

## A Conversation with John Balaban

Interviewed by Donna Seaman

John Balaban escaped the tragically poor and violent Philadelphia neighborhood in which he grew up, a grim world he writes about with riveting immediacy and remarkable compassion in his poetry, to study literature at Penn State and Harvard. The author of eleven books of poetry and prose, he has garnered the Academy of American Poets' Lamont Prize, a National Poetry Series Selection, two nominations for the National Book Award, and the William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America for *Locusts at the Edge Of Summer: New and Selected Poems*. Balaban is currently Poet-in-Residence and Professor of English at North Carolina State University in Raleigh.

Balaban is also a humanist. A conscientious objector during the Vietnam War, he performed his alternate service in Vietnam during the Tet offensive, a harrowing and life-changing experience he recounts in his memoir, *Remembering Heaven's Face*. Balaban served as a university teacher, then helped secure medical care for war-injured children, and became the first Westerner to study and record Vietnamese folk poetry. A translator and expert on Vietnamese literature, Balaban edited and translated *Ca Dao Vietnam: A Bilingual Anthology of Vietnamese Folk Poetry*, and served as co-editor, with Nguyen Qui Duc, of *Vietnam: A Traveler's Literary Companion*.

Balaban was introduced to the work of the late-eighteenth-century woman poet, Ho Xuân Hương, while recording folk poetry in the Mekong Delta. Astonished by her "exquisite cleverness," audacity, and political acumen, he spent years researching her life and translating her provocative poems, a sustained effort that has resulted in the groundbreaking volume, *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Ho Xuân Hương*. One of very few poetry books to capture mainstream media attention, the much-heralded *Spring Essence* has gone back to press at least five times, and Balaban has traveled far and wide to explicate and perform Ho Xuân Hương's poetry. I spoke with poet Balaban about poet *Spring Essence* when he was in Chicago.

Q: The story of how you came to translate the poetry of Ho Xuan Hương is rooted in a love of literature that earned you a fellowship to Harvard in 1966. When did you first discover the solace and beauty of literature?

A: That's a good phrase for it. Who knows when. I'm still discovering the solace and beauty of literature. It was an interest of mine when I was a kid, and it was a strange interest considering where I grew up and what my parents' interests were. I don't think there were any, well, there were some books in the house, the abridged Reader's Digests, and at one point there was National Geographic. But somehow I got interested in poetry and that interest continued and grew at Penn State where I was an undergraduate and had really wonderful teachers I'm still grateful for. Then, as you say, it took me to Harvard, where I studied poetry with Robert Lowell. But I

also learned Old English, and a bit about oral narrative traditions, which prepared me for some of the things I did in Vietnam.

Q: Did you also acquire an interest in translation?

A: I did. I translated Old English poetry; I translated some Greek; I translated a lot of Latin poetry. But I had no idea when I was working on Ovid that a few years later, or even less than that, I would be in a city under siege during the Tet offensive talking about war casualties with Vietnamese people.

Q: Were you writing poetry then?

A: Oh yes. I wrote poetry, and was published, as an undergraduate. I think I would have had a very different life if it hadn't been for the Vietnam War, which in some ways I may be regretful about but otherwise no. For one thing, I would never have known about Ho Xuân Huong.

Q: You were a teacher in Vietnam, then you worked with injured children.

A: Right. And that was kind of an accident, too. I was a conscientious objector. I don't know if that term even means anything to anybody anymore. But during the Vietnam War, and during the draft, one could plead objection on a religious basis, or a spiritual basis of some kind. I objected to the war, yet I had the strange notion that it was a kind of obligation to go. So I volunteered to serve as a teacher of linguistics at a Vietnamese university with a group called International Voluntary Services, but I only did that for a few months because the whole place was bombed flat during the Tet offensive. And I was wounded. So I came home, and got patched up. By that time I was hooked on Vietnam, I suppose, and I had learned some Vietnamese. The war was up front, and alive, and I'd just gone through a siege in a hospital that was surrounded by--it's hard to say enemy troops because I never thought of them as my enemy--so I'll say hostile troops, a sharp memory which oddly enough brought me back to Vietnam.

Q: Your response to Vietnam as a real place, a place people love as their home, seems very different from the perspective of soldiers who saw it only as a place of great danger. They were afraid, and alienated, and I would think few were interested in the culture.

A: Well, in all fairness, those 500,000, or even 600,000 Americans weren't really given the chance. They were afraid. They were confused. And they hardly ever had any real contact with the Vietnamese. Whereas I lived in a Vietnamese community, rented a home from a Buddhist nun, actually a lay nun, whose son was a law student at the university, and whose life changed with mine when the university was bombed. So I lived among the Vietnamese daily and seldom had contact with Americans. Because of that I started to learn the language, and because of that proximity I began to hear about poetry.

The Vietnamese referred to poetry all the time. They would use it in debate; they referred to it to make a point in an argument. And this oral folk poetry fascinated me. In Harvard I had heard of oral poetries from Albert Bates Lord in his great book *The Singer of Tales*, and also in his lectures, and I thought of oral poetry in terms of long narratives, Homeric ballads and things like that. But in Vietnam there was apparently an ongoing, live oral poetry that the Western world knew nothing about. So after my alternative service was over and I got my discharge, as it were, from General Hershey, saying I'd performed my two years, I went back to Vietnam yet again in 1971, this time on a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. They paid me something like \$16,000, which for me was more money than I'd ever made, and which is probably a tenth of the bomb load of a B-52 in terms of actual dollar value. But it was a fantastic year.

I had just gotten married and my wife and I both went to Vietnam, where I traveled the countryside with a tape recorder. I imagine only in Vietnam could one do this. I walked up to country people--farmers, shipbuilders, women working old Singer pedal sewing machines--and said, "Would you sing me your favorite poem?" And they looked at me, this young American with a Harvard book bag which held my tape recorder, and they said, "Yes." Or, "Come back this evening." Because this wasn't a crazy question, or a bizarre proposition.

I often thought, what would it be like if, say, a 24-year-old Vietnamese man was doing the same thing, walking up to farmhouses in Illinois knocking on the porch door and asking, "Would you sing me your favorite poem?" Even if he was greeted as happily as I was--there was much welcoming and curiosity--what would have been sung? Because for the Vietnamese, who have been more or less where they are now for thousands of years, there's a 2000-year-old tradition of singing poetry. Most of their beliefs about themselves and the universe they live in, their affection for each other, their sense of what the world is and what it might mean for them is locked up in that poetry. Which is why I wanted to record it. After a year of evacuating war-injured children from Vietnam, which is what I did after I taught at the university, it seemed to me, considering how many lives we might have actually saved in that process, maybe a 100, maybe a few hundred more, that maybe there was something I could do on a different scale that maybe no one else could do, and that was record the poetry in which most of Vietnamese humanism was articulated.

Q: It's such a generous act, beneficial for both cultures. It extends the reach of the poetry of Vietnam, and for Americans, it helps us understand the history and spirit of a place we encountered in violence. Poetry, after all, reveals both what is unique about a place, a culture, an individual, and what is universal in our feelings and experiences.

A: Most of my recording was done in the Mekong Delta among, as I've said, country people, farmers for the most part. Now, as ever in Vietnamese society--there must be 80 million Vietnamese alive today--90 percent of them are still working in the

fields. It's still an agricultural civilization, and that was a revelation to me. A farming country makes sense to me, but an agricultural civilization was a concept that I had to develop for myself. We think of the monuments of civilizations as monuments like Angkor Wat, monuments in stone. But in Vietnam there are very few of those. Most of the grand and beautiful buildings of Vietnam have disappeared in the monsoon, or warfare, or fire a long time ago. But in the ca dao, as it's called, in these little linked couplets, there's a huge record of Vietnamese civilization, although the poems are not narrative, they're lyric. They don't tell stories except in a very imagistic way. And usually they're very short; they last for maybe four lines, and they must be sung.

This is an English translation of a poem I recorded as sung by a 19-year-old farmer in October 1971:

#### Love Lament

Stepping into the field, sadness fills my deep heart.

Bundling rice sheaves, tears dart in two streaks.

Who made me miss the ferry's leaving?

Who made this shallow creek that parts both sides?

It's a woman speaking. Her boyfriend, or lover, is gone. As in a lot of these poems, it's as if the hand of fate has created the river that separates the two of them. I was careful to try to put into the translation some of the musical elements found in the original. In this couplet form, which is called a luc-bat, there's a six-syllable line followed by an eight-syllable line. The rhymes occur on the sixth syllables of the first two lines, and then a new rhyme, potentially, is on the eighth syllable. But also in Vietnamese there's something that just doesn't exist in English, and that's word tone. This is a requirement of the poetry, too, and I must remind you that this is done by people who don't read or write. So for instance, if you say the syllable la, with no tone, it means to shout. If you say la, with a falling tone, it's the verb to be. If you say la, with a rising tone, it means tired. If you say la with a high-constricted and broken tone, it means insipid. If you say la with a high-rising tone, it means leaf. If you say, la with a low constricted gone, it means strange.

Q: You have to learn to listen very carefully.

A: Yes, and it's very hard for a Western ear to keep this going, as I've learned 30 years after the time I was speaking this every day. The Vietnamese don't have to think about tones as a linguistic requirement of every syllable unless they are writing poetry. In prose, or the way I'm talking right now, they can fall anywhere. But in poetry there are specific places in the poetic line where a certain kind of pitch or tone has to fall. That makes for the melody, and that makes the singing of these poems inevitable.

Q: Such subtleties. Surely this musicality aids memorization.

A: Absolutely. I've recorded children six-year-olds who knew a few of these poems, and I recorded one man who had at least 500 in his repertoire. He was very gifted. Ca dao isn't the property of poets; it's the property of everybody.

Q: The metaphors seem so elegant and supple, the meaning enriched by the sound of the words.

A: They run the whole gamut. They get polished over the course of hundreds of years. No one knows who composes any particular ca dao, but if people like it, they repeat it, and as it gets repeated it gets polished. And as it gets polished, it gets more and more finished the way we would think of a poem in the West. Valéry's comment, "A poem is never finished, only abandoned," is very true with ca dao. And they are subtle. When they're not subtle, they'll be rejected.

I remember playing a poem I recorded in the Mekong Delta for some men in Hue, the old capital. I was curious to know what they thought of it because it had clear political content, anti-American content. And they said it wasn't any good. I asked why, was it the politics? And they said, oh no, the politics are fine, we're just as anti-American as the singer of the poem, but it's too crude. It's too flat. It's too front on. It's too head-butting and too obvious to the listener. And then I played this one for them. This is a song by a Vietnamese who had been a Vietcong but who quit and became a Buddhist monk. He was the only one of the singers who said no--I was trying to do a simple ethnological study, and so I asked people, "How did you learn this song?" "How old are you?" "What's your name?" And "Can I take your picture?"--and he was the only one who said no pictures. Here's the poem in English:

The Saigon River

The Saigon river slides past the Old Market,  
its broad waters thick with silt. There,  
the rice shoots gather a fragrance,  
the fragrance of my country home,  
recalling my mother home, arousing deep love.

That concept of rice shoots gathering a fragrance is quintessentially Vietnamese. Vietnamese can tell where rice was grown by the smell of the steam coming off the rice bowl. And they can recognize the fragrance of their own riverine deltas, the creeks and rivers that they grew up near. So it's a very subtle political poem, because here we have the Saigon market destroyed, or pushed aside by the war, and this person still trying to remember it. It's not overtly political, but it was understood as such by my Hue listeners, one an elderly man who had been a palanquin bearer, a sedan chair bearer for a mandarin in the last dynasty, and the other a boatman who sold things along the river and knew a lot of songs as a result. Here's what it sounds like in Vietnamese. (Balaban then sings the poem in its original form.)

Q: It's amazing how much of the poem's emotion and intent comes through even when a listener doesn't understand the words.

A: Yes, the pentatonic scale is what Vietnamese sing to, so the poems have a different aura to a Western ear. The poems are never accompanied by a musical instrument, and they're always sung by one person, by himself or herself. Men and women sing them equally. And these are the poems that led me to the poet Ho Xuân Huong.

Q: Spring Essence is the English translation of her name?

A: Ho is her family name. Xuân means spring. Huong is perfume, or scent. You could also translate it Spring Perfume, or Scent of Spring.

Q: When did you first hear of Spring Essence?

A: While recording the ca dao I got into conversations with people about poetry and they said, "Oh you have to know so-and-so," and they'd mention Nguyen Du (1766-1820), the great classical poet and author of The Tale of Kieu, and Ho Xuân Huong's name would come up all the time. Everyone would laugh, and some would say, "You really ought to translate her because she's a lot like ca dao." I didn't know what that meant, but I hoped it meant that the word stock of her poetry was natively Vietnamese, not filled with a lot of Chinese loan words, which for me were forbidding and too difficult. I just don't have that kind of training. And in fact it's true, she was deliberately chauvinistic, you could say in one sense, because even though the form was that of the literary elite, the words themselves belonged to common people.

Q: You've said that women sang ca dao, but was it unusual for women of her time to be composing poetry, and to be known as poets?

A: There are two strains of poetry. There's the folk stream, in which women work and offer poems up equally. Then there's the high literary poetry, with its traditions rooted in China and the classical form the Chinese know as lu-shih, brought to its highest level during the T'ang dynasty, which the Vietnamese, Vietnamese men, have been using as a vehicle for literary thought, much the same way we use the sonnet, which we have borrowed from the Italian renaissance.

Q: Even though the Chinese had invaded . . .

A: Right, and that doesn't necessarily make you embrace the aggressor's literary practices . . .(laughing)

Q: But art forms are contagious.

A: It's true; there is this curious love-hate relationship, culturally speaking, between the Chinese and the Vietnamese. In 939, when the Vietnamese finally, after about 1000 years of Chinese domination, threw them out by military force, they

immediately set up a system of government that was a direct mirror-image of the Chinese court. But you're right about Spring Essence. In that literary tradition women were really an uncommon phenomenon. It was mostly a male writing tradition, a Confucian tradition, a mandarinic tradition. But she, with her extreme cleverness and wit, was simply so much better at it than almost all of her contemporaries, she could not be ignored.

Q: So she was definitely a real person.

A: She absolutely was real. There are legends about her that probably aren't true. One of them, for instance, is that she ran a tea shop in Hanoi. . .

Q: What years are we talking about?

A: She was probably born around 1775, so she was in her twenties by 1800. An aristocrat, she was married, and we know this from the historical record, as the second wife of a high-ranking official. But since she wasn't able to find a husband as the first wife, which is something she complains about considerably, she is legended to have run a tea shop, where young men who had just passed the imperial exams, or who merely wanted to banter in poetry, or match wits with her would come and try to get the better of her, and, of course, none of them ever did. She was like the fastest gun in Hanoi.

One day, the story has it, someone who had done very well in the exams came with his brother, and they called the maid out from the shop and said they wanted to talk to Ho Xuân Hương. So she went to her in the back room and said, there's another one of these guys here, and Ho Xuân Hương wrote a couplet, which required an answer in a particular form. The maid took it back out, and it was so difficult to answer, the young challenger fainted dead away, a huge disgrace. He was brought to by his brother, and finally managed to answer her couplet. The maid brought it back to Ho Xuân Hương, who looked at it and allegedly said, "Not bad," and married the young man, who, if you believe the legend, became the Prefect of Vinh-Tuông.

Q: Spring Essence's poems are succinct and lyrical. They're sly, defiant, and subversive. She protests hypocrisy, the lowly status of women, and the pervasiveness of misogyny. And she dares to write explicitly about sex, using witty double entendres that remind me of blues lyrics in which women singers turn food and household chores into profoundly erotic objects and activities. Was her sexiness considered outrageous?

A: It was outrageous then, and it is now. The book Spring Essence got reviewed in Vietnam, I was delighted and very nervous to see, and the reviewer, a woman, said, you know when we were in high school, like everybody else we had to read Ho Xuân Hương, but it was always just the same three poems. . .

Q: The same three "clean" poems? (laughing)

A: (also laughing) Yes, the same "clean" poems. And the reviewer said, thanks to Mr. Balaban, we now can see these other poems, and what other people are making of them. Vietnamese women, she said, are indebted because their identities are expanded.

Q: What an affirmation of your mission. And what a revelation for Vietnamese readers. Ho Xuân Hương unmasked.

A: Ho Xuân Hương is aggressive. She takes delight in sex, and in making jokes about sex, and in teasing people, especially men, about sex. She was a rebel and did not like the society she lived in, which is not so strange since she lived at the end of the Lê Dynasty (1592-1788), during a period of 40 years of continuous warfare as the Vietnamese warred against each other, and the French took advantage and invaded by helping one of the contenders, the Nguyen clan, while they were locked in battle with the Trinh in the north.

She was related by blood to the Tây-Son, the upstart, populist emperors who overthrew everybody for a short while. They defeated the Trinh, then they turned and defeated the Nguyen both in Hue and in Saigon. And then the Chinese took advantage and invaded yet again, and the Tây-Son wheeled their army north one more time and defeated the Chinese. They were amazing, but they did not last more than 24 years, partly because French troops and Portuguese arms were brought in to establish the Hue dynasty.

So Ho Xuân Hương was conscious of all this, and this is partly the reason that Vietnamese women of her time did not enjoy the privilege that, traditionally, Vietnamese women did and do. Since the very earliest days Vietnamese women held a very high position in society, even raising and leading armies. Wealth was passed down along the female line, not the male line, so women have always been powerful figures in commerce and politics. But by her time--with all the warfare and the disintegration of Confucian feudal society, which was dying of its own weight and collapsing under foreign pressure--the luck of Vietnamese women wasn't great, and hers was not great at all. Not only was she a concubine, but so was her mother. I have a poem, well, I should say, she has a poem--that's what happens to a translator, you get proprietary. You forget that you didn't write it. (Laughing)

Q: And since Spring Essence is long gone, and since you've resurrected her and introduced her to English readers, you're probably channeling her spirit.

A: Could be she's resurrecting me. Since this book has come out, I've received a flood of e-mails in which a number of Vietnamese have evoked her spirit, saying that she must be having a big laugh in heaven to find her poetry a success in America, a country she never knew about. Here's a poem about the plight of women. It's called "On Sharing a Husband," and it begins with a rude phrase right off the street, which she must have taken delight in using because part of her subversion was this: she



absolutely was a master of this elegant, regulated verse form, this classical form which had all sorts of literary piety attached to it, and then she'd do these very vulgar things within it that no one else had ever thought of doing.

#### On Sharing a Husband

Screw the fate that makes you share a man.  
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.

Q: These poems feel so contemporary. They must have been a great surprise to you as you worked on translating them.

A: I worked on these for ten years by myself. I mean, really by myself, there was no one else to talk to, no one to verify what I was doing. And it's been 30 years since I was in Vietnam and using the language, so I never heard the poems. All the time I was translating them, I didn't know anybody I could ask to read them out loud. But recently a Vietnamese woman in California heard me on the radio and sent me a tape, a good reading of the poems, I think. And a gift to me, although I may end up sounding like a middle-aged Vietnamese woman when I read them.

Q: Most Americans won't know the difference. What else goes on in Ho Xuân Huong's poetry that surprised and intrigued you?

A: Let me read a poem of hers. This is "Autumn Landscape":

Drop by drop rain slaps the banana leaves.  
Praise whoever sketched this desolate scene:  
the lush, dark canopies of the gnarled trees,  
the long river, sliding smooth and white.  
I lift my wine flask, drunk with rivers and hills.  
My backpack, breathing moonlight, sags with poems.  
Look, and love everyone.  
Whoever sees this landscape is stunned.  
She's taken the figure of the wandering scholar/poet right out of Chinese and Vietnamese cultural habit, but she's changed it a bit. She's not drunk with the usual rice wine, she's drunk with rivers and hills. Her backpack, or poem bag, isn't filled with samples of calligraphy, or anything mundane, it's filled with wind and moonlight. And looking at this landscape, she leaps into a sense of compassion that makes it possible to love anybody. The nature she's looking at is so beautiful, human beings, also, even with all their miserable habits, are beautiful, too.

Q: The landscape, when she isn't using it mischievously as a naughty metaphor for the body, is rendered in a deeply spiritual way. You feel that she knew the land intimately, and felt its abiding power.

A: It may be that reason as much as the fact that she was naughty in talking about sexual things that made Vietnamese suspect that this poet was not a real person, but the fictional creation of some mandarin. How could a woman know this after all?

Two years ago, when I was doing the final research on this book, I tried to retrace a lot of her trips, and they're arduous. They were hard to do two years ago by bus. It would take you all day on a bumpy road, and then once you got to the end of the road, you would have to get into a boat that was rowed upriver, then walk miles to see the temples that she visited. So I can't imagine how difficult it was for her, a woman, when the place for a woman in Vietnam at the end of the Lê Dynasty was home.

Here's what "Autumn Landscape" sounds like in Vietnamese. Notice how the first line sounds just like the slapping drops of rain it describes. The form is 8 lines long, 7 syllable to a line. It requires rhyme on the first, second, fourth, sixth, and eighth lines. This was never good enough for her. She threw in extra rhymes, piling on the richness so that there's a luxury of soundplay. And then she'll work in a crude line right out of the marketplace, a line someone selling eggs could have used.

Q: That's haunting, really beautiful. I find many of her poems deeply moving. I particularly like the second couplet in "The Floating Cake"; it seems to embrace both aspects of her life, that of a concubine, and a profoundly observant and spiritual artist:

The Floating Cake

My body is white; my fate, softly rounded,  
rising and sinking like mountains in streams.  
Whatever way hands may shape me,  
at center my heart is red and true.

A: Yes. She loves to take things in everyday life and look at them in a different way. The cake that floats in water is a little doughy thing that has a kind of red bean paste at the center, and no matter what you do to it, it's still itself.

Q: No matter how she is treated, she's still herself.

A: It's an interesting poem, too, because it has that personal aspect to it, but it's also one of the three poems the Vietnamese learn in school because it has another meaning as a political poem. She uses the phrase "mountains and rivers" to suggest that the country, whatever way outside forces shape it, is at center, at its heart, always true to itself; it's always Vietnamese.

Q: Your book is trilingual. Each poem is presented in three versions, English, modern Vietnamese, which uses the roman script with lots of diacritical marks, and in a beautiful script that looks like calligraphy.

A: It is calligraphy, and it's called Nóm. It's a writing system that represents Vietnamese speech. From the first century A.D. on, the Vietnamese were writing in Chinese, which doesn't represent Vietnamese speech. Then, around 1000 A.D., they started to be troubled by this, and began to develop their own writing system using a Chinese-like format but making it Vietnamese. That system lasted until the 1920s, when the French forbade its use by decree because, as you know from Ho Xuân Hương's poetry, it was the language of rebellion, of deep Vietnamese-ness. So Nóm has an effect similar to the empowerment that Chaucer gave English as opposed to French, or Dante gave Italian instead of Latin.

There's something else remarkable about this book. Not only have we put in all three scripts, English, modern Vietnamese, and ancient Vietnamese, but the typographical printing of Nóm has never been done before. A tiny amount of Nóm has been printed, but only by woodblock, hand-carved and hand-inked. So almost 80 percent of Nóm literature, a vast amount of writing, has never been translated into modern Vietnamese. Luckily, I know a computational linguist at New York University's Courant Institute of Mathematical Sciences, Ngô Thanh Nhân, who also knows Nóm, one of the few who do who aren't in their eighties. Of 80 million Vietnamese, and this is a sad and frightening figure since we're talking about 1000 years of literary culture locked up in Nóm, there may be 30 individuals who can read it. So what Nhân has done by digitizing Nóm is extraordinary. We've created the Vietnamese Nóm Preservation Foundation to try to make the most of this breakthrough, and we hope to unlock that 1000 years of literature so that living Vietnamese can read their literary history and make it permanently accessible.

Q: Does this literature exist in scrolls?

A: Yes. Nhân told me an incredible story. He was traveling by train with an American computer expert, who had some Chinese poems up on his laptop. An elderly man seated next to them got very interested, and said, "You must get off at the next stop." They did, and he took them to his home and he called into his elderly wife and said bring out the scrolls, and she brought out an armload of documents from the last Vietnamese dynasty, and when she dropped them on the ground, Nhân said, all these bookworms jumped off them and scattered.

So there he was, looking at imperial documents that had been taken away by some mandarin ancestor of this man and were now rotting away in his house. There are scrolls like this all over the country, all over the world. The Vietnamese don't know, there's no way of knowing, what the Nóm tradition holds. For instance, the Jesuit priests took lots of documents to Spain, and certainly there are documents in the Bibliothèque National in Paris, and at the Vatican library there's huge holdings. The Chinese took documents. The Americans. The British Museum has some. The

Germans, Dutch, Japanese, all these world libraries have stashes of Nôm texts but they can't even read them, they can't even say what they are for the sake of a card catalog identification. So one of the things our foundation wants to do is to provide a bibliographic service to world libraries.

Q: What a tremendous and noble undertaking. I guess we have Ho Xuân Hương to thank for launching this incredible effort.

A: That's right. And you know, we've talked about how risqué she is, yet we haven't given an example. So here's one of her sexy poems. This is called "Three Mountain Pass":

A cliff face. Another. And still a third.  
Who was so skilled to carve this craggy scene:  
the cavern's red door, the ridge's narrow cleft,  
the black knoll bearded with little mosses?  
A twisting pine bough plunges in the wind,  
showering a willow's leaves with glistening drops.  
Gentlemen, lords, who could refuse, though weary  
and shaky in his knees, to mount once more?

*The poems "Autumn Landscape," "The Floating Cake," "On Sharing a Husband," and "Three-Mountain Pass" are published in Spring Essence: The Poetry of Ho Xuan Huong, translated by John Balaban. Copyright (c) 200 by John Balaban. Reprinted by permission of Copper Canyon Press. The poems "The Saigon River" and "Love Lament" are published in Ca Dao Vietnam, edited translated, and introduced by John Balaban. Copyright (c) 1980. Reprinted by permission of Copper Canyon Press.*