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## Deciphering the Code to Vietnam's Old Literary Treasures



Doan Bao Chau for The New York Times

A street vendor walks by a gate in Hanoi carved with an example of the classical Nom script, right, that was once used by poets and philosophers.

By Jane Perlez

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HANOI, Vietnam, June 11 — A verse of fiery poetry composed by one of Vietnam's legendary fighters and carved into the plinth of his statue in gilded calligraphy speaks of victory and valor against northern invaders.

The poet warrior and 18th-century emperor, Nguyen Hue, conjures a scary but triumphant scene in which his warriors, looking especially fierce with long hair and blackened teeth, defeated the enemy.

His original verse was written in a Chinese-like script, known as Nom, used by classical Vietnamese poets and philosophers, government officials and religious leaders.

Most of the Buddhist pagodas and temples in Hanoi are festooned with Nom calligraphy inscribed on pillars and altar tables. At the Temple of Literature, a revered national monument, akin to, say, the Jefferson Memorial, the names of Vietnam's most famous scholars from the Middle Ages are inscribed on gray stone stelae in Nom script.

But these days very few Vietnamese can decipher Nom, which was banned in 1920 by the French colonial government and officially replaced by script based on the Roman alphabet that Alexander de Rhodes, a French missionary, devised in the 17th century.

An American poet, John Balaban, who first came to Vietnam as a conscientious objector during the war and who has nurtured a love affair with the country ever since, is leading a drive to revive the script, which he says will unlock a trove of hidden Vietnamese culture.

"Nom keeps a flavor of a culture washed away with the language of the Roman alphabet," Mr. Balaban said. "There are real literary treasures and still a lot of texts that have not been translated."

At a gathering of international linguists in the city of Hue earlier this month, he introduced four young Vietnamese "font carvers" who are working at digitizing the script. A nonprofit foundation created by Mr. Balaban for the preservation of the script has compiled a Nom dictionary. It is a collection of 20,000 characters, which he says can be more difficult to master than Chinese.

By making the script accessible on the Internet, Mr. Balaban said, he hopes that an array of Vietnamese writings from the 10th to the early 20th century will be translated into modern Vietnamese. Many of these writings were spirited out of the country by missionaries during the colonial era and are tucked away in foreign archives, including the Vatican and the Musée Guimet in Paris.

Mr. Balaban cannot read Nom, but from his days as a medic in the countryside helping wounded civilians during the Vietnam War, he can speak and read modern Vietnamese.

A poet in residence and a professor at North Carolina State University, Mr. Balaban has used that knowledge to translate Vietnamese poetry written in Nom into English.

For 10 years, he labored over the works of Ho Xuan Huong, one of Vietnam's most treasured poets, who wrote sensuous, sometimes cheeky, always powerful verse in Nom.

Working from the modern Vietnamese versions of her 18th-century poetry, Mr. Balaban translated about 50 of her poems that appeared in a collection, "Spring Essence."

"She was a big hit in her own time," Mr. Balaban said of the poet. Now, she is perhaps the most widely read poet, not least because she combined a high literary tradition with earthy street language. Her poetry is sprinkled with sexual allusions and topics that ring true today.

She often sounded feminist themes, including being caught in marriage, a sentiment that pervades "On Sharing a Husband."

The poem begins by cursing the fate that would require a woman to share a man and then continues, in the translation by Mr. Balaban:

One cuddles under cotton blankets; the other's cold.

Every now and then, well, maybe or maybe not.

Once or twice a month, oh, it's like nothing.

You try to stick to it like a fly on rice

but the rice is rotten. You slave like the maid,

but without pay. If I had known how it would go

I think I would have lived alone.

The only known image of the poet, who was born in 1775, shows her dressed in a full-length robe, kneeling on the floor in front of a low table, calligraphy brush in hand as she writes on a folded sheet of paper.

Mr. Balaban's next project is to translate into English Vietnam's most famous poem, "The Tale of Kieu," by Nguyen Du, a male contemporary of Ho Xuan Huong sometimes referred to as the Shakespeare of Vietnam.

"The Tale of Kieu," a novella-length poem about a beautiful and talented young woman forced to sell herself into prostitution, traces the ups and downs of Kieu from a feckless 18-year-old to a responsible grown woman: her loves, her promiscuity, her obligations to her Buddhist beliefs and finally her decision to settle down with the lover she met years before in a graveyard.

Mr. Balaban offered a sample verse from "The Tale of Kieu":

Night fell on the path she had traveled.

The sky seemed endless, with no horizon,

Even seeing the moon made her ashamed,

the moon, her witness to broken vows.