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John Balaban

North Carolina State University-Raleigh

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Spring Essence

The Poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương

John Balaban

North Carolina State University-Raleigh
Raleigh, North Carolina, USA

Hồ Xuân Hương—her given name means “Spring Essence”—was born around 1780 at the end of the second Lê Dynasty, a period of calamity and social disintegration. Her fame in Vietnam as a poet and cultural figure continues to this day. A concubine, although a high-ranking one, she followed Chinese classical styles in her poetry, but preferred to write in *Nôm*, the language of ordinary Vietnamese. And while her prosody followed traditional forms, her poems were anything but conventional: Whether about mountain landscapes, or longings after love, or apparently about such common things as a fan, weaving, some fruit, or even a river snail, almost all her poems were double entendres with hidden sexual meaning. In a Confucian tradition that banished the nude from art, writing about sex was unheard of. And, if this were not enough to incur disfavor in a time when impropriety was punished by the sword, she wrote poems which ridiculed the authority of the decaying Buddhist Church, the feudal state, and Confucian society. Yet, because of her stunning poetic cleverness, she and her poems survived. Young scholar-poets came to match wits with her. Her poems were copied by hand for almost one hundred years before they finally saw a woodblock printing in 1909.

The book I have edited and translated, *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Hồ Xuân Hương* (Copper Canyon Press, 2000), is the first printing of her collected poetry in any Western language. Indeed, it is the first time that her poems have been actually *printed* in the *Nôm* she wrote in, rather than passed on by hand or copied in limited woodblock editions.

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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.

The Retired Doctor

He couldn't care less about carriages or staves.
Sitting cross-legged on his veranda,

pouring out heavenly wine for old friends,
he offers toasts with this immortal cure.

He recites "Lu'o'ong-Phú" for people near and far.
Zithers "Tall Mountain" for dwellers of peaks and clouds.

Finding great peace again and again
he claps out rhythms, shouts out joy.

The Lustful Monk

A life in religion weighs heavier than stone.
Everything can rest on just one little thing.

My boat of compassion would have sailed to Paradise
if only bad winds hadn't turned me around.

Country Scene

The waterfall plunges in mist.
Who can describe this desolate scene:

the long white river sliding through
the emerald shadows of the ancient canopy

...a shepherd's horn echoing in the valley,
fishnets stretched to dry on sandy flats.

A bell is tolling, fading, fading
just like love. Only poetry lasts.

Spring-Watching Pavilion

A gentle spring evening arrives
airily, unclouded by worldly dust.

Three times the bell tolls echoes like a wave.
We see heaven upside-down in sad puddles.

Love's vast sea cannot be emptied.
And springs of grace flow easily everywhere.

Where is nirvana?
Nirvana is here, nine times out of ten.