as symbols of the will and love that historians and literary critics believe that the Vietnamese people have had for their rulers. Depending on the ideological position of the critic involved, Lê Ngọc Hân and Hồ Xuân Hương are made to represent the legitimacy of the Quang Trung emperor, the Gia Long emperor, or the Lê dynasty. But their actual loyalty was never really the point under dispute in this myth-making exercise; as women writers during one of the most important periods in the Vietnamese past, they were a key to constructing a new and legitimate Vietnamese society in a time of ideological uncertainty.

## Notes

A version of this essay was first presented at the annual meeting of the New York Conference on Asian Studies; I would like to thank the members of the panel, Olga Dror and John K. Whitmore, and the audience at that conference for their comments. George Dutton provided invaluable help tracking down names and dates. In addition, I would like to thank Sujata Gadkar, Melissa Wilcox, K. W. Taylor, and the anonymous reviewers of this article for their extensive and very helpful suggestions for revisions.

In this essay “Gia Long” and “Quang Trung” refer to the titles of reign periods during the rule of King Nguyễn Phúc Ánh and King Nguyễn Văn Huệ. However, after the early eighteenth century in Vietnam, reign periods tended to last the entirety of an emperor’s rule. Therefore, Vietnamese popular and scholarly convention has been to use reign titles as if they were the proper names of emperors, thus referring to emperors as “King Gia Long” or merely “Gia Long” rather than always using the more formal “the Gia Long emperor.” I have retained that convention in this essay.

- 1 Patricia Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 8.
- 2 Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 25.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 24–25.
- 4 Nguyễn Lữơng Bích and Phạm Ngọc Phụng, *Tìm hiểu thiên tài quân sự của Nguyễn Huệ (A Survey of the Military Genius of Nguyễn Huệ)* (Hanoi: Quân đội nhân dân, 1976), 187–214.
- 5 Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*, 38.
- 6 D. M. [Văn Tân], “Giới thiệu văn học Việt-nam thời Tây-sơn,” *Tập san nghiên cứu văn sử địa* 14 (February 1956): 51–59. I thank Patricia Pelley for her help in identifying the pseudonym D. M.

- 7 The full *nôm* texts of these poems, along with a transliteration into *Quốc Ngữ*, appear in Nguyễn Cẩm Thúy and Nguyễn Phạm Hùng, *Văn thơ nôm thời Tây Sơn (Nôm Poetry of the Tây-sơn Period)* (Hanoi: Khoa học xã hội, 1997), 95–122. The source for these *nôm* texts is “Quốc Âm Phú” (“Riches of the National Language”) (manuscript AB, Viện Hán Nôm, Hanoi, 184); and “Quốc Âm Tê Văn” (“Stele Inscriptions in the National Language”) (manuscript AB, Viện Hán Nôm, Hanoi, 318). *Manuscript AB* refers to the manuscript classification system of the Sino-Nôm institute (*Viện Hán Nôm*) in Hanoi. For information on this classification system or on these archival manuscripts, see Trần Nghĩa and François Gros, eds., *Di sản Hán Nôm: thư mục đề yếu (Vietnamese Sino-Nôm Heritage: Complete Catalog)*, 3 vols. (Hanoi: Khoa học xã hội, 1993).
- 8 An extremely interesting essay on the significance of the bonds of *tình cảm* can be found in Allison Truitt, “Changing the Terms of Address: Women’s Writing and the Crisis of Vietnamese Literature” (master’s thesis, Cornell University, 2000); see also Neil Jameson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988).
- 9 Nguyễn Cẩm Thúy and Nguyễn Phạm Hùng, *Văn Thơ Nôm*, 107. The translation is my own. For a partial translation of this poem into French, see Nguyen Khac Vien, Nguyen Van Hoan, and Huu Ngoc, *Anthologie de la littérature Vietnamienne*, vol. 2 (Paris: Harmattan, 2000): 160–63.
- 10 D. M. [Văn Tân], “Giới thiệu,” 55–56.
- 11 Văn Tân, *Cách Mạng Tây Sơn (The Tây Sơn Revolution)* (Hanoi: Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Sử Địa, 1958), 231–32. (Author’s translation)
- 12 *Ibid.*, 232–33.
- 13 Nguyễn Lộc, *Văn học Tây Sơn (Tây Sơn Literature)* (Nghĩa Bình: Sở văn hóa và thông tin, 1986), 79. (Author’s translation)
- 14 For Phạm Thái’s eulogy, see Nguyen Khac Vien, Nguyen Van Hoan, and Huu Ngoc, *Anthologie de la littérature Vietnamienne*, vol. 2, 168–69; for Gia Long’s eulogizing of the bishop of Adran, see Léon Vandermeersch, “Autour des honneurs funèbres décernés à l’évêque d’Adran au Vietnam” (“On the Funerary Honors Awarded to the Bishop of Adran in Vietnam”), *Vietnamologica* 3 (1998): 127–28.
- 15 Nguyễn Cẩm Thúy and Nguyễn Phạm Hùng, *Văn Thơ Nôm*, 93–94.
- 16 Letter from François Joseph Girard to Denis Boiret, November 25, 1792. Archives des Missions Etrangères de Paris (AMEP), vol. 692, 398; Đỗ Bằng, *Những khám phá về Hoàng Đế Quang Trung (Discoveries about the Quang Trung Emperor)* (Huế: Thuận hóa, 1998), 16.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 17; letter from Girard to Claude François Létondal, March 23, 1791, *AMEP*, vol. 801, 349–50; and letter from Girard to Boiret, November 25, 1792, *AMEP*, vol. 692, 397.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Văn Tân, *Cách Mạng Tây Sơn*, 233.
- 20 Nguyễn Thương Khánh, “Vua Quang Trung Chết vì một Liều Độc Dược của Ngọc Hân Công Chúa” (“The Quang Trung Emperor Died because of Princess Ngọc Hân’s Vial of Poison”), *Phở Thông* 62 (August 1961). Quoted in Đỗ Bằng, *Những Khám Phá*, 42–43.

- 21 Ibid., 43.
- 22 Ibid., 43–44.
- 23 Ibid., 47.
- 24 Nguyễn Phương, *Việt nam thời bành trướng: Tây Sơn (Vietnam in a Time of Turmoil: Tây Sơn)* (Saigon: Khái trị, 1967), 314.
- 25 David Marr, *Vietnamese Anticolonialism 1885–1925* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).
- 26 See Văn Tân, *Cách Mạng Tây Sơn*, 228–33.
- 27 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 1–42.
- 28 K. W. Taylor, “Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 57 (1998): 949–78.
- 29 “Đại Nam Đối Liễn Thi Tập” (“Compilation of Poetry and Parallel Sentences from the Great South”), in Nhan Bảo, *Phát Hiện Mới về Hồ Xuân Hương (New Discoveries about Hồ Xuân Hương)* (Hanoi: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2000), 184. (Author’s translation)
- 30 See Huỳnh Sanh Thông, ed. and trans., *The Heritage of Vietnamese Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 247–48.
- 31 Hồ Xuân Hương, *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương*, trans. John Balaban (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon, 2000), back cover.
- 32 Nguyễn Lộc, *Văn học Tây Sơn*, 44.
- 33 Văn Tân, “Ý nghĩa và giá trị thơ Hồ Xuân Hương” (“The Significance and Value of Hồ Xuân Hương’s Poetry”), *Tập san nghiên cứu văn sử địa* 10 (September–October 1955): 35.
- 34 Ibid., 23. (Author’s translation)
- 35 Ibid., 33. (Author’s translation)
- 36 Nguyễn Lộc, *Văn học Tây Sơn*, 44–45. (Author’s translation)
- 37 Nguyễn Lộc, *Văn học Tây Sơn*, 45.
- 38 Hữu Ngọc and Françoise Corrèze, *Hồ Xuân Hương, ou le voile déchiré (Hồ Xuân Hương, or the Torn Veil)* (Hanoi: Fleuve Rouge, 1984), 8.
- 39 John Balaban, “Translating Vietnamese Poetry,” *Manoa* 11, no. 2 (1999): 77.
- 40 Ngọc and Corrèze, *Hồ Xuân Hương*, 21. (Author’s translation)
- 41 For this narrative of Tây Sơn developments, see Nguyễn Khắc Viện, *Vietnam: A Long History* (Hanoi: Thế Giới, 1993).
- 42 Duy Dao, *Sự Thật Thơ và Đời Hồ Xuân Hương (The Truth about the Life and Poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương)* (Hanoi: Văn Học, 2000), 159–60.
- 43 See Hoa Bằng, *Hồ Xuân Hương, Nhà Thơ Cách Mạng (Hồ Xuân Hương: A Revolutionary Poet)* (Hanoi: Bốn Phương, 1950), 38–39.
- 44 The original Hán text of the *Lưu Hương Ký Tự*, along with a quốc ngữ translation, appears in Nhan Bảo, *Phát Hiện Mới về Hồ Xuân Hương*.
- 45 Hoàng Xuân Hãn, *La Sơn Yên Hồ (La Mountain and Yên Lake)* (Hanoi: Giáo Dục, 1998), 901.

- 46 “*Xuân Hương Thi Tập*” (“Poetic Works of Xuân Hương”), in Nhan Bảo, *Phát hiện mới về Hồ Xuân Hương (New Discoveries about Hồ Xuân Hương)* (Hanoi: Khoa học xã hội, 2000), 34.
- 47 Maurice Durand, *L’Oeuvre de la poétesse vietnamienne Hồ Xuân Hương (The Works of the Vietnamese Poet Hồ Xuân Hương)* (Paris: Adrien-Maisonneuve, 1968), 142.
- 48 Hoa Bằng, *Hồ Xuân Hương*, 54–55.
- 49 For information on Văn Tân’s participation in the attempts to forge a new, Marxist historiography of Vietnam, see Patricia Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*, 14. On women in classical texts, see “Hương Sơn Linh Cầm Quan Âm Sự Tích” (“Book of Prayers from Perfume Mountain”) (manuscript AB 111, Viện Hán Nôm, Hanoi), and “Hương Sơn Quan Thế Âm Chân Kinh Tân Dịch” (“Newly Translated Poems from Perfume Mountain”) (manuscript AB 271, Viện Hán Nôm, Hanoi).
- 50 Wynn Wilcox, “Allegories of the U.S.-Vietnam War: Nguyễn Ánh, Nguyễn Huệ, and the ‘Unification Debates,’” *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 17, no. 1 (2003), 129–60.
- 51 Tamar Mayer, “Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Setting the Stage,” in *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*, ed. Tamar Mayer (New York: Routledge, 2000), 3.
- 52 In December 1955, without taking on Văn Tân directly, Đái Xuân Ninh, in an “opinion of our readers” section of *Tập san nghiên cứu văn sử địa*, suggested that the importance of Hồ Xuân Hương’s poetry lay in her humanitarianism and, by implication, not in her association with a particular dynasty. Đái Xuân Ninh, “Ý kiến bạn đọc: chủ nghĩa nhân đạo trong thơ của Hồ Xuân Hương,” *Tập san nghiên cứu văn sử địa* 12 (December 1955): 78–86.
- 53 Mayer, “Gender Ironies of Nationalism,” 7.
- 54 George Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1985), 18.

Copyright of positions is the property of Duke University Press. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.