In the history of Vietnamese literature, the truyen thoai, or verse narrative, occupies a prominent place. The genre emerged at least as early as the sixteenth century when Vietnamese storytellers realized they could employ the same verse form used for short folk poems, called ca-dao, to tell longer stories. Ca-dao poems consist of couplets, the first line containing six syllables, the second eight. Usually they were only one or two couplets long. To tell their verse narratives Vietnamese authors used rhyme to link these ca-dao couplets. The following diagram shows how this linking was accomplished. Each dash represents a syllable; R’s occupy slots that must have a rhyming syllable; subscript numbers indicate syllables that rhyme with each other.

The linking is achieved then by having the last syllable in the eight-syllable line of one couplet rhyme with the last syllable in the first line of the following couplet. As the above diagram shows, every line rhymes with the next line, but because different rhymes constantly appear, the form does not become monotonous when it is prolonged to tell a story.

Verse narratives were composed by scholars trained in the Confucian tradition who wrote them in the Southern script (chữ Nôm), a way of writing the Vietnamese language using modified Chinese characters. Only the educated could read chữ Nôm, but because verse narratives were written in the same poetic form as ca-dao, a form containing mnemonic aids such as syntactic parallelism and rhyme, they were easy to memorize. These verse narratives therefore became a part of the oral folk tradition and were well known by common people, not just by a scholarly elite.

The verse narrative most loved by the Vietnamese and also best known in the West is Nguyễn Du’s Tale of Kiêt written around 1800. The story of the misfortunes of a girl, Thùy Kiệt, who allows herself to be sold into marriage to an evil man for ransom money to keep her father out of prison, this tale presents many themes important to Vietnamese, including the idea that those with loyal and affectionate hearts can survive the cruellest of circumstances. But I would like to discuss not The Tale of Kiêt but another verse narrative, Lễ Văn Tiên’s Lễ Văn Tiên, a poem with characters not as psychologically complex as those in Kiêt, with verse not as polished and elegant as that found in Nguyễn Du’s masterpiece, but a work with its own peculiar charm. Lễ Văn Tiên was written in the late 1850s by the teacher, poet, and patriot Nguyễn Đình Chiểu who, since he was blind, did not write the poem but, according to accounts, lay in a hammock and chanted it to listening students who copied it down. It has been extremely popular in Vietnam, particularly in the South, and is probably the second best known Vietnamese verse narrative.

I shall concentrate on only one aspect of Lễ Văn Tiên: its relations to prior texts in the Vietnamese literary tradition. Why this particular concentration? Because to understand any text one must be aware of the ways it paral-
writes him a poem, but then they part. Nga returns to Ha-khe, where her father weak from weeping that he eventually goes blind. Wandering blind and unprotected, he feels for him soon becomes mixed with love. To express her appreciation, she...
river, and Tien's in-laws, afraid they will be struck with a worthless blindman for a son-in-law, leave him to die in a cave. But, as the narrator reminds his readers, the agents of mercy look after the virtuous. A friendly river dragon saves Tien from drowning, and a fairy leads him out of the cave. Finally, through the help of a woodcutter, he ends up in a pagoda, where the narrator allows him to rest while recounting the misfortunes of the heroine Nga. Nga, still pining for Tien even since he so gallantly rescued her, learns from her father, mistakenly as it turns out, that he had died from sickness. She vows to remain chaste and loyal forever in his memory. Keeping her vow is not easy because she has other suitors, one of whom, when scorned, seeks revenge by influencing the King of S6 to have her offered as a tribute wife to the King of Phien, a country that has been harassing the country of S6. Nga then must choose between two virtues: filial piety to Tien, whom she regards as her husband even though they were never formally betrothed, and loyalty to her King, who has ordered her to become the wife of a foreign king. Unable to resolve this dilemma, she attempts suicide by jumping off the boat taking her to the land of Phien. She is saved by the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, who removes her from the water and places her in a garden of flowers. The aging caretaker of the garden befriends her, but when his son (Bui Phung) makes advances, she flees, finally finding refuge in the home of a kind old woman.

The narrator then returns to the adventures of Tien, who begins to enjoy better fortune. After being blind for six years, he is cured by a fairy who visits him in a dream, bringing him a bowl of magic medicine. His sight restored, he begins his rise to fame and happiness. He reviews his lessons and takes the examinations, passing with the highest rank. At the King's request he leads a successful expedition against the O-Qua, a neighboring people who have been harassing the land of S6. After this battle he stumbles upon the old lady's home where Nga has taken refuge. There is a joyful reunion. Later they are happily married and the King of S6, grateful for Tien's assistance in driving out the O-Qua, and himself eager to retire to a pagoda, allows Tien to take the throne and rule the country.

This summary in English proves the maxim "To translate is to betray," not only because the rich elaborating detail and the music of verse are lost but also because it fails to evoke in Western listeners certain prior texts a knowledge of which is essential to proper appreciation. What are these prior texts?

There are allusions also to characters of other Chinese historical romances, while trying to decide whether she can avoid becoming the tribute wife of the King of Phien, Nga consults her priest, to that of two well-known Vietnamese heroines, Chieu Quan (Chin.: Chao Chun) and Nga Nhinh (Vinh Nga). The comparison to Chieu Quan, one of the four most famous beauties of China, is apt because Chao Chun, a concubine of the Han emperor Yuan Ti, was herself sent to become a tribute wife of the northern barbarian Khan. The comparison to Nga Nhinh is also appropriate. She is the heroine of another Vietnamese verse narrative called My Ma Mai (The Twice-Blooming Plum Tree), a poem written by an anonymous Vietnamese author some time in the late eighteenth century but clearly based on a sixteenth or seventeenth century novel entitled Tien My, a story of filial piety, filial duty, chastity, and the Three Kingdoms. Nga is also appropriate. She is the heroine of another Vietnamese verse narrative called My Ma Mai (The Twice-Blooming Plum Tree), a poem written by an anonymous Vietnamese author some time in the late eighteenth century but clearly based on a sixteenth or seventeenth century novel entitled Tien My, a story of filial piety, filial duty, chastity, and the Three Kingdoms. Nga then must choose between two virtues: filial piety to Tien, whom she regards as her husband even though they were never formally betrothed, and loyalty to her King, who has ordered her to become the wife of a foreign king. Unable to resolve this dilemma, she attempts suicide by jumping off the boat taking her to the land of Phien. She is saved by the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, who removes her from the water and places her in a garden of flowers. The aging caretaker of the garden befriends her, but when his son (Bui Phung) makes advances, she flees, finally finding refuge in the home of a kind old woman.

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VÀN TIỀN AND NGUYỆT NGA
the stories of Chieu Quan and Hạnh Nguyễn helps Nga decide what to do. As she sees how closely her situation parallels that of these heroines, her references to them become the cause of her actions as well as her way of giving expression to her feelings. After remembering these stories she says: ‘Now it is my fate that is in question. I swear to this portrait that I will remain faithful all my life. The love between husband and wife, the duty between king and subject, the unbreakable obligations of love and this duty must be fulfilled. Duty and love weigh equally heavily upon me. If I am loyal to the king, I neglect the debt I owe my husband. So the only solution is to die, sacrificing my body to serve the king, sacrificing my heart to serve my husband.’ (lines 1415-22)

Nga’s decision is not impossibly difficult because the path of moral heroism for a tribute wife forced to choose among conflicting loyalties has been marked out for her by these heroines of the Sino-Vietnamese histories. Because she knows these stories, Nga knows how to act. If we as readers know them, if we are familiar with Nga’s literary ancestors, then we do not misinterpret her actions as aberrant or bizarre but, instead, recognize them as traditional, the expected behavior of a woman placed in such a situation.

But to understand Nga’s actions, to understand why, for example, she is determined to die rather than betray her vow of chastity to Lục Văn Tíên, a man with whom she was never formally engaged, it helps if we know other prior texts besides the historical romances. One cannot understand Sông Văn unless one is familiar with the Confucian texts, particularly The Four Books and The Five Classics, in which important Confucian concepts such as the Three Bonds and the Five Virtues, the idea of chinh-chuyễn or faithfulness, and the Three Submissions are explained. The Three Bonds—king-subject, father-son (or—daughter), husband-wife—are at the heart of Confucianism; they are the essential human relationships through which nhân (Chin.: jen), or human heartedness, was expressed. In all three of these relationships a woman was to exhibit chinh-chuyễn (chung chuan), or faithfulness: in the first relationship a woman demonstrated her faithfulness by being loyal to her king, in the second by being filially pious to her father, and in the third by remaining faithful to her husband.

The Three Bonds were the ethics of society. The Five Virtues—human heartedness, righteousness, propriety, knowledge, and sincerity—applied to individuals. According to the Three Submissions, described in the Classic of Rituals, a woman owed obedience first to her father, then to her husband, then to her eldest surviving son. Nguyễn Đình Chieu’s heroine Nga knows these texts well. After she is saved from drowning, the lecherous Bùi Kiem tries to seduce her into marrying. Determined to remain chaste in loyalty to Tíên, she rejects all overtures with the words:

A woman must engrave in her heart the phrase “faithfulness-purity,”
And devote herself to fulfilling the word “submission.”
In life as in death there must be only one husband.

(lines 1571-73)

Later she tells Bùi Kiem:

I have read in all the histories and classics
That a lady must always all else protect her chastity.

(lines 1593-96)

In remaining chaste and loyal to Tíên she is applying the virtue of faithfulness or chinh-chuyễn to the third Confucian bond, the bond between husband and wife. The fact that she was never formally betrothed to Tíên, but considers her unilateral vow of eternal devotion to him as binding, makes her behavior even more admirable: she follows the rules even when technically they do not apply to her.

Nga’s situation becomes more complicated when the king of Sắc orders her to become a tribute wife. She is then forced to choose between two virtues: loyalty to the king and faithfulness to her husband. In Vietnamese verse narratives heroines are often forced to make agonizing choices between two virtues. In The Tale of the heroine Thiệu Ký must choose between filial piety for her father and faithfulness to her lover Kim Trong. She decides the former is a "harm-
view virtue and allows herself to be sold into a bad marriage. In both the tale of Nga and Nguyen Binh Chieu conflict between two of the Three Bonds is an important source of dramatic tension. Is it the vili breaking of the Three Bonds and other Confucian virtues? It is certainly in part a Confucian moral tale. In fact, the two main characters Tien and Nga are not so much complex individuals as allegorical figures. Tien represents忠诚 and loyalty-filial piety, and Nga仁義 and chastity. By announcing the moral of his tale clearly in the prologue Nguyen Binh Chieu makes it impossible for readers not to see Tien and Nga as exemplars of these virtues.

Attention everybody! Be quiet and listen. Remember: mistakes avoid bad consequences. Men take loyalty-filial piety as your rule. Women take chastity as the word to improve yourselves.

(lines 1-4)

Although they do not deny that this tale reveals the influence of Confucianism, Nguyen Quang Vinh and Tran Van Thong, two scholars publishing in Hanoi Journal, argue that Confucianism in Nguyen Binh Chieu's narrative is only a veneer. The essential qualities of the vili breaking, they argue, is something different, something more Vietnamese. For Vinh it is a "communal feeling" [thông cảm xã hội], a quality that he believes its creator absorbed as he lived the life of a village school teacher. For Thong it is a sense of human righteousness" [tâm lý nhân nghĩa] stemming from Nguyen Binh Chieu's love of the people and his country, a human righteousness which, Thong emphasizes, was different from the righteousness taught in the Confucian texts. To understand these interpretations one must know more about Nguyen Binh Chieu and the time in which he lived.

He was born in Gia-Pham Province in 1831, the son of a mandarin from Central Vietnam. A diligent student, he passed the regional examinations in 1843. He returned to Hue when he was 25 to take the metropolitan examinations but before he was to sit for them, he heard that his mother had died. Quickly abandoning his hopes of taking the examinations, he came home to mourn his mother's death. Rule he tired himself in weeping for his mother and because the journey from Hue was arduous, he fell sick and eventually went blind. We see that the story of Nguyen Binh Chieu is, on his own life up to the onset of blindness closely parallels that of his character Luc Van Tien. After this event the two stories diverge. No fairy comes in any dream to deliver Nguyen Binh Chieu from his blindness so he could take up arms and defend his country from foreign invaders, but through his character Tien he achieves all: he regains his sight, passes his examinations to the king troubles Hanoi scholars because in their view it was "the selfishness and ineffectiveness of King Tu Duc" (and other kings of the Nguyen dynasty) that led to the loss of the southern part of Vietnam to the French. Tu Duc, intimin­dates by western weapons and uncertain as to the depth of his support among his own people, signed a treaty with the French in 1862 which ceded three eastern provinces of South Vietnam to the French. Later he acquiesced when the French annexed some western provinces as well. For modern Vietnamese patriots then, loyalty to the king is a by-product of a feudal period, not a revolutionary vir-
tue, and so they take great pains to prove that in *bác vân* Confucian dogma such as the Three Bonds is only a veneer, that the poem is most fundamentally an expression of Vietnamese folk values. The prior texts they emphasize are not the Confucian classics but those more purely Vietnamese: folk tales, including tales of miraculous happenings, proverbs, and *ca-dao* folk poems.

Certainly these texts are evoked often in *bác vân* *Lê Van Tien*. Both Vinh and Giau call attention to the important role the anonymous characters, all of them simple country people, play in the story—characters like the tavern keeper who entertains the young scholars, the fisherman and woodcutter who help Tien, the old woman who lets Nga recuperate in her home. According to Giau, these are the characters who express Vietnamese "human righteousness" (p. 56). The fisherman, for example, demonstrates this virtue perfectly when, after nursing Tien back to health following his near death by drowning, he refuses to accept any money for his services with the comment: "To do one's duty as a human being is more important than silver and gold!" (line 101). This human righteousness is different from that spoken of in most Confucian texts. Giau argues, because in *bác vân* *Lê van Tien* it is exhibited by the common people, not just by a scholarly elite. It seems to emanate from the land and the people. Nowhere in Vietnamese literature before Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, Giau argues, do we find anyone speaking of poor country people with so much admiration and affection (p. 58).

Where do these folk characters come from? According to Vinh, they originate in Vietnamese folk tales from which they step, "their arms and legs still smeared with mud," to make their appearance in this verse narrative of the Confucian scholar Nguyễn Đình Chiểu (p. 59). These folk tales, called *cổ tích* (ancient tales) or *vũ lê* (tales of olden times), were prose narratives. Although as early as the thirteenth century scholars collected and recorded these stories in Chinese characters, the folk tale remained an oral folk genre. There are different types of folk tales—tales of worldly affairs, sentimental tales, miraculous tales—but common to most of them are simple, virtuous characters much like the fisherman and the woodcutter in *bác vân* *Lê van Tien*. The miraculous tales featured supernatural beings—fairies, animals: ghosts, and magical elements. These beings appear in *bác vân* *Lê van Tien*. Altogether there are twelve miraculous agents including, for example, the river dragon who saves Tien from drowning and the fairy who cures his blindness. Nguyễn Đình Chiểu blends these miraculous elements into his Confucian tale, using them to tidy up his plot, to keep his tale moving at a fast clip. Trình Vân, for example, who tried to drown Tien, is efficiently dispensed with toward the end of the tale by having a miraculous tidal wave capsize his boat.

Vietnamese proverbs are also important prior texts for *bác vân* *Lê van Tien*. Sometimes it is the narrator who uses them, sometimes the characters, but no one can speak for long without quoting a proverb. The proverb is one of many verbal devices that Tien uses in his attempt to seduce Nga. "Who," he asks her, "when she has something precious to sell, hangs around the market till noon?" [Ai tung bán cái mà ngồi ở trưa? line 1376]. The question is a Vietnamese proverb, and the implication is that since Nga has been "unbought", it is time she gave serious thought to marriage.

Another important category of prior texts is *ca-dao*, or folk poetry. Many *ca-dao* lines are either quoted verbatim or echoed in *bác vân* *Lê van Tien*. Because poets composed verse narrative in the same poetic form as *ca-dao* (in lines of six and eight syllables with a fixed meter and rhyming scheme), incorporating *ca-dao* lines was virtually easy. The challenge was to employ them skillfully. Vinh praises Nguyễn Đình Chiểu for the way he uses the following *ca-dao* lines, which appear unchanged in *bác vân* *Lê van Tien*:

A ship of love drifts to and fro.
At which of a dozen ports shall I be cast ashore?

Usually this *ca-dao* couplet is used to describe a young girl who, in love for the first time, feels lost and bewildered. Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, however, has the treacherous Bùi Kiem employ it as another weapon in his attempt to conquer Nga’s affections and get her to give up her vow to Tien (Vinh, p. 62). Bearing these wai—
known ca-dao lines being put to villainous purposes by Bui Kim is a source of aesthetic pleasure for Vietnamese, a pleasure that can be enjoyed only if one knows the original ca-dao text.

Many ca-dao lines, as I have just explained, were incorporated into verse narratives, but it worried the other way too: sometimes popular lines from verse narratives became a part of the ca-dao tradition. Often it is difficult to determine whether some popular ca-dao lines originated as ca-dao or first appeared in a verse narrative. Vinh admits that he does not know which came first, the lines in Luc Van Tien, describing how, when Nga returned to Ha-khe, she fashioned a portrait of Tien, or the following similar folk poem (Vinh, p. 63):

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Ly non bele thua luc danh-thua,} \\
&\text{Ly mai chu lien cuc-xo phu,} \\
&\text{Ma non chu lien cuc-xo phu.} \\
&\text{Ly non bele thua luc danh-thua.}
\end{align*}
\]

I climb the mountain seeking leaves on which to paint your picture.
A likeness of you to lessen the heartache of separation.
My sacred picture may tear, but I'll still worship it,
I wait for you, passing up other opportunities for happiness.
Yes, my sacred picture may tear, but I'll still worship it,
I'll remember and love you for the rest of my life.

So what is Luc Van Tien? A historical romance in the Chinese style preaching Confucian morality? Or a Vietnamese folk story expressing the communal spirit of the common people of Vietnam? An analysis of prior texts reveals it is both. It is the tale of Tien and Nga, two children of the scholar gentry, embodiments of the Confucian virtue of loyalty-filial piety and chastity, who travel across the land of S\& protected by representatives of the Vietnamese folk tradition: miraculous forces, common peasants who prefer honor to riches, and the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy. One should not accept the arguments of those who maintain that Luc Van Tien is only superficially an expression of Confucian morality. It is a very Confucian poem. Those who try to make us believe otherwise are too eager to make Nguyen Binh Chieu a perfect modern revolutionary. But there is no need to make excuses for Nguyen Binh Chieu's Confucianism, no need to apologize, for example, for his reluctance to abandon his king. It must have been difficult for someone raised on the Confucian texts to separate loyalty to the king and patriotism; they went together as in the Sino-Vietnamese expression "con danh quan tu ba" (be loyal to your king, love your country). The assumption was that "to have a country one had to have a king" (con danh quan tu vu). Nguyen Binh Chieu composed Luc Van Tien in the 1850s—before the French had taken Cochinchina, before Tu Duc had revealed himself as inept and opportunistic, before his friend Truong Phu had died in the resistance. There are indications that after Tu Duc allowed the French to gobble up more of South Vietnam, Nguyen Binh Chieu began to question whether his king deserved loyalty. Although in his funeral orations for fallen resistance heroes he still pays ritual homage to loyalty to the king, he also praises these heroes for disobeying royal edicts urging them to lay down their arms. Truong Phu Lam argues that Truong Phu and his followers carefully distinguished "the person of an individual king and the moral principle of loyalty to monarchy." Thus perhaps Nguyen Binh Chieu felt no moral contradiction in urging the partisans to disobey royal edicts while in the same breath he pledged loyalty to the king. By "king" he may have meant an idealized monarch, someone worthy of the throne, not the weak Tu Duc who was bowing down to the French. But Luc Van Tien is a product of a simpler time, a time when there was no pressing need to distinguish king and country. Much of its charm for modern Vietnamese stems from the forthright, unreffectve way the characters exercise their virtues; they seem to know instinctively what is right and what is wrong; they have no difficulty making moral and political decisions. When in doubt they need only consult the ancient texts. As for its creator, Nguyen Binh Chieu, one senses that after he composed this narrative, after his king began dealing with the French, making moral and political decisions became harder. And, as we all know, it has not become any easier for Vietnamese of this century.
NOTES


2. There are several versions of Luc van Tien. My line references are to the following version edited by the Committee to Study the Works of Nguyen Binh Chieu: Nguyen Binh Chieu, Luc van Tien (Saigon: TG Sach Van-Hoc, 1973).


4. In the text the capital is called Trifong-an, which is the ancient Chinese capital of Ch'ang-an or Sian in Shensi Province. But the geography and chronology are not consistent. Some places mentioned in Luc van Tien one can locate on a map of China, whereas on a map of Vietnam, still others no one has been able to find on a map of either country. The chronology is also confused. Tien and Nga are citizens of the land of Sd or Ch'u, a country that ceased to exist after the Ch'in dynasty (265-206 B.C.), but they and other characters refer to historical personages who lived during the Later Han, T'ang, and Sung dynasties.


7. Nga refers to the portrait she drew of Luc van Tien.


10. Truong Thinh, for example, praises Nguyen Binh Chieu but finds this aspect of his work disturbing. See Nguyen Binh Chieu, "Mong ngan thai nhac nhu nhat kim" ["Thinking about the source and evolution of Nguyen Binh Chieu's heroism"].

11. Nguyen Van Chi, in the title of his work, proposes the point in the "naming of Nguyen Binh Chieu and quai-dinh kinh-thanh chu-nga" as being the source and evolution of Nguyen Binh Chieu's heroism. Ngu Phieu Vu luc bai ca, 143 (1972), 28-33.