Phạm Duy Tôn: Journalist, Short Story Writer, Collector of Humorous Stories.

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Many Vietnamese, even those who have grown up in the United States, know Phạm Duy (complete name: Phạm Duy Cân), the Vietnamese singer, composer, and musicologist who has composed some of the best-loved songs of Vietnam.¹ Younger Vietnamese, however, unless they are students of Vietnamese literary history, don’t know about Phạm Duy Tôn, Phạm Duy’s father. He deserves to be better known, however, because as Vietnamese literary historians all agree, he played an important role in the literary life of his country, particularly in the development of prose fiction, and no doubt would have contributed more if he had not died of consumption at the age of 43. Phạm Duy Tôn is most interesting when seen as an individual—as someone who made certain choices, accomplished particular things, wrote this or that story. But he can also be viewed as a representative of a group of Vietnamese intellectuals who reached maturity around the turn of the century and were forced to come to grips with the realities of French colonialism. I will describe Phạm Duy Tôn’s choices and contributions and provide some translations of his writing, but first a brief biographical sketch.

Phạm Duy Tôn was born in Hà Nội in 1881 when the French were stamping out the final pockets of Vietnamese resistance in their attempt to turn Tonkin (north Vietnam) and Annam (central Vietnam) into peaceful Protectorates of France. His father was called thien hò, an honorary title assigned men with some wealth and prestige. When the French solidified their hold on Tonkin, he became a merchant and sold oil (which at that time was used primarily for lamps). Apparently Phạm Duy Tôn’s father earned a comfortable living; at least his grandson, Phạm Duy, reports that his father grew up in a family that did not suffer severe financial hardship. Phạm Duy Tôn reached adulthood at the turn of the

¹ Việt Nam Thông (1942), Yale Southeast Asia Studies, PO Box 208206, New Haven, CT 06520.
nineteenth century when men with an interest in furthering their education had to decide whether to, as his son explains, "become one of the last of the Confucian scholars or to choose Western studies to become the first person in a new movement." He chose the latter course and enrolled in the School for Interpreters from which he graduated in 1901. Other graduates included Nguyễn Văn Vinh and Phạm Quỳnh who later both became enthusiastic collaborators with the French and successful promoters of a modern literature in quốc ngữ, the national script.

After graduating from the School for Interpreters, he worked for a short while as an interpreter in an office of the colonial government, but then, for reasons that aren't clear, resigned to pursue other means of making a living. Although some relatives told Phạm Duy that his father quit his interpreter's job because he opposed the French, Phạm Duy suspects his restlessness and sense of adventure may have had more to do with his decision. After leaving his interpreter's job Phạm Duy Từ taught at Trí Trì School in Hà Nội. Apparently he also assisted in the founding in 1907 of the Tonkin Free School (Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục). Nguyễn Hiền Lê mentions that Phạm Duy Từ was one of the scholars of the "new learning" (tân học) who were associated with this movement to modernize Vietnamese education. Phạm Duy Từ and Nguyễn Văn Vinh were given the responsibility of drafting the application to open the new school that was submitted to the office of the French Governor. Because this school became adept at promoting Vietnamese nationalism, it was closed by the French authorities in 1908.

The projects Phạm Duy Từ pursued after teaching were quite daring and nontraditional. He opened a restaurant, a bold financial venture at a time when the Chinese pretty much controlled the restaurant trade. Not successful with his restaurant, he started a jewelry store which, despite some innovative advertising involving endorsements from famous actors and actresses, also failed. Apparently Phạm Duy Từ borrowed money to finance his business schemes: Phạm Duy mentions that after his father died his mother spent the rest of her life trying to pay back the debts of her husband. Next came a job with a branch of the Banque d'Indochine. This also did not satisfy him and he began to pursue more vigorously a career he had already dabbled in while pursuing his other jobs and adventures—a career as a journalist and writer.

In journalism and in writing he appears to have found his calling, for he pursued these activities until his death. In the articles included in the 1971 issue of Văn (Literature), the issue entitled Tương Niệm Phạm
Duy Tôn (Remembering Phạm Duy Tôn) that was devoted to his life and work, he is mentioned as having worked for eleven different newspapers. Most of these, like Đông Dương Tạp Chí (Indochina Magazine) and Nam Phong (Southern Ethos) were based in Hà Nội, but he also traveled to the South to assist southern publications—Lục Tỉnh Tôn Văn (News of the Six Provinces) and Nông Cố Mín Đám (Discussions of Agriculture and Commerce), for example. It is not easy to piece together the exact role Phạm Duy Tôn played on these various newspapers. From the references in the various tributes to him in the Văn collection it appears that he acted as an editor or assisting editor for some newspapers, wrote editorial and short stories for others, and acted in both capacities—as an editor and writer—for a third group. He was secretary of the editorial board for the journal Học Báo (Studies and News) when failing health forced him to retire.

He was also a politician. In 1919 he was elected to the Hà Nội City Council and from 1920 to 1923 he also served in the Congress of North Vietnam (Bắc Kỳ Nghiên Viên) as a representative of District Three in Hà Nội. In 1922 he along with some other prominent Vietnamese were invited to attend the International Exposition in Marseilles. At this time his health was already failing and according to his son, this trip weakened him further. Although not a user when he was healthy, he began to smoke opium when he knew he was dying. He was philosophical about his death. When friends from the newspaper Thúc Nghịch Dân Báo (Producing People’s Paper) came to visit him a few months before his death, he told them: “You only die once. I’ve known I was going to die for several years. There’s no cure for this disease. For me death is nothing to hope for but neither is it anything to fear.”

Assessing Phạm Duy Tôn’s journalistic accomplishments is difficult because it has not been possible to find copies of all the newspapers with which he was associated. Cornell University does, however, have copies of the weekly newspaper Lục Tỉnh Tôn Văn (News of the Six Provinces) for which Phạm Duy Tôn acted as writer and editor in 1915, and so some observations can be made based on an analysis of his contributions to this publication.

In colonial Vietnam it was in principle feasible but in practice impossible for a Vietnamese to receive permission to start a newspaper, and so most Vietnamese newspapers were directed by Frenchmen who
hired Vietnamese editors and writers. The French directors of many newspapers were in turn subsidized by the colonial government. *Lúc Tinh Tấn Văn* was directed by Françoise Henri Schneider who received funds from the Governor General of Indochina. Pham Duy Tôn was hired by Schneider to edit *Lúc Tinh Tấn Văn*. After 1898, when a decree was passed prohibiting newspapers from publishing politically sensitive articles, censorship was strict. It became even stricter during the war. On August 5, 1914, the colonial government issued a decree imposing a strict wartime curfew on the publishing of any article damaging to French security. On November 11, 1914, two *Frenchmen*, the director and editor of a French language newspaper published in Saigon, *L’Opinion*, were fined and imprisoned for violating this decree. These facts regarding press censorship should be kept in mind as we evaluate Pham Duy Tôn’s accomplishments as a writer and editor for *Lúc Tinh Tấn Văn*.

The articles that Pham Duy Tôn wrote for *Lúc Tinh Tấn Văn* are what we would call editorials, not news articles. He certainly did no investigative reporting. Except for a few brief reports of meetings, accidents, and crimes in the Six Provinces area and translations of items from French newspapers (news of the European war, for example), there were no straight news stories in *Lúc Tinh Tấn Văn*. What did Pham Duy Tôn write editorials about? The position expressed in most of his articles can be summarized as follows: France is a powerful and humane country which has already helped us achieve a “taste of civilization and a touch of freedom.” After allied forces win the war, France will be even more powerful and less distracted and will help us even more. We are lucky to have her as our protector and not Japan or China. Our responsibility as Vietnamese is to be loyal subjects of France, the mother country (mau quốc). We must refrain from spreading unsettling rumors (such as the French are going to trade Indochina to Japan in return for help against the Germans) and, of course, not join any groups plotting to disrupt France’s authority.

It is clear from reading his editorials that the French would have been hard put to find a more persistent or more impassioned advocate for France’s mission civilisatrice than Pham Duy Tôn. In one editorial he reveals his awareness of other views regarding France’s role in Indochina. I know, he says, that some people believe the French are in Vietnam only to exploit us, to milk us for taxes, to turn us into servants—that they provide us with only a minimal education. But I say, he continues, that great countries like France establish colonies for humanitarian rea-
sons as well as for profit. Sure, there are some French people who treat us badly. But look at the way the Japanese treat the Koreans, look at how the Chinese treated us, how we treated the Cambodians. Rarely has there been a people that love mankind as much as the French do.¹⁰

Not all his articles cover the glories of France. He wrote an editorial attacking Indian usurers and several examining why the Chinese are more successful at business than the Vietnamese.¹¹ Perhaps his most successful articles were ones concerning the flood in the North in the months of July and August. This was a terrible disaster that, according to figures published in Lục Tỉnh Tấn Văn, left over 60,000 people dead—either from drowning or from a cholera epidemic that broke out after the flooding. In one article, "Hỗn Nam Tương Cứu" (Helping Each Other in Misfortune), Phạm Duy Tôn described the effect of the flood in graphic terms and then launched an emotional appeal to his southern readers to form an association and collect funds to send to the North for relief of the flood victims.¹² His appeal was successful, an association was formed, and money was raised and sent to authorities in the North.

The article that provoked the most violent reaction was called "Văn Minh Giả" (False Civilization) which appeared on 4 November 1915, Nông Cộ Mín Đạm (Discussions of Agriculture and Commerce), another southern newspaper, printed articles by angry readers. Almost every issue from late November, 1915, through February, 1916, had one and sometimes two or three articles attacking Phạm Duy Tôn. The editor of Nông Cộ Mín Đạm, Nguyễn Kim Dinh, also entered the fray after Phạm Duy Tôn responded indirectly to the criticism with an article entitled "Trích Nhiệm Nguời Làm Báo" (The Responsibility of the Press). Phạm Duy Tôn compared the country of Việt Nam to a ship adrift at sea and journalists to the rowers and helmsmen charged with bringing it safely to port. Insulting each other in vulgar language demeaned, he said, the noble profession of journalism. Nguyễn Kim Dinh accused Phạm Duy Tôn of not practicing what he preached.¹³

What did Phạm Duy Tôn say in "Văn Minh Giả" that stirred up so many people in the Six Provinces? He argued that Vietnamese were attracted to the superficial aspects—the gaudy trappings—of modern civilization and didn’t appreciate that becoming civilized involved internal changes in attitude. The article included an excerpt from an article by Nguyễn Khắc Hiệu, a northern writer, that had appeared in Đồng Dương Tạp Chí (Indochina Magazine), a northern publication. In the excerpt Nguyễn Khắc Hiệu comments on the gaudy Western clothes some people
are wearing and ridicules those who think that all one has to do to become civilized is to visit a French clothing store. The article angered southerners, who took it as an attack by a recently arrived northerner on the society of the South. Some writers reminded Phạm Duy Tôn of the contributions southerners had made to victims of the flood in the North and asked whether this humanitarian effort was a sign of a true or false civilization. This reaction reveals how sensitive southerners were to criticism by northerners.

"Bút chiến," or pen wars, were common in the colonial press and some writer/editors of southern newspapers—Lê Hoàng Mưu and Nguyễn Chánh Sát, for example—entered into them enthusiastically, in part because they apparently increased circulation. According to Mộc Khué, because southern readers weren’t as sophisticated as northern readers, they loved these "pen wars" in which writers insulted each other in colorful language. No doubt the French were pleased to let Vietnamese intellectuals dissipate their energies in debates over nonpolitical issues. According to one point of view, that of Hà Nội scholars like Đăng Thải Mai, writer/editors like Phạm Quỳnh, Nguyễn Văn Vinh, and Phạm Duy Tôn were lackeys of the French and their newspapers nothing put propaganda sheets designed to eradicate any inklings of revolutionary and patriotic thought that might be sprouting in the minds of Vietnamese citizens.

There’s a great deal of truth in that charge, but it is also true that many Vietnamese in the period before and after the First World War honestly believed that Vietnam’s best hope lay in a close association with France. Many like Phạm Duy Tôn were attracted not by the glittering surface of French civilization but by what they perceived as its more substantive aspects—its industrial power, its successful economic system, its unity in the face of German attack, its rich literary heritage, and its humanitarian aims. As editor of Lục Tinh Tấn Văn he was an instrument of French colonial policy, but nevertheless he obviously learned a great deal about the printing and managing of a newspaper and about the writing of editorials—skills and knowledge which he willingly shared with his compatriots in the north and the south. In his pieces on the flood he demonstrated how the press can be used to rally support for a people in need. According to Vũ Bằng, any list of the pioneers of Vietnamese journalism would be incomplete if it did not include the name Phạm Duy Tôn.
Phạm Duy Tôn is best known for his short stories in which he experimented with realism and the objective method made popular in France by Guy de Maupassant. Phạm Quỳnh, the editor of the journal *Nam Phong* in which Phạm Duy Tôn’s stories appeared, helps us understand why his narratives were considered new and unusual when they began to appear around 1918. In an article entitled “A Discussion of the Novel” (Bản về Tếu Thuyết) published in 1921, Phạm Quỳnh explains that traditional Chinese and Vietnamese storytellers were very good at the narration of events; they did not attempt full descriptions of the setting of their stories or the feelings of their characters. Phạm Quỳnh calls their narrative technique the “straight line” (duống thẳng) approach and compares it to the recording of history and the writing of family registers. Events are narrated one after the other, the writer rarely pausing to provide detailed descriptions of scenes or the feelings of characters.

Phạm Quỳnh also stresses that in a modern novel characters and their actions must be believable: characters should not be fantastic, supernatural figures who perform actions readers know are beyond the power of humans. Phạm Quỳnh emphasizes this feature of the modern novel because supernatural beings and events were common in traditional stories. The earliest recorded Vietnamese stories were called *truyện kỳ* strange tales passed down from one generation to the next. One collection of *truyện kỳ* stories called *Việt Diệu U Linh Tapel* (Spiritual Powers in the Viet Realm), compiled in 1329, includes many stories about spirits and the assistance they provided Vietnamese rulers. Even in the more recent verse narratives supernatural elements still play a major role. In *Kim Vân Kiều* (early 1800s), for example, the ghost of the famous beauty Đàm Tiến converses with the heroine, Thúy Kiều, and in *Lục Vân Tiên* (ca. 1860), the hero, Văn Tiên, is cured of blindness by a fairy who visits him in a dream.

In short, traditional Vietnamese stories were not meant to be realistic. They were also usually based on historical events in the past and contained no contemporary characters. Their purpose was to teach morality, usually the Confucian virtues of loyalty, filial piety, and human righteousness (*nhan nghĩa*). In many tales the moral was explicitly announced at the beginning. Traditional writers did not describe characters
and scenes and leave it up to their readers to induce the moral; they wrote stories to illustrate well-known virtues.

Because he realizes that realistic description was not a prominent feature of traditional Vietnamese stories, Phạm Quỳnh, in his article on the novel, does not advise aspiring writers to attempt it. Instead he encourages them to begin with something easier, with what he calls "tiêu thuyết truyện ký" by which he means not the traditional strange tales such as those collected in Việt Điện U Linh Tạp, but modern adventure stories. "Tiêu thuyết truyện ký" is Phạm Quỳnh's translation of "romans d'aventures" and he mentions the stories of Alexandre Dumas père and Jules Verne and Defoe's Robinsen Crusoe as instances of the type. This kind of novel would be easier for Vietnamese to learn to write, Phạm Quỳnh suggests, because "it is similar to Eastern novels—we like strange and unusual events—and because this type does not demand a high degree of literary craftsmanship; therefore, it is suitable for a country such as ours in which literature is still in the early stages of development."

Because Phạm Quỳnh realized Vietnamese readers weren't familiar with realistic writing, he attempted to teach them about it. In 1919 he translated a brief critical discussion of Guy de Maupassant that was published originally in a French publication (Information d'Extreme-Orient). Phạm Quỳnh's translation, entitled "Lời Tả Chân trong Văn Chuồng: Bản về Nhà Văn Pháp Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893)" (Realism in Literature: A Discussion of the French Writer Guy de Maupassant), appeared in Nam Phong in March, 1919—around the time Phạm Duy Tốn was writing his short stories. As the excerpts below indicate, this article presented a way of telling stories that all Vietnamese, given their traditional understanding of storytelling, would find new and that some—Phạm Duy Tçon in particular—would find exciting and worth experimenting with in Vietnamese.

His [Maupassant's] short stories succeed because in them he opens a window into the middle of life—opens it up only for a second and then closes it immediately. This allows us to catch a glimpse of an amusing, moving, vulgar, or pitiful scene—but only a fleeting glimpse, as if the scene were passing before our eyes.... Thanks to [Maupassant] we know the customs, the way of speaking, the thinking, and the hopes of a complicated and lowly
class of people—fish sellers, grocers, servants, boatmen, laborers, girls looking for a husband, men who have abandoned their wives, etc. He adopts a detached attitude and objective view, and exposes a little world (ce petit monde) without providing additional commentary. This allows readers to react according to their personality: the compassionate see the wretchedness of these classes of people and sympathize with them; those lacking compassion observe them and are scornful. The author himself remains aloof and uninvolved.

In Phảm Duy Tôn's short stories we see him applying some of the principles mentioned in this article. Instead of writing another talented-youth-meets-beautiful-girl story, a standard plot in the Vietnamese tradition, he opens a window on a different world—a world that includes not only members of the upper classes but also peasant farmers and rickshaw drivers.

The earliest story I have found is “Câu Chuyện Thương Tâm” (A Heartrending Story). In this story (or excerpt) the narrator sees an old man trying unsuccessfully to pull a rickshaw loaded down with a woman and her belongings. The narrator asks the old man how his children can let him suffer so, and he explains that his only son drowned in a flood and he has to work to earn enough to feed his grandchildren.

“Song Chết Mạc Bay!” (It’s Nothing To Me!) is the first story by Phảm Duy Tôn (see our translation) to be printed in Nam Phong (in December, 1918) and is also his most famous, the story most often singled out by Vietnamese literary historians as an example of Phảm Duy Tôn’s successful application of a new way of telling stories. This story has no formal introduction, no statement of a moral that the story will illustrate. Instead it begins with a brief description of the situation: the river is rising and the dike is about to collapse. Then the author presents the two contrasting scenes: the frantic peasants struggling in the mud and rain and the aloof mandarin high and dry in the village hall, absorbed in his game of cards. As is clear from the translation, the author can’t resist some moralizing. “Who except those with hearts of stone,” says the narrator, “would not be moved by pity for the people of this village!” But the story marks a clear departure from past practice in its detailed description and more colloquial style.
“Sống Chết Mạc Bay!” was introduced rather dramatically to the readers of Nam Phong. A heading in large type, MỘT LỜI VÀN MỚI (A New Way of Writing), appears at the top of the page22 followed by a three-paragraph introduction by Phạm Quỳnh. In this introduction, Phạm Quỳnh explains that Phạm Duy Tồn has established a "special way of writing based on realism." Phạm Duy Tồn believes, Phạm Quỳnh continues, that “literature that describes a scene truthfully will automatically have the power to evoke strong feeling; there is no need for extended discussion.” Up to now, he continues, our literature has overvalued the vague and mysterious and undervalued realistic writing, but now, as a result of influence from the West, this way of writing is becoming more popular. Phạm Quỳnh concludes by praising Phạm Duy Tồn for his contribution to the national literature.

The story “Con Người Sở Khanh” (The Lady Killer)23 concerns a girl whose own husband, a ruthless deceiver, steals her money and jewels on a trip to Hà Nội. “Người Về Làm Tôi” (The Tides of Life) is a story about a man who, when he was fourteen, witnessed his father beat his mother to death. This is a remarkable story in several respects. The story of the beating is told by Dao, the man who saw his mother beaten, to another narrator who describes how he met Dao, an old school friend, outside an opium den in Saigon. Dao is thirty-eight when the narrator meets him, but opium and his dissolute life have so altered his appearance that he looks at least fifty. Before he hears Dao’s story, the narrator tells him he should pull himself together and get a job, but after he hears his tale he can only repeat a line from Kim Văn Kiều: “What ironies the tides of life throw up!” (Người về làm tôi là-lừng khắp-khe).24 The reader therefore reacts to the story of the beating but also to the narrator’s reaction to it. Such techniques as these—first person point of view and framing one story with another—were new on the Vietnamese literary scene and no doubt heightened the impact this story had on Vietnamese readers.

Another remarkable feature is the extraordinarily vivid account of the beating. It is described in considerable detail, blow by blow:

When I quickly opened the door and looked in, I saw my father strike my mother on the neck, forcing her down on the bed. With his other hand he hit her in the face.

My mother, her hair disheveled, raised her arms to ward off the blows but it was no use. My father, like a
man possessed, kept beating her wildly. She fell from the
to the bed but did not call out or cry; she only held her face in
her hands and lay quietly. My father turned her over and
began hitting and kicking her without stopping.

My friend, when I saw all this I was terrified. I
thought the world was falling apart. Out of fear I shouted
loudly. My father turned and when he saw me, he let my
mother go. Still terrified, I ran down to the kitchen and
stayed there till morning.

Bùi Xuân Bào faults Phạm Duy Tôn for following French texts
too closely. The mandarin in “Sống Chết Mạc Bay!” he says, is modeled
on the field marshall in Alphonse Daudet’s “La partie de billard.” This
story, one from a collection of stories called Les Contes Du Lundi, published in 1873, describes a field marshall during the Franco-Prussian
War of 1870. While his men, who are awaiting his orders, suffer outside
in the rain, the marshall is absorbed in a game of billiards at an elegant
Louis XIII chateau, temporary headquarters for the French forces. The
enemy draws closer, shells land around the chateau, and an aide-de-camp,
covered with mud, bursts past the sentries yelling “Marshall, Marshall!”
After expressing displeasure at the sentries for letting the man enter, the
marshall tells him to wait and returns to his game, which he wins while
his men are slaughtered by enemy forces.

Phạm Duy Tôn may have been influenced by the Daudet story.
The practice of modeling Vietnamese stories on French works was com-
mon during this period (1912-1925). Họ Biểu Chánh, for example, wrote
novels based on Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables, Alexandre Dumas père’s
Comte de Monte-Cristo, Hector Malot’s Sans Famille, and other works.26
A reading of Phạm Duy Tôn’s accounts in Lược Tinh Tổn Văn of the flood
in the north in 1915, however, suggests that “Sống Chết Mạc Bay!” was
inspired primarily by local events. Several passages in one of his articles
on the flood, “Hỗ Nạn Tổn Văn Của” (Helping Each Other in Misfor-
tune) resemble passages in his short story and the article also contains
the phrase “sống chết mặc ai” (it’s nothing to me), an expression almost
identical to the one he later used for the title of his short story, although
in the article it is applied not to uncaring mandarins but refers to the
attitude he hopes southerners will not adopt toward the suffering of their
compatriots in the north.27
This story can be seen as a reaction to indigenous political, as well as natural, phenomena. As the French took more and more power from the Nguyễn emperors at the court in Huế, many honorable and talented Vietnamese declined to serve as chiefs of prefectures and districts and as notables on village councils. Many of the Vietnamese who were willing to collaborate were lazy and incompetent individuals who abused the peasants and used their positions to achieve a life of luxury for themselves. In other words, Phạm Duy Tôn did not have to go to nineteenth century French literature to find models of uncaring officials; they were all around him.

Apparently he also did not have to ransack French literature, or even his own imagination, to find officials who played cards while the waters rose. Here is the beginning of a report, written by a Frenchman, of the collapse of the dike of Thượng Cát in 1910:

For a month, the province of Hà Đông had been under water. From the green dike to the horizon one saw nothing but a mass of reddish water. The tops of high bamboo plants, the moss-covered roofs of pagodas, and the ancient tumulus (grave mound) were the only things that showed above water.

The dike was scarcely scrutinized by the man responsible, the canton chief, who was playing xe-phão-ma at the village chief’s home... First some oozing occurred, then a kind of stream, and, at last, as people realized the extent of the disaster, the dike collapsed into pieces like fingers falling one after the other from the hand of a leper.

Literary historians focus almost exclusively on Phạm Duy Tôn’s achievements regarding the short story; they may mention in passing his journalistic activities, but they ignore his role as collector of folk anecdotes (probably because they did not know that Thọ An, the pen name that is found on his collections of anecdotes, was Phạm Duy Tôn). Scholars devote only a modest amount of space to Phạm Duy Tôn—usually only three or four pages. In an early study of prose fiction published in 1932, perhaps the first retrospective look at the evolution of the genre, Trúc Hà has already concluded that Phạm Duy Tôn was the first writer to “open up a new way of writing.” He praises him for his fluent, colo-
Qual style and realistic description. Critics writing after Trúc Hà echo these comments. Vũ Ngọc Phan argues that Phạm Duy Tôn wasn’t as modern or as realistic a writer as other critics say he was—he maintains that his style was old-fashioned and complains that he slips into pious moralizing on occasion—but he still concludes that he was “the first to write short stories in the Western style.” Thanh Lân, too, states that Phạm Duy Tôn was “the first to succeed in applying the new artistic method.”

Often critics compare Phạm Duy Tôn to Nguyễn Bá Hộc, a contemporary of Phạm Duy Tôn’s who also wrote stories for Nam Phong. Nguyễn Bá Hộc’s stories were written in a much more classical and formal style than that favored by Phạm Duy Tôn. He was a Confucian scholar in the old Sino-Vietnamese tradition and wrote stories with more explicit moral messages. As Thanh Lân points out, Nguyễn Bá Hộc preached conformity to society’s customs whereas Phạm Duy Tôn, taking the side of the downtrodden, wanted to reform society; his works, Thanh Lân observes, have “a clear social tendency.”

Not surprisingly, it is this social tendency that earns Phạm Duy Tôn praise from Hà Nội scholars. Bùi Văn Nguyên and Phan Si Tấn praise Phạm Duy Tôn’s “Sông Chết Mạc Bay!” for being the first short story “to speak of the suffering of farmers oppressed by feudalism and colonialism.” Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh, another scholar from Hà Nội, praises him for opening the way for what he calls “a tendency toward critical realism in the contemporary short story.”

These tributes seem justified as long as one is talking about the situation in the North, but become misleading when one considers the whole country. As Cao thị Như-Quỳnh and I have argued elsewhere, northern scholars have written most of the literary histories and they tend for various reasons, including lack of knowledge of literary efforts in the south, to pay scant if any attention to southern writers. As early as 1887 a southern writer named Nguyễn Trọng Quân wrote a remarkable short story called “Truyện Thày Lazaro Phien” (Story of Lazaro Phien) that is in many respects more carefully crafted than any of the stories by Phạm Duy Tôn discussed here. Apparently, however, it provoked little interest when it appeared, perhaps because it was ahead of its time—departed too radically from the traditional way of telling stories described by Phạm Quỳnh. In addition, the story’s Christian title and theme may have suggested that it was a story designed not for entertainment but for
religious instruction. In the story a man (Lazaro Phien) confesses to the narrator that he murdered his wife and best friend whom he wrongly thought had been lovers. He decides to become a priest to atone for his sin and to secure peace of mind.39

Another southerner, Hồ Biểu Chánh was also writing prose fiction in a colloquial style before Phạm Duy Tôn's stories appeared in Nam Phong. His first novel, Ai Lâm Đuợc? (Who Can Do It?) was published in 1912.40 Although this work contains some old-fashioned elements, including a great deal of the “straight line” narration mentioned by Phạm Quỳnh, it concerns ordinary people living in Cà Mau who are allowed to speak naturally in their southern dialect. Other southerners, too, were writing around this time: Gilbert Trần Chánh Chiểu, Lê Hoàng Mưu, and Nguyễn Cần Sát, for example.41 The common assumption that Phạm Duy Tôn was the first to develop a modern prose style will have to be reexamined as more is learned about the development of the early novel in the south.

**Collector of Humorous Anecdotes**

In an interview in 1971, Phạm Duy explains how he discovered that his father and Thọ An, the collector of humorous stories (some of them which, as we say, would make a sailor blush) were one and the same person:

> One day when I was sad and bored I went upstairs and searched a desk, curious to see what was there. I found a notebook filled with squiggly writing. After reading it for a bit, I went downstairs and said to my mother: “At that old desk of father’s there’s a book with really obscene stories in it written by Thọ An. I wonder who this Thọ An is who writes these shocking, unbearable stories.” “Thọ An,” my mother replied, is no one else but your father.42

These stories (see pp 124-125 for two examples), published around 1922-1923,43 are short—only from one-hundred to two-hundred words long. They are anecdotes, not short stories. Although Phạm Duy Tôn may have made up some of them and certainly embellished many, his role was primarily that of collector and recorder. At least one edition of his stories was called Tiếu Lâm Quảng Kỳ which means a collection of bawdy stories (tiếu lâm), recorded (kỳ) widely (quảng), i.e. from vari-
ous regions of the country. In his introduction to a 1924 edition, "Thơ An" explains that he has accumulated these stories from different regions. He emphasizes their communal composition: "One person tells another a story and then people everywhere add to it with the result that the story expresses a common spirit shared by a people; it's not the private expression of any single individual."

Phạm Duy Tồn’s achievement in these anecdotes is his fluent, simple prose style that remains close to the rhythms of oral speech and avoids the excessive parallelism of a more mannered style, sometimes called the “Chinese style” (lời văn tấu). Apparently Phạm Duy Tồn published these anecdotes after he wrote his short stories, but he suggests in his introduction to Tả Lăm Annam (Bawdy Stories of Annam) that he had been leisurely collecting anecdotes for some time. His ear for the nuances and rhythms of oral speech must have been heightened by his collecting of these oral narratives; certainly this activity helped him achieve a colloquial style more appropriate for modern fiction than the classical “Chinese style.”

One must remember that Vietnamese writers in the first quarter of the century were still struggling to develop a modern prose style. Other writers, contemporaries of Phạm Duy Tồn, who attempted to write prose fiction produced works that resembled verse narratives in style, theme and structure. The critic Vũ Ngọc Phan accuses Phạm Duy Tồn of slipping back into an older, poetic style in his story "Con Nguai Sa Khanh." He quotes lines like the following to make his point: "Chàng vừa trạc tuổi thanh-xuyên; hình-dung chí-chuột, áo-quần bánh bao" (He was a stranger in the flush of youth, with polished image, elegant cap and robe). These lines, however, are taken from Kim Văn Kiều where they describe the infamous Sa Khanh, a handsome rascal who deceives the heroine, Thúy Kiều. In these lines Phạm Duy Tồn is alluding (as he does in his title) to the older verse narrative to increase the intertextual richness of his story. His allusions to the Kiều story are a way of saying: You remember Sa Khanh, that dastardly deceiver of women from Truyện Kiều? Well, his type is still around—right here in Hà Nội!

Although Vũ Ngọc Phan may attack Phạm Duy Tồn unfairly for his old-fashioned style in these lines, one can’t dispute his point that Phạm Duy Tồn had not yet achieved a modern Vietnamese prose style. This was not developed until later, primarily by Nhật Linh and other writers of the Self-Strength Group (Tự Lực Văn Đoàn). Even as late as 1933 Nhật Linh complained that writers couldn’t avoid two extremes:
some tried to impress people with their classical learning by writing in a Chinese style; others showed off their modernity by writing strange-sounding sentences characteristic of a French style. An "Annamese style" (tô văn Annam) still eluded them, a "simple style, clear, close to the way we speak, with a sensible structure, strong in its ability to express meaning concisely and fluently." Pham Duy Tôn did not live long enough to master completely this style, but he began the journey toward it. Certainly his appreciation for folk anecdotes gave him a head start on his trip.

Vũ Bằng concludes that Pham Duy Tôn was a "pioneer" collector of humorous folk anecdotes—the first modern scholar/writer to realize their value. More research needs to be done in this area. Nguyên Đăng Mạnh mentions two other collections published before Pham Duy Tôn’s—one called Truyện Dỗi Nay (1910) (Stories of These Times) and one entitled Chuyện Khởi Hải (1913) (Humorous Stories). In the south other scholars had already produced collections of short tales in the quốc ngữ script. Trương Vĩnh Ky published Chuyện Dỗi Xưa (Stories of Olden Times) in 1866, and Huỳnh Tinh Của’s Truyện Giới Buồn (Stories to Relieve Boredom) came out in 1880. These collections resemble Pham Duy Tôn’s Tịnh Lầm Annam: they also are compilations of very short anecdotes that were part of the oral tradition.

These southern compilers had different aims, however: Trương Vĩnh Ky and Huỳnh Tinh Của produced their collections to help Vietnamese learn the new writing system employing roman letters—quốc ngữ. They intended them to be used as McGuffey’s Readers were used in the U.S.: to promote literacy while teaching moral conduct. The stories in their collections, none of which is vulgar, have a clear moral lesson (which is often stated explicitly at the end of the tale). Pham Duy Tôn, on the other hand, intended his collection not to instruct but to entertain; he also wished to preserve a part of the Vietnamese cultural tradition.

By showing how the new script could be used to tell familiar stories in a colloquial style all these compilers—northern and southern—hastened the development of prose fiction. Nguyên Khue sees similarities between the style used by Trương Vĩnh Ky and Huỳnh Tinh Của in their retelling of folk anecdotes and that used by Hồ Biểu Chánh in his early novels. Unlike these southern compilers, who did not write prose fiction, Pham Duy Tôn moved in his own writing from folk anecdote to short story and so in his case it seems inescapable that the approach
taken to the writing of the one genre would influence the approach taken in writing the other.

These collections were (and still are) extremely popular. Chuyện Đôi Xua and Chuyện Giải Buồn have been reissued in dozens of editions. Phạm Duy Tôn’s collections appear to have served a more underground but also extensive audience. Because some of his stories were considered obscene, many no doubt had to read them on the sly. Nevertheless, many copies were printed. Thiền Tùng, who claims personal knowledge of publishing practices related to Phạm Duy Tôn’s works, says that after the publishing house Quảng Thịnh bought the copyright, it reprinted Phạm Duy Tôn’s collection of anecdotes always once and sometimes twice a year; at each printing 10,000 to 30,000 volumes were produced. According to Thiền Tùng, there “wasn’t a province capital, or district, or prefecture in Indochina that didn’t have a copy.”

Phạm Duy Tôn was certainly not as influential a figure as Nguyễn Văn Vinh or Phạm Quỳnh, two of his contemporaries who were also writers, editors, and staunch advocates of cooperation with France. Both these men were editors of more influential newspapers—Đồng Dương Tạp Chí and Nam Phong respectively. Nguyễn Văn Vinh distinguished himself as a translator of French and English works—La Fontaine’s fables, Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables, Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels, Abbé Prévost’s Manon Lescaut, for example. Phạm Quỳnh wrote long scholarly articles for Nam Phong on topics chosen from the fields of science, philosophy, literature, political science, and geography. But Phạm Duy Tôn, as I have attempted to show, participated prominently in the intellectual life of Vietnam during the period 1910-1924. Although southerners were writing prose fiction before Phạm Duy Tôn, they didn’t specialize in short stories. Further research seems likely to confirm that he deserves to be considered the father of the modern Vietnamese short story. If all his writing, including that which he did using various pen-names—his journalism, his short stories, his collections of folk anecdotes—could be gathered in one place for a more thorough appraisal, we might find that he has bequeathed us more than we now realize. There is a tendency among some resistance-oriented scholars to ignore figures like Phạm Duy Tôn. This is a mistake for although Phạm Duy Tôn was not a revolutionary, he led a rich and colorful life. Understanding his choices and contributions helps us develop a more complete picture of the literary and political culture of Vietnam during the colonial period.
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Works by Phạm Duy Tôn

“Bực Minh” (Annoyed) or “Câu Chuyện Thương Tâm” (A Heart-Rending Story). See endnote 20 for an explanation of the confusion over the title of this story. It appeared originally in Đông Dương Tập Dĩ (55(1914) and is reprinted in Văn 169 (1 Jan 1971): 63; and also in the following work edited by Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh: Hợp Tuyển Văn Học Việt Nam (1920-1945) (Selections from Vietnamese Literature), Series 5, Volume 1 (Hà Nội: Văn Học) 1987: 87-88.


“Nước Đôi Lắm Nói” (The Tides of Life), Nam Phong 23 (May 1919): 401-404.

Tiểu Lâm Ảnh Nam (Bawdy Stories of Annam). Author: Thọ An (pen name). Two volumes (Vol. 1 contains stories 1-31, volume 2, stories 32-64). Third edition. (Hà Nội: Ich Kỳ) 1924. We obtain microfiche copies of these volumes from the National Library in Paris, which also has editions published in 1927 and 1929. Thien Tuong says that Phạm Duy Tôn published a three-volume edition of his stories called Tiểu Lâm Quang Ky (Bawdy Stories Recorded Widely) “around 1925, 1926.” First the publishing house Ich Kỳ published Tiểu Lâm Quang Kỳ, later Quang Thịnh. Thien Tuong also mentions that Phạm
Notes

1 Pham Duy was born in 1922 and grew up in Hà Nội. He composed patriotic songs for the Việt Minh during the early part of the first Indochina War against the French but split with them in the early 50s and moved to Sài Gòn where he continued to write songs, give concerts, and teach music. Among those young Vietnamese who learned from him were his own children who started a popular singing group called the Dreamers in Saigon. When the communists took over in 1975, Pham Duy came to the U.S. and now lives in Midway City, California. His children, still the Dreamers and still popular, now sing for Vietnamese audiences in America.

3 Ibid.
5 Pham Duy, “Việt về Bố”; 5.
6 Pham Duy mentions his father’s use of opium in an interview with Vui Bàng. “Nhớ Chuyện với Phạm Duy về Phạm Duy Tồn” (Talking with Phạm Duy about Phạm Duy Tồn), Văn: 11.
9 Pro-French sentiments are found in almost every article by Pham Duy Tồn in Lục Tích Tần Văn in 1915-1916. His pro-French arguments are expressed most directly in articles appearing on the following days in 1915: March 1, 11, and 25; April 1, and 15; October 21; and, December 9, and 16.
10 “Tình Người Pháp đối với Người Nam” (Relations between French and Vietnamese), 1 April 1915.
11 The article on Indian usurers appears on 15 July 1915; the articles on business and the Chinese appear on 27 May and 2 September 1915.
12 See the following issues from 1915 for articles on the flood: 29 July, 12 August, and 16 September. “Hoàn Nạn Tướng Cũ” appeared in the August 12 issue.

Mộc Khue, Ba Mẫu Nắm Văn Học (Thirty Years of Literature) (Hà Nội: Tân Viêt) 1942: 121.


Vũ Bá, “Nói Chuyện với Phạm Duy và Phạm Duy Tôn”: 17.


Ibid.: 14.

I have been able to locate only four of Phạm Duy Tôn’s short stories (see list at end of this article), but it seems likely he wrote and published others. His son mentions that he wrote stories under the pen names Úu Thội Man and Đặng Phuong Sóc (“Việt về Bô”: 6), but we couldn’t find any works written under these names, no doubt because American libraries do not have a complete collection of Vietnamese periodicals.

There is some confusion surrounding the title of this story. In the Văn issue devoted to Phạm Duy Tôn, and in Hợp Tuyển Văn Học Việt Nam (1920-1945) (Selections from Vietnamese Literature), Series 5, Volume 1, ed. Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh (Hà Nội: Văn Học) 1987, this story about the rickshaw driver is called “Câu Chuyện Thuang Tâm.” Both these sources reprint the story, presumably in its entirety. However, this same story is called “Bực Minh” (Annoyed) by Thành Lãng in Bảng Lược Đô Văn Học Việt Nam: Quyển 3 (A Survey of Vietnamese Literature: Vol. 2—Three Generations of Modern Literature) (Sài Gòn: Trịnh Bây) 1967: 496. Perhaps what has been reprinted is an excerpt from a longer story called “Bực Minh.” The story originally appeared in Đồng Dương Tập Chí 55 (1914). I have not been able to locate this volume of this periodical in any U.S. library.

Many Vietnamese know this story because it was included in a very widely circulated anthology entitled Quyết Văn Trích Diện (Excerpts from the National Literature) prepared by Dương Quang Ham in the early 1920s. This anthology, which has been reissued in dozens of editions, was first published for use in normal schools and in French-Vietnamese superior primary schools.

Nam Phong 18 (Dec 1918): 355.

“Don Juan” would be another possible translation of the title of this story. Sở Khanh is a character from Nguyễn Du’s verse narrative Kim Vân Kiều. Because he deceives the heroine in this famous verse narrative, his name has become a synonym for deceiver of women—a wolf or lady killer. See the Tale of Kieu, trans. by Huỳnh Sanh Thông (New Haven: Yale University Press) 1983: 55-63.
24 See Huỳnh Sanh Thống’s translation of *The Tale of Kiều*, line 1220: 64.
27 Luc Tinh Tân Văn, 12 August 1915.
29 These are names for pieces in chess as well as cards, so perhaps the canton chief was playing chess, not cards.
30 Quoted by Phạm Cao Dương: 89.
31 Trúc Hà, “Lược Khảo về sự Tiến Hóa của Quốc Văn trong Lời Tiếng Tiệp Thuyền” (Summary of the Evolution of the National Literature as Seen through the Novel), *Nam Phong* 175 (August 1932): 116-120.
33 Thanh Láng: 497.
35 Thanh Láng: 494.
38 See note 26 above.
39 This story has been reprinted in Văn (Hồ Chí Minh City) 3 (February 1989): 115-122, and in Nguyễn Văn Trung, ed., *Những ấn tượng văn chương quốc ngữ đầu tiên* (First Literary Works in the National Script) (Hồ Chí Minh City: Đại Học Sư Phạm) 1987: 36-60. Excerpts in Vietnamese with a French translation can be found in A. Cheon, ed., *Recueil de Cent Textes Annamites* (Hà Nội: F.H. Schneider) 1899. According to Nguyễn Văn Trung, “Truyện Thủy Lazaro Phênh” is “the first story in the southern region written in prose in the Western style”: 26.
40 This novel can be found in the journal Nông Cố Mín Dâm beginning with the 20 March 1919 issue and ending with the 18 March 1920 issue.
41 For information on these and other southern writers, see Hoài Anh, Thanh Nguyễn, and Hồ Sĩ Hiết, *Văn Học Nam Bộ từ Đầu Đến Giữa Thế Kỷ XX* (1900-1954) (The Literary Culture of the Southern Region from the Beginning to the
Middle of the Twentieth Century) (Hồ Chí Minh City: Nhà Xuất Bản Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh) 1988.

42 Quoted by Vũ Bằng, "Nơi Chuyển về Phạm Duy về Phạm Duy Tôn": 10.
43 The edition in the National Library in Paris that we read (Tiền Lâm Annam) was published in 1924, but it was a third edition. See our list of "Works by Phạm Duy Tôn" at the end of this article.
45 Tiền Lâm Annam: 1.
46 Ibid.
47 I would put Nguyễn Tường Tam’s (pen name: Nhật Linh) Nho Phong (Confucian Manners) (1925) in this category.
49 Se Huỳnh Sanh, Thông’s translation, lines 1059-60: 56.
50 The most well-known advocate of the French style was Hoàng Tích Chu. See David Marr: 165.
51 Nhật Linh, "Hai cái Thái cực” (Two Extremes) Phong Hoa (Manners and Morals), 14 July 1933: 3.
52 Vũ Bằng, "Phạm Duy Tôn, Bạc-Dắn Anh trong Lời Văn Hai Hước” (Phạm Duy Tôn: Leader in the Field of Humorous Stories), Văn: 35.
53 Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh: 10.
55 Thien Tuong: 49.
* One of three suits in the game of tế-tóm. The suits are sách, văn and văn.
A Story and Two Anecdotes

Sống Chết Mạc Bay!
It's Nothing to Me

Phạm Duy Tôn
Translated by John C. Schaefer and Cao thị Như-Quỳnh

It was almost one o'clock. Torrential rains were falling. The waters of the Red River had risen to a dangerous level and it looked as if a section of the dike in village X of district X had weakened and was about to collapse.

A thousand or so workers had been trying since the afternoon to save it—some with shovels, some with pickaxes, some carrying dirt, some carrying bamboo. Walking in mud up to their knees, they packed the earth and drove in stakes. Everyone was soaked to the skin. It was truly a sad scene.

The drum beat continuously, the horn blew nonstop, and the people worked together, calling out noisily, but everyone was already tired. From the heavens the rain continued to pour down and the waters of the river whirled higher. Alas, human power is no match for the power of the heavens! A dike cannot compete with the force of water! What a catastrophe it would be if this dike should break.

So the children, the people, covered with mud and worried to death, threw their frail frames into battle with the elements in order to save their lives and property! But where were the parents—the mandarins?

They were in the village hall about four or five hundred meters away. The hall was above the dike but high and sturdy: no matter how high the water rose it would never be threatened.

Inside, the hall was well-lit, and servants and soldiers bustled about. On a bed placed in the middle of the hall sat an imposing and proud-looking mandarin. His left hand rested on a pillow and his right
leg was stretched out so a servant kneeling on the floor could scratch it. An orderly holding a feather fan stood nearby and would fan the mandarin lightly from time to time. Another orderly stood with his arms folded ready to wait on his master. Near the mandarin on his left steam billowed up from a bowl of sweetened swallow’s nest soup placed on an inlaid tray. A turtle-shell box lay open with a silver compartment filled with betel leaves and areca nuts. Around it lay tobacco, a gold watch, a knife with an ivory handle, a carved limestone pipe, an ear cleaner, a case for medicine, a pen holder, and toothpicks with the ends split and spread to form small blossoms. All these things were very pleasing to behold. Around the bed were four rattan chairs. To the mandarin’s right sat his assistant, a sergeant in charge of soldiers, and a clerk; seated close to the mandarin on his left was the local chief of the canton. They were playing cards.

Outside the wind blew, the rain poured down noisily, and the workers were in a state of panic; but inside the atmosphere was very quiet and serious: except for the mandarin no one dared to speak in a loud voice. Outside, people smeared with mud toiled like ants on the dike; but inside the hall everyone acted in a leisurely, majestic, and imposing manner. The mandarin sat above, his deputies sat below, and servants and orderlies, their arms folded respectfully, stood in line to wait on these godlike personages. Occasionally the mandarin would call out, “You, my waterpipe!” and the orderly would reply, “Yes, sir.” The assistant mandarin would ask, “Sir, are you ready to draw?” and the mandarin would reply, “Ready.” One person would say, “Eight säch,” I win.” Another, “Seven văn, I win.” At times they played quickly, at times slowly and happily. It was all very proper and honorable, truly a pastime suitable for this illustrious mandarin.

The mandarin and all his staff were enjoying their game of tổ-tóm in the village hall. If the heavens should fall, the dike break, and people drown while he was playing, he didn’t care. What strange power do those 120 black and red cards possess that enable them to obsess this mandarin? If the dike breaks, never mind; no matter how much the river moves it’s no match for a move in a game of cards. Standing on the dike supervising those pounding in posts and packing dirt, watching those wretched scenes—how can that compare to sitting in the village hall where there are people ready to deal and draw cards, where there are so many pleasures!
Alas, the way the mandarin sat so relaxed, with his staff and orderlies hovering on both sides of him, who would dare say: Close by there is great danger, a terrible catastrophe is about to occur. Who except those with hearts of stone would not be moved to pity for the people of this village!

Never mind. The people are not important. If you have a good hand, how can you abandon it? The mandarin eats and plays cards while servants wait on him hand and foot. How wonderful and enjoyable it is! When the mandarin puts down a winning card, who doesn’t chuck in admiration. A high card is worth dozens of broken dikes and flooded rice fields. Everyone should understand that.

The mandarin won a hand. People on all sides hasten to show him their cards. “I was close,” said one, “but I didn’t dare make a try,” “I had a pair,” said another, “but I didn’t dare draw another card.”

The mandarin held his cards. Having finished a bowl of swallow’s nest soup, he sat idly, stroking his beard and stretching his legs, his eyes focused on the stack of undealt cards. Suddenly from outside came and earth-splitting sound. Everyone was startled except the mandarin, who remained unruffled, eagerly waiting for someone to put down the same card as he held so he could defeat him. He was about to achieve a big win.

Someone said softly: “Sir, maybe the dike collapsed.”

Frowning, the mandarin grumbled, “Forget it!”

Clasping his cards, he adjusted a pillow on his right side. Then he leaned forward and spoke to one of the officials: “If you can’t win the hand, then take a card.”

“Yes sir, I will,” the official quickly replied.

Just at that time the sound of people yelling became louder and louder. There was also a roar that sounded like a rushing waterfall and then the crying of chickens, dogs, water buffalo, and cows echoed on all sides.

Everyone in the hall was anxious and frightened. Suddenly a peasant, his body smeared with mud, ran in breathing so rapidly he could hardly speak:

“Sir... honorable mandarin... the dike collapsed!”

The mandarin’s face reddened and turning he shouted:

“The dike collapsed! The dike collapsed! I’ll cut your throats. I’ll put you all in prison. Do you know what you’re doing? Where’s the
orderly? How dare you let him run in here like this? Don’t we have any rules anymore?”
“Sir...”
“Get him out of here!”
The mandarin turned toward an official and asked:
“What card did you draw?”
“Sir, I haven’t drawn yet.”
“Well then draw.”
The officer, his hand trembling, reached out and took a card from the deck. He turned it over and called out:
“Card number one!”
Clapping his hands and stepping down from the bed, the mandarin shouted:
“There! Just what I was waiting for!”
Then the mandarin quickly spread out his cards, laughing and saying: “I win! I win with this number three and number one! Orderly, my waterpipe!”
While the mandarin was winning his big victory in cards, the whole region was flooding, swirling eddies created deep pits, houses drifted away, and rice seedlings were inundated. There was no place for those still alive to live, no place for the dead to be buried: they drifted alone—solitary figures on the water. The scene was so sad there is no way to describe it adequately.

Two Humorous Anecdotes

A Beard Just Like Yours

A long time ago there was a district chief who administered a district far from his home. His wife, who was pregnant and about to give birth, did not accompany him. One day the district chief sent a servant home to see whether his wife had given birth yet. Because the servant was quite naive and feared the whole business of childbirth, when he arrived at his master’s home he didn’t dare enter; instead he stood outside the fence and peeked in. At that time the district chief’s wife came out from the house, lifted up her skirt, and relieved herself. After seeing this, the ser-
vant quickly returned and said to his master: “Sir, your wife has had a baby.”

Delighted by the news, the district chief asked: “Is it a boy or a girl?”

“Sir,” the servant replied, “I’m not certain whether it’s a boy or a girl, but I noticed that it greatly resembles you.”

“Really? In what way?”

“Sir, it has a beard just like yours.”

One Must Be Calm and Serene

There once was a man who had a servant who spoke very quickly and thoughtlessly. The man would scold the servant for “exercising his mouth before he had rested his rear.” He instructed him to speak calmly and sweetly, to talk so that it was clear what happened first, what happened last.

One day the man was having a drink while sitting next to a hot coal stove. The servant entered and was about to call out when he remembered what his master had taught him. Calmly and serenely he folded his arms and spoke very slowly:

“Sir, the silkworm spits out the raw silk which is spun into a cocoon; then people unwind the silk thread from the cocoon and weave it into cloth. Finished with the weaving, they take the silk to market to sell. You, sir, go to the market, you buy the cloth and take it to the tailor who sews for you a shirt which you take home and wear. Wearing the shirt, you sit next to the stove drinking. The fire moves from the stove to your shirt and sets it on fire. Right now it is about to burn up your whole shirt.”

The man jumped up and saw that the fire had consumed almost all of the flap of his shirt. He yelled at the servant, who responded:

“Now, master. You’re angry and are speaking quickly and thoughtlessly and not making any sense. One must speak sweetly, calmly, and serenely.”