

“New cries from a broken heart: Nguyễn Du and his “Tale of Kiều” in the historical context of late 18th and early 19th century Việt Nam”

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In dedication to Nguyễn Thị Nga, my teacher, confidant, counselor, and friend. I am honored to have studied under you and truly take everything you tell me to heart. You will be missed.

Cô ơi, mặc dù chúng ta không đồng ý luôn nhưng em biết chúng ta yêu quý nhau.

Introduction

The “Tale of Kiều” composed by Nguyễn Du is widely regarded as the pinnacle of Vietnamese literature. In the Vietnamese-English dictionary, under the word “masterpiece” (kiệt tác), it says: “Tale of Kieu” is Nguyen Du’s masterpiece.” This is a study of both the man and his masterpiece within space and time. Nguyễn Du was born into a tumultuous time in Vietnamese history. For over two hundred years at the time of his birth in 1766, the Việt realm had been halved in two; Đàng Ngoài encompassed the north and Đàng Trong the central and southern regions of the modern nation-state. These realms were ruled by rival lords (chúa), the Trịnh in Đàng Ngoài and the Nguyễn in Đàng Trong, each of whom pledged loyalty to the impotent Lê emperors atop the throne in Thăng Long (modern Hà Nội). The 18th century was a time of social change and political turmoil in both of the Việt lands. In Đàng Ngoài, population and economic growth caused societal transformation that outstripped the ability of the Trịnh to control; uprisings marked the middle of the century. By the 1770’s, political turmoil began to divide the Lê emperors and the Trịnh lords. In this same decade, three brothers from the Tây Sơn region in Đàng Trong began a rebellion that toppled the Nguyễn lords, forcing their survivors to escape to the far southern reaches of the realm. In Đàng Ngoài, events came to a head in the 1780’s with in-fighting in the Trịnh house after a 1782 coup and the march of one of the Tây Sơn brothers, Nguyễn Huệ, north in 1786 which brought the downfall of the Trịnh lords and ended the over 300 year old Lê dynasty. The following 16 years saw more warfare and hardship in Đàng Ngoài as the Tây Sơn battled the resurgent Nguyễn who had made their base Gia Định (modern Sài Gòn) in the south. Finally, in 1802, the Nguyễn, after their slow march north, defeated the Tây Sơn and inaugurated the Nguyễn dynasty (1802-1945).

The late 18th century also marked a high point in the history of Vietnamese philosophical thought and literature. The scholar-officials who lived through these tumultuous times were some of the most prominent minds in Vietnamese history. These officials faced an interesting dilemma during these times of social turmoil and political ambiguity. In 1788, there were four claimants to the throne in Đàng Ngoài, the Lê, Trịnh, Tây Sơn, and Nguyễn. Many of these officials, who had formerly served the Lê/Trịnh regime, withdrew from political life and went into hiding with the ascension of the Tây Sơn. Others chose to serve the new regime. While yet others took their own lives rather than serve a regime that they perceived as illegitimate.

Nguyễn Du was from a prominent family of scholar-officials with a long history of service to the Lê/Trịnh. When the Tây Sơn came north in 1786, Du’s family scattered throughout the realm. Some of his brothers chose to fight the Tây Sơn, following their faction of Trịnh lords or the Lê emperor Chiêu Thống. Others served the new regime. Du himself chose to withdraw from political life in 1786 at the age of only 20, having only been able to serve for three years. It is my contention that Du did this not out of the belief that the new regime was ‘illegitimate’, but rather due to the constant warfare and political ambiguity that encompassed this era. Du was both unsure of the proper action to

take and increasingly distraught with the death and destruction that was endemic in this epoch of dynastic change.

By 1802, when Du was called to serve the Nguyễn dynasty, he had tired of the possibility of serving in the political sphere and preferred to withdraw in the mountains of his homeland, in Nghệ An province.¹ Be this as it may, he heeded the call to serve the Nguyễn, not because he chose to, but because he felt he could not do otherwise. Du spent the following 18 years, until his death in 1820 begrudgingly serving the Nguyễn. He practiced what I would term non-violent protestation. He did this through two principal means, one was his repeated requests to quit his posts and return to his home. The other was his criticism of the society in which he lived and thereby the regime that governed that society in the form of prose. The preponderance of great minds during this era coupled with the social and political changes that were taking place gave rise to a literary movement in which many scholar-officials expressed their feelings, emotions, thoughts, and frustrations concerning the events taking place in their society. It is my contention that Du composed the “Tale of Kiều” as this type of commentary.

Although the date of composition of the “Tale of Kiều” remains a point of contention in Vietnamese scholarship, it is widely believed that Du penned his masterpiece during his time serving the Nguyễn. The “Tale of Kiều” is the story of a beautiful and talented young woman, Thúy Kiều who is thrown into a life of hardship and immorality by external societal forces.² Kiều’s period of hardship lasts for 15 years, in which time she is forced to be a prostitute and a slave, is a concubine, a mistress, and a nun. Despite her servitude and the moral degradation that it causes, Kiều is emblematic of the good of humanity; its beauty, talent, and virtue. Through her entire period of adversity, Kiều retains her moral compass, a virtue that Du says eventually accounts for the end of her woes.

More than a metaphor for Du’s own period of hardship during his withdrawal in the Tây Sơn years and his forced servitude to the Nguyễn dynasty, the “Tale of Kiều” is Du’s supreme critique of the society in which he lived. The chief aim of this paper is to draw attention to Du’s perception of his society as seen through “Kiều”³. I specifically seek to analyze the aspects of corruption, injustice, and concepts of value and its monetization within the “Tale of Kiều” and their relation to the role of scholars and officials in society. It is the contention of this paper that the “Tale of Kiều” is Nguyễn Du’s veiled criticism of his own society; one which he found was rotting and morally corrupt.

In order to analyze the “Tale of Kiều” in this manner, I must first outline the historical period in which the author lived and composed as well as discuss Nguyễn Du’s experiences within that context. With this in mind, the content of this paper is as follows.

¹ Note: Du’s ancestral land of Nghi Xuân town was during his era in the “province” of Nghệ An. However, Nghi Xuân currently sits in Hà Tĩnh province, just south of modern Nghệ An province.

² Note: I often refer to Thúy Kiều simply as Kiều

³ Note: Through out this paper, I will refer to the “Tale of Kiều” as such or simply as “Kiều”. This should not be confused with the main character in the epic, Thúy Kiều, whom I often refer to as Kiều, with no quotation marks.

In the first section, I outline the literary movement that occurred in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The social and political transformations of this period were accompanied by new forms of literature and prose that sought to explain these changes and comment on the society in which they were taking place. It is imperative to examine this literary movement, for in doing so I am placing the “Tale of Kiều” in context. I then go on to outline the “Tale of Kiều”. I do this not only to give the reader general knowledge of the “Tale”, but also due to the fact that I will analyze various passages from “Kiều” at length below. It is therefore paramount that one is familiar with the poem, its characters, and plot line.

The third section of this paper is a historical outline of the 18th and early 19th centuries. In order to look at the events that took place during this era, I must first examine the beginning of the Đàng Ngoài/Đàng Trong split to provide historical background. I then focus on the social, economic, and political events that took place in Đàng Ngoài during this era. In this way, I paint a picture of the society in which Nguyễn Du lived and the troubles of his age which I believe were antecedent to his composition of the “Tale of Kiều”.

In the following section I outline Nguyễn Du’s life within this political and social environment. As was stated, Du came from a long line of scholar-officials whom served the Lê/Trịnh regime. The events of the late 18th century had a tremendous impact on the poet and his perception of the world in which he lived. Using various accounts of Du’s life as well as the poetry that he composed, I seek to illustrate Du’s life and his mental attitude in the face of societal change, political promiscuity, and warfare.

Finally, I will analyze the “Tale of Kiều” at length in order to ascertain the social commentary I believe to be contained within the epic. Through exhaustive analysis of the “Tale”, I have come to the conclusion that Du’s main criticism revolved around the corruption, lack of justice, and concepts of value that he found endemic in his own world. In connection with this analysis, I also examine the author’s perception of scholars and officials. I conclude my conversation of Nguyễn Du and the “Tale of Kiều” with a discussion of what I believe was the author’s ambition, to be able to withdraw from political life. As Xuân Diệu noted, “The Tale of Kiều” is Du’s heart.⁴ As the title of this paper indicates, it is my aim to discover why that heart was “crying” for both himself and his society. By doing so, I hope to shed new light not only on this most famous piece of Vietnamese literature, but also on the author and the space and time which he inhabited. Verse lends personal depth and perception to historical narrative. It has been my ambition by studying the “Tale of Kiều” in the aforementioned manner to gain new perspective not only regarding Nguyễn Du and his “Kiều”, but also the period in which he lived.

⁴ Ng. Loc. “Cảm Hứng chủ đạo và nội dung xã hội của *Truyện Kiều*”, 118.

Methodological Conceptualization and Gratitude

I chose to do a project focusing on Nguyễn Du's the "Tale of Kiều" as one who has spent a fair amount of time in Việt Nam and knows of its relevance to Vietnamese literature, society, identity, and history. Every Vietnamese person knows "Kiều", everyone studies it in school, discusses it on the streets of major cities or over wine in the countryside.

The "Tale of Kiều" has influenced generations of poets, writers, thinkers, philosophers, and politicians in Việt Nam. In modern Vietnamese society, poets write odes to Nguyễn Du and his "Kiều". They take lines from "Kiều" to create their own poetry and eulogize characters within the poem. In broader Vietnamese society, people describe others using characters from the poem: "Oh, she's nothing but a Hoạn Thư!" (meaning that she is a very jealous person) or "He's a real Sở Khanh!" (meaning that he is insincere). Lovers compare their love to that of Kim Trọng and Thúy Kiều. Fortunes are told by random selection of lines and passages. My teacher told me of a time when he was in High School, one of his classmates "bói Kiều" – asked his fortune in "Kiều" for fun. The passage was something to the effect that devastation would strike his house. When he returned home, he discovered that his father had died.

On a bus one day I struck up a conversation with a man of my age sitting next to me. When I told him that I was studying the "Tale of Kiều", he grew very excited. He told me that his grandmother was illiterate, but that she has memorized the "Tale" in its entirety, all 3254 lines! We spent the remainder of the two hour ride discussing "Kiều" and various characters therein.

The "Tale of Kiều" lives in the very heart and soul of Việt Nam. This is the reason that I chose to study it. As Alexander Woodside has stated, those who are curious about Việt Nam and the Vietnamese may well gain more real wisdom from cultivating an appreciation of this one poem than they will by reading the entire library of scholarly and journalistic writings on modern Việt Nam.⁵ To undertake a study of the "Tale of Kiều" then, I found it imperative that I go to Hà Nội not only to gain Vietnamese perspective on the "Tale", but also to attempt to "touch" "Kiều" within Vietnamese society.

Analyzing the "Tale of Kiều" in the manner I have below proved a daunting task. "Kiều" was originally composed in chữ nôm, the Vietnamese demotic script. My analysis of the poem has been conducted through the transliteration of the original nôm verse into quốc ngữ (Romanized Vietnamese). Adding to this complexity, within Du's prose, there exist many antiquated terms and references to Chinese history. It was therefore also due to the complexity of the text that I chose to undertake this study partly in Việt Nam. I note my experiences in Hà Nội below because they were paramount in shaping my thoughts and perception of Nguyễn Du and his masterpiece. These "unorthodox" methods were part of my methodology in the composition of this work.

⁵ Alexander Woodside in Huynh Sanh Thong trans. *The Tale of Kieu*. ix.

I studied the “Tale of Kiều” in Hà Nội for two months under two scholars from the Institute of Linguistics, Dr. Nguyễn Phương Chi and Mr. Nguyễn Thế Dương. In our study of the poem, we first broadly outlined its contents and context. After I was familiar with the text, Dr. Chi and Mr. Dương helped me navigate the lingual aspects of the verse, including Du’s word choice and the lục bát (six-eight) rhyme scheme in which “Kiều” was composed. We then focused on different themes in the “Tale”, including Buddhism, the role of women on society, and ideas of fate/destiny. This was followed by character analysis of each of the main characters. My studies with Dr. Chi and Mr. Dương greatly influenced this work and my perception of “Kiều”. I am deeply indebted to both of these scholars for their assistance on this project, without which I would scarcely have been able to grasp the cultural antecedents behind Du’s epic.

In addition to my more formal studies with Dr. Chi and Mr. Dương, I used my time in Hà Nội to discuss “Kiều” with scholars at the Hán Nôm Institute. These discussions were fruitful and enhanced my understanding of Nguyễn Du and the “Tale of Kiều”. Perhaps even more informally, but again, a part of the method that I used to carry out research for this project, was the fact that I sought to talk to many different “strangers” on the streets of Hà Nội, in cafés, shops, parks, restaurants – anywhere someone was willing to talk about “Kiều” or excited that I was studying it. My purpose in doing so was to gather as much perspective on Du’s prose and the manner in which Vietnamese perceive it as I could. These conversations with the people of Hà Nội were very interesting. The people I met and talked to were uniformly excited and ‘proud’ of my interest and study of the “Tale”. I owe these anonymous parties my gratitude for willfully sharing their thoughts on “Kiều” and more often than not Vietnamese history in general with me. Our conversations, like the one I mentioned above, could have turned into a project in and of itself. They greatly informed my knowledge and appreciation of “Kiều” within Vietnamese society.

In addition to my classes and informal research regarding Kiều, I spent my time in Hà Nội gathering academic sources on the “Tale”, the period of Vietnamese history in which it was composed, and the literary movement of which it was a part. There are a plethora of Vietnamese sources on “Kiều”. To navigate through this large amount of material, I enlisted the assistance of Ms. Chu Tuyết Lan the librarian at the Hán Nôm Institute. Cô Lan was very helpful in my near endless search for scholarship relevant to my work.

When I went to Việt Nam to study the “Tale of Kiều” I attempted to carry no preconceived notions regarding the “Tale” with me, I wanted to glean as much information as I could regarding the poem and various perceptions thereof from different parties of Vietnamese society, both academic and non-academic – from researchers at academic institutes to motorbike “taxi” drivers on the street. I wished to be a clean slate, a white board that would be marked up by various opinions and ideas, of which I could later organize and think through. To the extent to which this is possible for anyone, in any case – to have a ‘clear mind’, I think that my attempt was successful. The conceptualizations that I gathered in Việt Nam, once ‘organized’ and thought through acted as road markers on the path of my study, or like winds blowing my thoughts in various directions. The more these shifting winds blew, the more I began to

conceptualize “Kiều” not in parts or characters, but holistically as veiled criticism not only of Nguyễn Du’s forced position within his society, but of that broader society itself.

In general, there is a dearth of English language scholarship on this era of Vietnamese history, there has been virtually nothing written regarding Nguyễn Du or the “Tale of Kiều”. I have therefore leaned heavily on the sources that are available in my composition of this paper. I have attempted to mingle my perception of this era by using the more prevalent Vietnamese sources, especially concerning Nguyễn Du and “Kiều”. I sought to reconcile and amalgam the various perspectives I encountered in both English and Vietnamese scholarship into my own perception of the era, Nguyễn Du, and “Kiều”. This is especially evident regarding the sections on history and Nguyễn Du’s life below.

The bulk of this paper, that of my analysis of “Kiều”, is primarily my own conceptualization of Nguyễn Du’s verse. Again, these thoughts and ideas were informed by my studies in Hà Nội, informal “interviews”, and the more concrete academic research I conducted regarding the late 18th and early 19th centuries and Nguyễn Du’s life and experience therein. I came to the conclusions outlined in the introduction of this paper and expounded on below through this research and my continued and seemingly never ending reading of the “Tale of Kiều” itself. I found there to be great correlations between the author, his “Kiều”, and the society in which he lived. Again, this broad thought has been the catalyst of this paper.

Within this work, poetry is used as an important primary source. I use the poetry of this period, both Nguyễn Du’s prose and that of other scholar-officials to illustrate perception. Again, I believe that poetry is an interesting window into the society in which the poet lived and composed. This is especially true with regards to “Kiều”, which I quote extensively from in my analysis. Unless otherwise noted, all of the translations are my own. I found the existing English language translations of the “Tale of Kiều” helpful while forming my conception of the poem and its author, especially that of Hùynh Sanh Thông. However, I chose to translate the poems below due to the fact that I believe a more ‘literal’ translation is necessary for my purpose of utilizing prose as historical source material.⁶

Finally, I am deeply indebted to my Professors at the University of Michigan, John K. Whitmore, Rudolf Mrazek, and Nguyễn Thị Nga for their support and continued guidance. Our conversations regarding “Kiều”, Vietnamese history, historical perception, and thought have greatly influenced my method of thought and action in going about the composition of this paper. I am truly thankful and humbled to be associated with each of these wonderful and extremely knowledgeable people. My only hope is that each of them can see within this paper a glimmer of the tremendous influence that they have had on my thoughts and perceptions.

⁶ Note: Many translations of Vietnamese poetry into English are poetic compositions in and of themselves. I have not sought to compose verse in translation, but rather have attempted to transfer the content and purpose of the poem into English.

Poetry

Poetry gives voice to distinct historical perspective and a unique way of recording and conceptualizing contemporary thoughts for historical posterity. In pre-modern Việt Nam, scholar-officials regularly composed verse on a wide range of subjects, from their own observations on a warm spring evening and the changing of the seasons to more acerbic commentary on the times in which they lived. The 18th and early 19th centuries in Đàng Ngoài represented a new era for Vietnamese prose and literature, comprising various new styles of prose and forms of expression in verse. Intellectual ferment and expanded literacy during this era saw a flowering of literature, especially in the Vietnamese demotic script, *nôm*.⁷ The times of social change and political turmoil in which these poets lived gave rise to a forum where the poet could express his feelings, emotions, and thoughts regarding societal issues. It is my contention that Nguyễn Du's purpose in composing the "Tale of Kiều" was in fact to do just this – it was a cry for himself, his age, and his society. This section seeks to place the "Tale of Kiều" within its literary context and examine how Du's contemporaries were using verse during this period.

In Western society, one often thinks of poetry as something romantic or tragic, ethereal and not tied concretely to reality. In the East Asian classical world however, poetry was utilized in a different manner – as a means of communicating one's ideas concerning his/her experience and likewise understanding the thoughts of others.⁸ It is my contention that the scholar-officials of Đàng Ngoài during the 18th and early 19th centuries were immersed in this cultural thought-world which emanated from China. It is not the purpose of this paper to argue the extent or reality of this influence, only to note that I believe it was profuse. The literati of Đàng Ngoài were influenced by classical Chinese thought through their system of education and examinations, and their community of close-knit scholars who perpetuated itself and its beliefs.⁹ This is not to claim that the scholars/poets of Đàng Ngoài were in any way identical to their Chinese counterparts or that "Confucian" cultural influence was equally diffuse throughout the realm. On the contrary, the scholar-official of Đàng Ngoài was undoubtedly very distinct from his Chinese or Korean brethren. However, some aspects of philosophical thought would have been fairly uniform. I believe that ideas regarding verse were one of the universalities of classical East Asian thought.

This said, I view poetry in classical East Asia in general and in Đàng Ngoài in particular as Liam Kelley asserts "poetry was not viewed as referring to something else, but as an authentic presentation of a historical experience".¹⁰ That is, regarding the composition of verse, literati were responding directly to the physical world of events surrounding them. Poetry was a central part of the cultural landscape in Đàng Ngoài. It was an important

⁷ Lieberman, Victor. *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800-1830*, 444.

⁸ Kelley, Liam C. *Beyond the Bronze Pillars: Envoy Poetry and the Sino-Vietnamese Relationship*, 39.

⁹ Note: I use the terms "literati" and "scholar-official" interchangeably in this paper.

¹⁰ Kelley, 39.

way of expressing and transmitting one's perception of society.¹¹ In the 18th and early 19th centuries, poetry took on new significance as a form of cultural expression. In this time of societal transformation and political ambiguity and change, the poet created a space by which he could look at his society and relay thoughts and emotions regarding his perception of these transformations through verse.

Times of political conflict and social change often give rise to new forms of literary expression and transform or popularize older forms of expression in a new manner. This period of Vietnamese history witnessed great development of different types of literary forms. Principal amongst these new forms of literary expression were *văn tế* and *khúc* ("lament poetry"), poetry in *nôm* (the Vietnamese demotic script), and *truyện nôm* (Tales in *nôm*) of which the "Tale of *Kiều*" is the pinnacle of the genre. During the late 18th century, there was considerable verse composed in *nôm*, rather than and in addition to the more traditional language of composition, classical Chinese. Some of the most famous poets that composed in *nôm* include Phan Huy Ích, Hoàng Quang, Lê Huy Dao, Nguyễn Huy Lượng, Phạm Thái, Hồ Xuân Hương, and of course Nguyễn Du.

The poetry of this period had three main aims, one, to express personal sentiment (often anguish in the face of political turmoil); secondly, poetry functioned as a journal or kind of historical record; and lastly, poetry had a commemorative role, in the form of *văn tế* and *khúc*.¹² The largest category of these three was the first, personal sentiment/"political poetry": "In these troubled times writers' personalities and emotions came increasingly to the fore. Poetry became more personal, more closely linked both to the writers' inner feelings and to contemporary events".¹³ Indeed as Victor Lieberman has observed, in some cases verse during this period was, "clearly subversive" in nature.¹⁴ The scholar-officials of *Đàng Ngoài* were caught in an interesting position. Rebellion had marked nearly the entire period from 1740 to 1770. Accompanying this or perhaps antecedent to these uprisings was social change marked by an increase in commerce and the merchant class as well as a rise in official corruption. As Phạm Đình Hổ, a scholar-official under the Lê dynasty and again under the Nguyễn dynasty asserts, "The generation is slipping into bad habits, and the way of power is diminishing everyday. (The notion of) fame is in disorder and one no longer knows what is right and what is wrong."¹⁵ Finally, the in-fighting between the Lê and Trịnh and that within the Trịnh house itself culminating in the turbulent decade of the 1780's and the Tây Sơn conquest of *Đàng Ngoài* in 1786 was more than many scholar-officials were prepared to handle. They were forced to choose sides between many political contenders; this was a period of political promiscuity and moral degradation. The following untitled poem composed by Bùi Dương Lịch reflects a mood of the age.

¹¹ Dutton, George. "Verse in a Time of Turmoil: Poetry as History in the Tay Son Period" In *Moussons*, 41. (note: from here on referred to as: Dutton, "Verse".)

¹² Dutton, "Verse", 44.

¹³ Maurice Durand in Dutton, "Verse", 45.

¹⁴ Lieberman, Victor, 444.

¹⁵ Dutton, George. *The Tay Son Uprising: Society and Rebellion in 18th Century Viet Nam*, 25. (note: from here referred to as: Dutton, "The Tay Son Uprising")

Soon I will know the thoughts and the work of acting in a contradictory fashion,
 Then I would rather that in the past I had not gone on with my studies.
 The word filial I no longer know, the word loyal is already dead.
 When I act as an official, when I rest from my labors, how shall I behave?
 I think of officials serving in their posts, the clouds and mountains far away.
 The southern region is frosty and cold,
 the mother leans against the doorway awaiting her child;
 The hearts of those who travel this road are choked with flowing tears,
 The ocean waves carry misty rains as they scream and roar.¹⁶

Bùi Dương Lịch was a scholar from Nghệ An who had passed the imperial examination in the late Lê period, only to be called to serve the Tây Sơn in Phú Xuân in the early 1790's. The emotions that he expresses in this poem are clearly those of a man who is being forced to serve a dynasty that he views as illegitimate. Lịch tells us that he would rather have not studied at all than to use his talents for a purpose that he does not believe in. He talks of the emotions of a number of this generation, who were forced to travel the "road choked with flowing tears" that he is now treading. The poem touches on a theme that I will expound upon later in this section, that of the perceived misuse or ill-use of talent during this period. In any case, the verse plainly makes commentary that is very political in nature, reflecting the times in which Lịch lived.

Another famous poet during this period was the poetess Hồ Xuân Hương. Unlike the male poets of this age, Xuân Hương was not permitted to take the examinations or serve as an official, so she did not know some of the heartache that Lịch describes above. Be this as it may, Xuân Hương's verse is an acerbic attack on the institutions and society of her day. Much of her poetry was composed in the six-eight style indigenous to Việt Nam as well as in *nôm*, rather than classical Chinese. Compounding the overt social criticism in her poetry, Xuân Hương possessed a unique talent and wit for "nói lái" that is the ability to write verse with one overt meaning, however, when the diphthongs and/or tones are swapped in pairs or groups of words the meaning becomes different. Xuân Hương used this speech and literary device to make furtive sexual comments. A good example of Xuân Hương's verse is "Being a concubine" ("Làm lẽ"):

One's covered with a quilt, the other freezes.
 Sharing a husband, the plague of life.
 Oh for only five or ten times,
 He comes twice a month, if at all!
 I labor for sticky rice, stale sticky rice,
 As if a servant, an unpaid servant!
 If I had known this,
 I would have remained alone.¹⁷

In this poem, Hồ Xuân Hương expresses both her resentment at having to share her husband's attention and her lot as an "unpaid servant" in his household. The imagery of

¹⁶ In Dutton, "Verse", 48.

¹⁷ Phạm Du Yên. *Thơ Hồ Xuân Hương*, 28. My translation.

the poem clearly suggests that she is dissatisfied, at least in part, with the fact that she sparingly shares a bed with her husband; making the illusion that if she was to share his bed more often she would cease to be an “unpaid servant” doing her duty only for “stale sticky rice”. This poem represents a candid attack on the institution of marriage, suggesting that concubines are nothing more than servants, and does so in a way that suggests that the husband, who, according to Confucian ideology, the wife must submit to, is not satisfying her in an appropriate manner. The poem thus calls into question not only the institution of marriage, but the husbands place within it and therefore within the family. This attack goes to the heart of the ideological order of Confucian society and is an excellent example of how cleverly Hồ Xuân Hương went about attacking the cultural institutions of her day.

Another genre of poetry that found prominence during this time was ‘lament’ poetry, both in the form of *văn tế* and *khúc*. Nguyễn Gia Thiều’s “Cung oán ngâm khúc” (“Lament of a Woman of the Harem”) along with Đặng Trần Côn’s “Chinh phụ ngâm khúc” (“Lament of a Soldier’s Wife”) both composed earlier in the century, paved the way for later poets to cry for their age. In content and theme, “Cung oán ngâm khúc” is quite similar to the “Tale of Kiều”. Like Nguyễn Du, Nguyễn Gia Thiều uses a woman – a concubine in the king/lords harem as his protagonist to draw on themes of fate and talent colliding and the transitory nature of human love, success or favor.¹⁸ Thiều accomplishes this, like Du with thick Buddhist and Taoist overtones. As the “Tale of Kiều” is more than likely a veiled representation of Du’s forced servitude under the Nguyễn and talent and fate clashing in his own life, so too is Thiều’s portrait of a forlorn harem girl more than likely a veil for Thiều’s own political circumstance – that of an official who had lost favor with those he served. This comparison deserves more attention than I am able to give it here. However, it is important to note these similarities, for in doing so, I am placing the “Tale of Kiều” firmly in the context of the literary movement of Du’s time.

One of the main differences that separated works like “Cung oán ngâm khúc” and “Chinh phụ ngâm khúc” from the *văn tế* and *khúc* composed in the later 18th and early 19th centuries was the fact that many of those later works were composed in *nôm*, rather than classical Chinese, as each of the original versions of the aforementioned verse had been. Composition of verse in *nôm* allowed for wider dissemination due to the fact that the majority of the population could not read nor understand classical Chinese, but could understand and to an increasing extent was able to read *nôm*. In addition, poems composed in *nôm* and the six-eight rhyme scheme gave them the ability to become widely diffuse. Of the most regarded or famous compositions of this genre, Lê Ngọc Hân’s (the Lê princess who was given to the emperor Quang Trung in marriage, see below) “Ai tư vãn” (“Tears and Regrets”) and “Văn tế Quang Trung” (“A lament for the emperor Quang Trung”) composed on the occasion of the emperor’s death are certainly indicative of the ability to express sorrow, remorse, loss or frustration through this poetic genre.

¹⁸ Note: The protagonist of “Chinh phụ ngâm khúc” is also a woman.

Undoubtedly the most important lament poem of this period, and one of the period's most important compositions in general was Nguyễn Du's "Văn tế thập loại chúng sinh" ("Lament for the ten types of wandering souls"). This poem is ostensibly about commemorating the day of lost souls, whose hungry spirits the Vietnamese placate through prayer and the offering of food, wine, and paper clothing and money. This poem along with the "Tale of Kiều" are perhaps the two most powerful commentaries on the events of this era inscribed in verse. In Du's lament (thought to be composed early in the 19th century, after hostilities between the Nguyễn and Tây Sơn had reached an end) he does not glorify the Nguyễn as heroes, nor does he vilify the Tây Sơn. Rather, he mourns all who died in war, all of those who had to live through its devastation and did not come out the other side. As Phan Ngọc states, Du's "Lament for the ten types of wandering souls" exposes the unparalleled rupture of everything that was valued in society."¹⁹ I will cite "Lament for the ten types of wandering souls" throughout this paper, but would like to quote a brief passage of the 192 line poem here.

There were those men who arrayed troops,
They went to battle, stole seals.
They raged like wind and rain, thunder and lightning,
The bodies of the hundred surnames departed, the work of one man.
They fell to the ground under a barrage of stray arrows,
Expanses of men squandered, their blood flowing in streams
An expanse of desolation to the ends of the earth,
Bones unclaimed, who knows where they belong?²⁰

I have chosen to quote this passage here because it is indicative of the entire poem's imagery – that of a generation squandered by the holocaust of warfare. Du's exhortation of "expanses of men squandered, their blood flowing in streams..." is a powerful critique on the happenings of this age, and a timeless criticism of the idiocy and devastation of warfare. Again, the fissures and disorder that erupted during this period provided a space in which poets like Du and Hồ Xuân Hương could speak their minds and be critical of their society and the events that surrounded them.

The first two lines of the "Tale of Kiều" summarize the tragedy of a generation of scholars and poets: "In this life span of scarcely one hundred years, Talent, fate, oh how they have clashed."²¹ This conflict between talent and fate was a reality to Du and those of his generation; it was not simply a cliché. There was a trend in this generation to brag or boast of one's talent and in general to place more weight on individual emotion. This is certainly evident in the work of Hồ Xuân Hương, and that of Thiều and Du (although veiled under the cloak of female protagonists). Poets of this age bragged of their talent in order to demand a share of society's worth, or more often than not to lament the fact that they could not and did not get it.²² This was the conflict between talent and fate. People pointed to their talent because it was going to waste. They lived in a society which

¹⁹ Phan Ngọc. *Tìm hiểu phong cách Nguyễn Du trong Truyện Kiều*. 63-64.

²⁰ Nguyễn Du in Nguyễn Thạch Giang. *Nguyễn Du Toàn Tập*, 609. Lines 57-64. My translation.

²¹ Nguyễn Du. *Truyện Kiều*. Lines 1-2. My translation.

²² Phan Ngọc, 15.

squandered talent or one in which they were forced to display their gifts solely for someone else's gain, against their will.

Lastly, the literature of this era was the literature of situations. Vietnamese literature of the late Lê to early Nguyễn periods ran parallel to Vietnamese culture and society. It described the time period and the people whom lived during that time.²³ With the “Tale of Kiều”, Nguyễn Du follows in this tradition of exposing personal perspective on ‘real situations’ of his life and times. The “Tale of Kiều” is a poem of myriad situations, which Du painted to detail society as he saw it during his life. Because “Kiều” is a poem in which so many can see reality, in which so many can see themselves and others, it remains ingrained in Vietnamese culture and society to this day.

The “Tale of Kiều”: A Summary

Nguyễn Du was a scholar-official deeply embedded in the classical East Asian thought world. As Alexander Woodside has asserted, Du was a “superb East Asian classicist.”²⁴ The “Tale of Kiều” is a testament to Du’s immersion in this thought-world, it is as Huỳnh Sang Thông has said, “a treasure trove of classical Chinese learning.”²⁵ In fact, Du actually borrowed, or to use the Vietnamese term “leaned on” (dựa) a story composed by a Chinese scholar, Thanh Tâm Tài Nhân (Vietnamese from Chinese) during the Ming period, most likely in the 16th century.²⁶ Thanh’s original work was called the “Tale of Kim, Vân, and Kiều” (again Vietnamese from the Chinese). It is not surprising that Du used the “Tale of Kim, Vân, and Kiều” as the basis for his the “Tale of Kiều”. It had the environment, characters, and problems that Du observed in his own society. It also allowed Du to make the contemporary social commentary that he wanted to make, under the guise of the story of a young girl in Ming China. To be sure, the “Tale of Kiều” is Du’s own work. As George Dutton points out in his discussion of the Hoàng Lê nhất thống chí (HLNTC), it was not unusual during this period for Vietnamese authors to ‘lean on’ older Chinese works as the basis for their contemporary compositions.²⁷ I note Du’s borrowing from the “Tale of Kim, Vân, and Kiều” only because it is imperative that I establish this fact. It is not the ambition of this work to compare and contrast the two tales.

The “Tale of Kiều” is a 3254 line poem, composed in the Vietnamese demotic script – chữ nôm – in the lục bát (six-eight) style indigenous to Việt Nam.²⁸ So the “Tale” is 1627 six-eight couplets. The composition the “Tale of Kiều” in the six-eight and nôm made it accessible to the masses due to the fact that six-eight verse was prevalent in oral

²³ Phan Ngọc, 215-217.

²⁴ Alexander Woodside in Huỳnh Sang Thông, x.

²⁵ Alexander Woodside in Huỳnh Sang Thông, x.

²⁶ Phan Ngọc, 43-44.

²⁷ Dutton, George. “The Hoàng Lê Nhất Thống Chí and Historiography of Late Eighteenth Century Đại Việt”, 179-180. (note: from here referred to as: Dutton, “HLNTC”)

²⁸ The first line in each couplet is six syllables (words), the second is eight. The sixth syllables of each line rhyme.

folk poetry. The rhyme, meter, and tonal regularity made long passages of six-eight verse, like the ones found in the “Tale of Kiều” easy to memorize and recite.²⁹

Therefore, the longevity of the “Kiều’s” popularity cannot only be attributed to the timelessness of its content and theme, but also due the fact that Du composed it in the six-eight style and in *nôm*.

The “Tale of Kiều” is primarily the story of a young girl of extreme beauty and talent, Thúy Kiều. Du tells us the Kiều’s beauty is “bewitching”, she is also supremely talented in composing verse and playing the lute. Kiều was born into a family of middle station, the Vương. She has a younger sister, Thúy Vân, and a younger brother, Quan. At the beginning of the epic, Quan, Vân, and Kiều go on an outing on the day of commemorating deceased loved ones. On their return home, they come across the unkept roadside grave of an ex-courtesan, Đạm Tiên. Kiều wonders why no one has taken care of her grave at which time Quan enumerates her on Đạm Tiên’s life. Đạm Tiên was a talented and beautiful courtesan who had many male callers. However, upon her death, there was no one to care for her. Kiều sympathizes with Đạm Tiên’s plight and composes several lines of verse on a tree near her grave, imploring Đạm Tiên to appear, at which time they witness footsteps on the grass.

Almost simultaneous to this episode, a young scholar comes across the Vương’s on his way down the road. The scholar’s name is Kim Trọng, an old classmate of Quan’s. While Kim and Quan are talking, he and Kiều are stealing furtive glances of one another. Kim and Kiều fall in love at first sight; Kim subsequently rents a house on the other side of Kiều’s east wall. Upon returning home that evening, Kiều thinks of Kim Trọng and Đạm Tiên, her hopes and her fears. When she falls asleep, Đạm Tiên appears to her in a dream, warning her that she will have a fate akin to that of Đạm Tiên – thus foreshadowing Kiều’s impending years of “gió bụi”, of “wind and dust”, of hardship.

Kim meanwhile has been residing at the house neighboring Kiều’s, when he comes across one of her hairpins. The return of this hairpin is the excuse that Kim has been looking for to meet Kiều. They subsequently meet when Kiều goes looking for the pin. The two lovers exchange vows in a secret and illicit engagement, at which time Kiều finds herself alone at Kim’s house. Thus Kiều has secretly promised herself to Kim. After this engagement, Kim receives news that his uncle has died, he will have to return to his hometown, their new love will suffer the separation of three years.

Kim’s absence is the inauguration of Kiều’s period of wind and dust. After returning from their grandfather’s birthday festivities, Kiều’s father and brother are abruptly arrested and shackled; her house is ransacked for valuables. This is one of the most important episodes of the poem and one that will be analyzed in greater detail below. Du spends a total of 25 lines describing these events, which are a pivotal moment in the “Tale”. He briefly mentions that it was the allegations of a ‘silk merchant’ that brought these woes upon Kiều’s house, but does not elaborate on the reason for these allegations and arrests. In any case, one of those present, old Chung, takes pity on Kiều and her family and offers Kiều a way to save her father – she must pay 300 pieces of gold. Kiều

²⁹ Huỳnh Sang Thông, trans. *The Tale of Kiều*. 4.

decides that the only way she can save her father is to forgo her promise to Kim and sell herself in marriage as a concubine. She begs Vân to keep the promise she made to Kim, which Vân later does. An “agent” is brought in to find potential suitors for Kiều.

Mã Giám Sinh, a purported scholar, comes inquiring after the possibility of purchasing Kiều. He haggles with the agent, observes Kiều’s great beauty and unparalleled talents and subsequently makes the deal. Kiều leaves her home and family to follow Mã, having saved her father’s life with the money paid for her. Kiều then discovers that he is not a scholar, but rather a pimp who is married to a Madame, Tú Bà. Tú Bà discovers that Kiều had slept with Mã Giám Sinh, thinking that he was really her husband and is furious – she wanted this privilege to go to the highest bidder. She proceeds to beat Kiều, at which point the young woman pulls a knife from her cloak and stabs herself. Doctors are called in to save Kiều’s life and Tú Bà promises her she will not have to service clients at the brothel, the Madame will look for a husband for her to redeem her investment.

Kiều is confined to a room in the brothel when a dashing young man, another scoundrel posing as a scholar comes into her life, his name is Sở Khanh. Sở Khanh promises that he will help Kiều escape, but is actually working with Tú Bà. The Madame pays Sở Khanh 30 pieces of gold for his cooperation in the plot. When Tú Bà discovers the escapee, she is brought back to the brothel, beaten, and made to take clients.

One of Kiều’s clients is a young scholar from a merchant family, Kỳ Tâm or “Thúc Sinh”. Thúc Sinh is enamored with Kiều’s beauty and in his father’s absence, purchases Kiều from Tú Bà in order to make her his concubine. Kiều warns Thúc Sinh that they not be wed without his wife, Hoạn Thư’s, knowledge, but the young man in the heat of lust and love disregards Kiều’s wise warning. The two lovers live happily until Thúc Sinh’s father returns and orders the two before a judge – he wants the ‘whore’ to return to the ‘whore house’. Kiều and Thúc appear before the local official, who gives Kiều two options – go back to Tú Bà’s brothel or be beaten. Kiều chooses the later. She is saved from the beating when the judge discovers her supreme talent for poetry, he orders her release, her talent also softens the heart of Thúc Sinh’s father who grows to love the young woman.

The couple then lives happily for a period when Kiều begs Thúc Sinh to return to his wife and tell her about their marriage – something that he has yet to do. Thúc Sinh agrees and promises that he will tell her upon his arrival home. Meanwhile, Hoạn Thư, has learned that he has taken a concubine without her permission and is furious. Hoạn Thư comes from an extremely powerful family, this is the reason that Thúc married her and the reason that his father wanted to get rid of Kiều – he is afraid of the consequences that might ensue. When Thúc Sinh returns home, he is too scared to tell his wife of Kiều and so keeps it a ‘secret’. Hoạn Thư, still fuming at Thúc Sinh’s betrayal has hatched a plan. She asks Thúc to return to his father (who lives near Kiều). The young man is only too happy to hear this and sets off immediately. Hoạn Thư then sends two of her servants to kidnap Kiều, burn down her house, and make it look like she has died in the fire. With her mother’s sanction, Hoạn Thư wishes to make Kiều a slave in her house. When Thúc returns to Kiều, he discovers that she has “died” in the fire. After a time with his father,

he returns to Hoạn Thư only to discover that she has made Kiều a slave in his own home! Kiều and Thúc Sinh are speechless at Hoạn Thư's cruelty, alas, they can do nothing – they are as far apart as earth and sky.

Hoạn Thư humiliates Kiều, having her service her and Thúc Sinh's every need and desire. Kiều asks to become a nun in the temple on Hoạn Thư's grounds, which Hoạn Thư consents to. Shortly thereafter, Kiều escapes her enslavement, stealing some precious objects from the temple. She then goes to the monastery of the nun Giác Duyên, lying her way into the sanctuary. When Giác Duyên discovers that Kiều is actually an escaped slave from Hoạn Thư's house, she begs Kiều to leave and places her in the care of one of her parishioners, Bạc Bà. Bạc Bà tells Kiều that to save herself, she must take another husband. Kiều relents, only to be once again cheated and sold into prostitution.

Kiều resigns herself to her fate as a woman of play at her new abode when an enigmatic man comes calling, this is Từ Hải. Từ Hải sees true value in Kiều, something that every other member of Kiều's society seems to miss. He purchases Kiều and makes her his mistress. After a year of living together, Từ Hải, a rebel leader, leaves Kiều to go conquering. He returns to her after one year, his troops hailing her as their 'queen'. These are the hero and heroine of Du's epic, a rebel leader and a prostitute.

Kiều lives with Từ Hải for a period of five years, in which time he conquers a great swath of the empire. In one of the most interesting scenes in the "Tale", Từ Hải has all of the people that wronged Kiều or were her benefactors in the previous ten years rounded up and brought before her. Kiều dispenses 'justice' at her whim, killing some, rewarding others in a passage that will be examined in greater detail below. After this five year period, a provincial governor and the general of the imperial troops, Hồ Tôn Hiến asks Từ Hải for a truce. Từ Hải scoffs at this idea; he is the master of his domain. Kiều however persuades him otherwise. She dreams of peace and the prospect of being able to see her family again from a position of respect – Hồ Tôn Hiến had promised to make Từ Hải a great official. Từ Hải relents to Kiều's wishes. When going to accept the truce, Từ Hải is killed and his troops are slaughtered by the imperial forces.

Kiều falls into the hands of Hồ Tôn Hiến, who in celebrating his 'victory' becomes too drunk and makes advances towards Kiều, asking her to marry him. In the morning, realizing his embarrassing error, he forces Kiều to marry a tribal chief. After sharing this chief's bed, Kiều attempts to drown herself out of her sorrow and shame. Giác Duyên, the old nun, had been waiting for Kiều by the river in which she attempted to kill herself. When Kiều appears, Giác Duyên pulls her from the water, saving her life. Kiều then embarks upon a Buddhist lifestyle with her savior by the river.

As the above events are occurring, Kim Trọng returned to Kiều's house only to find her family in ruins. Kim learns of Kiều's piety and is deeply saddened by her plight. Despite this, he eventually marries Vân, who kept her promise to Kiều. Kim Trọng and Vương Quan (Kiều's brother) also pass the imperial examination and become officials. As the two young officials with their wives and Kiều's parents in tow, make their way to their new assignments, they learn of Kiều's history and her 'death'. Thinking that she has

drowned, they build an altar by the side of the river. By sheer fate, Giác Duyên comes upon them praying at the altar and informs them that Kiều is very much alive. She takes them to Kiều, whereby she is finally reunited with her family after her 15 year period of adversity.

Kiều's family begs her to go with them, but she is reluctant. At this point she has renounced desire and has grown accustomed to the Buddhist lifestyle. She only relents when her family agrees that Giác Duyên come as well – they will build the nun a temple. Reunited, Kiều's family and Kim Trọng implore her to wed the young official. Having been married numerous times before and having known many men, Kiều refuses. She eventually gives into their continued pleas when it is clear that they will not acquiesce to her wishes. Kim and Kiều are finally married, 15 years after their original promises. On their wedding night, Kiều begs Kim that their relationship not be carnal, but only a friendship. Hearing the wisdom and virtue of her words, Kim agrees. Kiều spends the rest of her days conversing and playing chess with Kim, drinking wine and composing verse. Her 15 years of hardship at an end, she has forsaken earthly desires and lives a life of quiet pleasure.

Historical Background

It is now imperative to look at the environment in which Nguyễn Du lived and composed. Again, to do so is to place both the poet and his masterpiece in space and time. For almost 300 years at the time of Du's birth, "Việt Nam" had been divided into two distinct political regions, Đàng Ngoài in the north and Đàng Trong in the center and south. Each region was ruled by a different clan of chúa or lords. The Trịnh lords ruled Đàng Ngoài while the Nguyễn lords ruled Đàng Trong. Each family of lords pledged loyalty to the Lê emperors. In order to ascertain why this system of governance that had worked in the Việt realms for almost 300 years came to an end during Du's life, it is imperative to look further back in time, to the establishment of the Đàng Ngoài/Đàng Trong divide and the events that took place within the century in which Du was born.

In the 1470's, King Lê Thánh Tông (r. 1460-1497) sent armies from Thăng Long through Thuận Hoá (the modern day provinces of Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị, and Thừa Thiên) to the south, conquering areas that extended 300 kilometers beyond the Hải Vân pass. These armies conquered the modern day provinces of Quảng Nam, Quảng Ngãi, and Bình Định.³⁰ This action opened up these territories, previously part of Champa, to migration of Kinh (Việt) peoples from the north. In the beginning of the 16th century, a Lê general, Mạc Đăng Dung, disposed of the Lê dynasty and took the throne for himself and his family. The Lê retreated from where they came, modern day Thanh Hóa province to regroup and begin a counter-insurgency. This counter-insurgency was aided by two families from the Thanh Hóa area, the Trịnh and the Nguyễn. With their help, the Lê house was restored and placed back on the throne in Thăng Long. The Mạc however were not defeated and fled to the northern part of the Việt realm. Following the

³⁰ Taylor, K.W. "Surface Orientations in Vietnam: Beyond Histories of Nation and Region", 958.

restoration of the Lê, the Trịnh and Nguyễn clans began to fight amongst themselves for power, the Trịnh eventually gaining the upper hand. Trịnh Kiểm, the Trịnh lord, killed the elder Nguyễn brother who had been vying for power. Kiểm then permitted the other brother, Nguyễn Hoàng to become governor of the then remote Thuận Hóa area. Hoàng arrived in Thuận Hóa in 1558, his entourage and supporters in tow.³¹ This marked the beginnings of the Đàng Ngoài/Đàng Trong split that would last for over two hundred years.

The Trịnh lord failed to subordinate Nguyễn Hoàng to his authority as ruler of the Việt realm. Following a joint Trịnh/Nguyễn campaign in 1592 to oust the remnants of the Mạc, Hoàng returned to Thuận Hóa to consolidate his power, never to set foot in Đàng Ngoài again.³² Then, in 1624, Hoàng's son declared that he would no longer send tax revenue to the north. This action permanently separated the two realms and began what would be 50 years of nearly constant warfare between the Trịnh in Đàng Ngoài and the Nguyễn in Đàng Trong.³³ The Trịnh first attacked in 1627, their final assault coming in 1672. At the conclusion of this long period of war, a de-facto military stalemate was declared.

After 1672, and indeed before this point, Đàng Ngoài and Đàng Trong had virtually no contact with one another other than through warfare. The two areas developed independently, although both still pledge allegiance to the Lê Kings, who by this time had virtually no power. Đàng Ngoài was oriented towards the north, towards China, both culturally and economically. The Trịnh regime attempted to promote social stability through Confucian scholar-officials.³⁴ These civil servants were an important component of the cultural make-up of Đàng Ngoài, their Confucian principals and "East Asian" outlook had a great influence upon society. Đàng Trong on the other hand was oriented towards the sea and the trade it brought to the realm. The Nguyễn lords relied more heavily on non-Confucian military officials to administer their realm. Đàng Trong was more culturally heterogeneous than Đàng Ngoài, expanding down the long stretch of coast that borders the South China Sea into the lands once occupied by the Cham, Khmer, and other minority peoples. As Alexander Woodside has pointed out, there was great regional differentiation between the two realms.³⁵ Each evolved separately in its own sphere with distinct economic, political, and social structures. Due to the fact that Nguyễn Du was born and lived in Đàng Ngoài, this paper will focus on that realm.

The 18th century was a period of economic growth in Đàng Ngoài. In 1664, the Trịnh regime froze population registers in order to stabilize tax revenue. This coincided with a surge in population growth.³⁶ By the first decade of the 18th century, the Trịnh could not cope with the commercial growth occurring in Đàng Ngoài and the socio-economic

³¹ Taylor, 958.

³² Whitmore, John K. "Literati Culture and Integration in Dai Viet, c. 1430 – c. 1840", 227.

Taylor, 958.

³³ Dutton, *The Tay Son Uprising*. 20-22. Taylor, 958. Whitmore, 227.

³⁴ Especially from 1682-1767, see Lieberman, 402.

³⁵ Woodside, Alexander B. *Vietnam and the Chinese Model: A Comparative Study of Vietnamese and Chinese Government in the First Half of the 19th Century*, 133.

³⁶ Whitmore, 228.

changes that it brought.³⁷ The bureaucratic system could not monitor the population and collect adequate tax revenue. In the 1720's, the Trịnh began to tax the commercial economy and made attempts at another census. Between 1720 and 1724, officials imposed taxes on previously untaxed items, such as salt, various metals, woods, and sea and river products.³⁸ These reforms sought to tax the growing commercial class, however, the result of taxing everyday items like salt placed greater strain on the peasantry of Đàng Ngoài. Ultimately, by the 1730's, the reforms had failed. The Trịnh still sought to collect revenue of course, despite the fact that their reforms had not worked. They then began to attempt to place the growing commercial sector under the management of the officials. This had two effects, officials increasingly became involved in commerce, the lords also sold previously communal lands to private owners including Chinese traders, domestic merchants, and officials which accelerated the privatization of previously communal property.³⁹ As John Whitmore notes, the failure of these reforms and lack of competent management helped collapse both the Trịnh and the Nguyễn regimes which "inaugurated a period of anarchy and rebellion unmatched since the late 14th century."⁴⁰

This period of "anarchy and rebellion" began in the 1730's. Compounding the increased tax demands on the population, were a series of natural disasters followed by famines.⁴¹ Rural uprisings began in the 1730's and did not abate until the 1760's.⁴² These uprisings were led by Lê princes, who wanted to wrest power back from the Trịnh, disgruntled peasants, disaffected scholars, and Buddhist monks, among others.⁴³ As Keith Taylor notes, rebellion spread through nearly every part of Đàng Ngoài in the 1740's, 1750's and into the 1760's when local peasant armies were suppressed after many years of fighting.⁴⁴ In 1749, an uprising threatened the capital, forcing the lord, Trịnh Doanh to construct a new wall, the Đại Đô citadel.⁴⁵ Much of Doanh's reign (1740-1767) was occupied by trying to combat these various uprisings.

When Trịnh Sâm (r. 1767-1782) became lord in 1767, he made efforts to combat the problems that he inherited and tried to bring stability to his realm. Unfortunately by this point, years of popular upheaval and continuing economic problems made this prospect difficult to attain. As George Dutton notes, the late 18th century was a period of internal societal change in Đàng Ngoài.⁴⁶ While some were taking up arms, others were profiting from the economic expansion and weakened central administration that caused widespread corruption. Trade became more profuse, both domestic and international. This increase in trade gave rise to a more powerful merchant class.⁴⁷ This merchant class

³⁷ Whitmore, 235, Lieberman, 420.

³⁸ Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 23. Whitmore, 237.

³⁹ Phan Ngọc, 58, Lieberman, 421.

⁴⁰ Whitmore, 235.

⁴¹ Nguyễn Thừa Hy. *Economic History of Hà Nội in the 17th, 18th, and 19th Centuries*, 16.

⁴² Hy, 16. Whitmore, 238.

⁴³ Whitmore, 238.

⁴⁴ Taylor, 957.

⁴⁵ Hy, 21.

⁴⁶ Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 26.

⁴⁷ Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 26. Phan Ngọc, 58.

shifted the previous 'equilibrium' of the class structure. Class boundaries became more fluid; the merchant class began to have increased political influence. As Victor Lieberman notes, the growing availability and purchase power of this class for luxury items once reserved for high officials threatened the 'proper' hierarchy of society.⁴⁸

In addition to these changes or perhaps in accordance with them, the 1770's and 1780's were complicated by a contestation for political supremacy between the Lê and the Trịnh.⁴⁹ This in-fighting once again created a space for popular discontent to rise to the surface. The Tây Sơn uprising, which began in Đàng Trong in 1771, would further complicate the situation. The Trịnh sent their armies south into Đàng Trong in 1774 with the nominal mission of "assisting" the Nguyễn against the Tây Sơn. The Tây Sơn realizing that they could not battle both the Trịnh in the north and Nguyễn in the south "surrendered" to the Trịnh in 1775.⁵⁰ The Trịnh were only too happy at the prospect of having the Tây Sơn fight their old enemies for them, their forces and supply lines having been stretched thin along the elongated coast. Trịnh Sâm thus made the brothers that began the Tây Sơn uprising Nguyễn Nhạc, Nguyễn Huệ, and Nguyễn Lữ generals in the Trịnh army. Sâm also made Nhạc, the oldest brother and at this point the most powerful, a Trịnh noble, complete with official seals and the titles that the Nguyễn lords once held.⁵¹

The aforementioned events in 18th century Đàng Ngoài culminated in the 1780's. In 1780, Trịnh Sâm, under the influence of a favored concubine, Đặng Thị Huệ, named her son, Trịnh Cán as his heir. Sâm took this action after hearing that an older son and previous heir, Trịnh Tông was planning a coup to dispose him and take power for himself. In 1782 Sâm died, and Cán ascended to the throne of the lord, only to be overthrown in a coup by Trịnh Tông.⁵² Following the coup, the young Trịnh Cán fled to the countryside, his political and military supporters in tow. By carrying out the coup and taking power for himself, Trịnh Tông greatly contributed to the growing political anarchy in Đàng Ngoài. The coup exacerbated growing factions within the Trịnh family that were in turn supported by the military force that Tông had unleashed in his rise to power. The new lord found it difficult to control these factions and their military supporters once they were out of the box. As a consequence, power shifted from civil officials towards armed bands supporting one of the claimants of power.⁵³ This was a trend, that of power being in the hands of military officials that would continue through the Tây Sơn regime and into that of the Nguyễn emperor, Gia Long's reign marking the beginning of political obscurity for the Đàng Ngoài literati.

The coup following Trịnh Sâm's death in 1782 marked the beginning of the end of the Trịnh lords and the Lê emperors. Even before the Tây Sơn, under Nguyễn Huệ, headed north into Đàng Ngoài in 1786, the system of governance that had ruled for more than

⁴⁸ Lieberman, 441-442.

⁴⁹ Dutton, "HLNTC", 172.

⁵⁰ Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 88-89.

⁵¹ Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 90.

⁵² Dutton, "HLNTC", 173.

⁵³ Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 38. "HLNTC", 174.

200 years was coming to an end, “the Lê kings and Trịnh lords were like a rotten tree, waiting to be blown over.”⁵⁴ The more than 40 years of uprisings, social and economic change, and hardship had taken their toll on the people. These changes were compounded in the 1780’s by political anarchy within the Trịnh house. As George Dutton tells us, “The turmoil of the 1780’s compounded by the effects of a disastrous series of famines in 1785-1787, meant that popular allegiance to the political status quo was perhaps at its nadir when the Tây Sơn entered the picture.”⁵⁵ It is clear then that the Tây Sơn, rather than being the main cause of political chaos in Đàng Ngoài, were merely an antecedent, a southern wind that uprooted the rotten tree.

This was the political situation in Đàng Ngoài into which the Tây Sơn entered in 1786. The Tây Sơn uprising began in 1771 in the modern province of Bình Định (south-central Việt Nam). The Tây Sơn established their leadership of Đàng Trong in 1775, only to continually fight the resurgent Nguyễn under the leadership of Nguyễn Ánh throughout much of the 1770’s, 1780’s, and 1790’s. The year 1786 marked a decisive defeat of the Nguyễn in Gia Định (the modern area of Sài Gòn) by the Tây Sơn. At this point, Nguyễn Nhạc, (who had named himself the Thái Đức emperor in 1778 and reigned from the old Cham capital of Vijaya (modern Qui Nhơn)) at the urging of the Trịnh defector, Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh, ordered his younger brother Huệ and Chỉnh to break the ten year truce with the Trịnh and attack the former Nguyễn capital of Phú Xuân, which the Trịnh had taken in 1775.⁵⁶ Huệ and Chỉnh easily took Phú Xuân, massacring the Trịnh forces stationed there. As the Hoàng Lê nhất thống chí (The unification record of the Imperial Lê) recounts, Huệ was then urged by Chỉnh to continue their assault into Đàng Ngoài, contrary to his brother Nhạc’s orders. Huệ and Chỉnh marched to Thăng Long under the banner of “destroy the Trịnh, aid the Lê”, taking the capital of Đàng Ngoài and encountering little resistance from the weak, politically diffuse Trịnh lords.⁵⁷

After their conquest of Thăng Long, Huệ seemingly kept his promise to “aid the Lê” by transferring power to the aged Lê ruler, Lê Cảnh Hưng (r. 1740-1786). Lê Cảnh Hưng in turn bestowed titles akin to those the Trịnh once held, Đại Nguyên Soái Uy Quốc Công (Generalissimo and Mighty Grand Duke) and gave Huệ a favored daughter, Lê Ngọc Hân in marriage.⁵⁸ Huệ subsequently returned to his new capital of Phú Xuân, stationing Chỉnh in Nghệ An (north-central Việt Nam) to monitor affairs in Đàng Ngoài. After Lê Cảnh Hưng died in 1786 (while Huệ was yet in Thăng Long), his successor Lê Chiêu Thống took the throne. The Tây Sơn departure from the heartland of Đàng Ngoài caused a power vacuum, which the weak Lê ruler was unable to fill. Rival Trịnh claimants to power retreated to the countryside and struggled amongst themselves for supremacy. One of the Trịnh was finally successful, and made his way back to Thăng Long to attempt to reassert his authority over the Lê house. Lê Chiêu Thống, recognizing his weak position, called on Nguyễn Hữu Chỉnh to provide him with assistance. Chỉnh then

⁵⁴ Nguyễn Thạch Giang and Trương Chính, 46-47. My translation.

⁵⁵ Dutton, “HLNTC”, 176.

⁵⁶ Dutton, “HLNTC”, 173.

⁵⁷ Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 90.

⁵⁸ Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 101.

returned to the north, disposed of the Trịnh claimant, and took a position of power for himself, not unlike that the Trịnh previously occupied.⁵⁹

Furious at Chính's unauthorized actions, Huệ sent another general, Võ Văn Nhậm, to dispose of Chính, which he did, but he then fell prey to the temptations that seem to have overwhelmed Chính. Nhậm's arrival in Thăng Long sent Lê Chiêu Thông into exile, where he appealed for assistance from the Qing court in China. His request was granted and the Qing sent a military force to occupy Thăng Long and place the impotent Lê Chiêu Thông back on the throne. Huệ had by this time disposed of Nhậm and taken power in Thăng Long. Upon hearing that Lê Chiêu Thông was returning with Qing forces, Huệ retreated to Phú Xuân where he crowned himself Emperor Quang Trung (r.1788-1792). He then returned to Thăng Long during the New Year celebrations of 1788 and dealt the Qing a series of defeats, which caused Lê Chiêu Thông, the last Lê emperor to flee into China, never to return to Đàng Ngoài. Chiêu Thông died four years later.

The Việt realms were now divided between the three Tây Sơn brothers, Nguyễn Lữ ruled over Gia Định and the south, Nguyễn Nhạc, the Emperor Thái Đức ruled the southern-central part of the realm (most of Đàng Trong) from Qui Nhơn, and Nguyễn Huệ, now the Emperor Quang Trung ruled Đàng Ngoài and northern Đàng Trong from Phú Xuân. From 1788, Quang Trung sought to consolidate his power over Đàng Ngoài. He instituted a number of different reforms and enlisted the assistance of prominent Đàng Ngoài scholar-officials whom had previously served the Lê/Trịnh regime. Most of these scholars did not heed Quang Trung's repeated calls for service; however several did, including prominent literati like Ngô Thì Nhậm and Phan Huy Ích. Although Quang Trung patronized these civil officials, using their expertise in governmental matters and their knowledge of Đàng Ngoài, the key posts during Quang Trung's reign, and that of his successor were occupied by generals from his army. As John Whitmore notes, this was the first time that military officials were superior to their civil counterparts at all levels of governance.⁶⁰ Quang Trung's reign came to an abrupt end when he died in 1792 at the age of only forty. His young son, the Cảnh Thịnh Emperor (r. 1792-1802), only ten at the time, ascended the throne.

The following ten years were occupied by more, near constant warfare throughout the Việt realms. Nguyễn Ánh, the leader of the resurgent Nguyễn clan retook Gia Định in 1787, never again to relinquish it. Throughout the 1790's Ánh's army slowly grew, gathering forces and practicing a new type of warfare learned during his exile in Siam and through the assistance (however nominal) of his European backers.⁶¹ Nguyễn Ánh slowly, but steadily, moved north up the coast, conquering lands previously in the hands of the Tây Sơn as he went. In 1800 Ánh took Qui Nhơn, the capital of the former Thái Đức Emperor, who had died in 1793. Meanwhile, the Tây Sơn in the north, without the enigmatic leadership and military skills of Quang Trung devolved into factions and were

⁵⁹ Dutton, "HLNTC", 174.

⁶⁰ Whitmore, 240.

⁶¹ Taylor, 967-968.

plagued by in-fighting.⁶² Real power during the reign of Cảnh Thịnh was in the hands of his regent Bùi Đắc Tuyên, whose leadership proved to be ineffectual as he sought the throne for himself and his own sons.⁶³

Finally, in June of 1802 Nguyễn Ánh's forces took Phú Xuân. Cảnh Thịnh and the remnants of his court fled to Thăng Long, which Ánh subsequently conquered in July of that year. This marked an end to 30 years of continual warfare in the Việt realms and the inauguration of the Nguyễn dynasty. Nguyễn Ánh, although he also had previously promised to "restore the Lê" ascended the throne as the Emperor Gia Long (r.1802-1820). These years of conflict culminated in the placement of all Việt lands, from Thăng Long in the north to Gia Định in the south under the leadership of one ruler for the first time in the realm's history (however titular this might have been, especially during Gia Long's reign). This period had quite literally brought society in the Việt realms to its knees. These years of warfare and chaos greatly affected the people living in Đàng Ngoài. I will now turn my attention to this aspect of the world in which Nguyễn Du lived; the effects of near constant warfare and political ambiguity on the people and literati of Đàng Ngoài.

The People

In most of the second half of the 18th century, as has been documented, Đàng Ngoài was absorbed in political conflict, taking the forms of rural uprisings, internal conflict between the Lê and Trịnh, amongst the Trịnh themselves, between the Tây Sơn and Trịnh, Lê, and Qing, and finally between the Tây Sơn and the Nguyễn. All of this warfare had tremendous consequences for the people living in Đàng Ngoài. Compounding this almost constant warfare were floods and famines that drove tens of thousands of people living in Đàng Ngoài from their homes, these problems were especially acute in the 1780's. A 1780 survey conducted by the scholar-official Ngô Thì Sĩ indicated that of the 9700 Red River Delta villages, more than 1000 had been abandoned and could no longer pay taxes.⁶⁴ Indeed, from the previous population census undertaken by the Trịnh in 1722 to Quang Trung's census in 1789, only 40%-50% of the *recorded* population was still in place. A similar percentage of farmland was still under cultivation.⁶⁵ As the following poem composed by the former Lê/Trịnh scholar-official Phạm Quý Thích (1760-1825) (who went into hiding during the Tây Sơn years) indicates, conditions for the population of Đàng Ngoài were dire, not least due to warfare, but also due to weather conditions:

Last summer floods washed away the harvest.
This summer there is tremendous drought.
Low field and high have all arrayed their water scoops.
At meals, both morning and night, every family eats potatoes instead of rice.

⁶² Nguyễn Thạch Giang and Trương Chính, 78.

⁶³ Kim Hải, Trong Đại. *Những Phụ Nữ Việt Nam Kiệt Xuất Trước Thế Kỷ XX*, 140.

⁶⁴ Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 212.

⁶⁵ Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 125.

For farmers clouds and rainbows raise false hopes.
Grasses and trees die from the cold in the sixth-moon frost.
A small crowd gathers in the village hall, lamenting this state of affairs.
Suddenly, there is a tax collector and off they run.⁶⁶

Two lines of this poem are especially striking. The first states that “every family eats potatoes instead of rice”. By asserting that the people must eat potatoes instead of rice, Thích is not only commenting on the situation of famine in the north, he is also making commentary on the Tây Sơn regime itself – a regime that cannot provide this basic crop for its people is a regime that does not have a proper mandate to rule and is failing the people. The second part of this poem that I would like to draw attention to is the final two lines, in which a group of villagers has gathered in the đình (village meeting house/communal ‘temple’) to lament state affairs, when a tax collector comes calling, they disperse. This line is indicative of the fact that although the people of Đàng Ngoài had endured years of warfare, draught, famine, flood, and political turmoil, the power holders within the ruling state apparatus still placed great burdens on them.

Indeed the nearly endless warfare during the Tây Sơn period necessitated these frequent and heavy demands upon the people. The Tây Sơn regime in Đàng Ngoài needed manpower to serve in their armies, labor service (corvee) for its construction projects, and tax revenue to pay for both. The relationship that developed was one which pitted the needs of the peasantry against the demands of the Tây Sơn.⁶⁷ People were enlisted from all areas of the realm, during the late 1780’s and 1790’s hundreds of thousands died and were wounded. Nguyen Du commemorates those who had fought and died during this period on all sides of the conflict in his “Lament for the ten types of wandering souls”:

There were also those who were conscripted into the army,
They left their homes to bear the weight of military duty.
With water from streams and a handful of rice,
Weather beaten, they trudged thousands of miserable miles at a time.
In times of war, human life is as cheap as trash,
Reconciled to their fate to be taken down by stray shots,
Flickering flames, wisps of smoke,
Their cries of injustice committed faintly resound in the dark.⁶⁸

The entire breadth of Du’s “Lament” is striking in its honesty and acerbic recollections of this period of great distress. Du does not mention sides to the conflicts, only the immense hardship that men forced into conscription faced. They marched far from their homes, only to be killed in foreign places, their bodies and souls not cared for, but left to rot in the war torn soil. “In times of war, human life is as cheap as trash” Du concludes. The soldiers and conscripts of all the parties involved in this prolonged period of warfare were used as cannon fodder. The devaluation of human life causes their wandering souls to

⁶⁶ In Dutton, “Verse”, 49.

⁶⁷ Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 120.

⁶⁸ Nguyễn Du in Nguyễn Thạch Giang, 611. Lines 101-108. My translation.

cry against the injustice committed during this era in which the people were sacrificial pawns used to realize the ambitions of feuding claimants to power.

Not only were the Tây Sơn involved in warfare with the Nguyễn from the early 1790's until 1802, they also conducted campaigns against the Qing (1788-1789) and in the Lao territories in 1790 and 1791.⁶⁹ Corvee was continually necessary to build and rebuild infrastructure damaged by war, as well as to reconstruct the palaces at Phú Xuân and to begin construction on Quang Trung's proposed capital in Nghệ An.⁷⁰ All of these continual demands threatened the livelihood of the people by pulling them from their homes and off of their lands.

When Nguyễn Ánh conquered Đàng Ngoài, the plight of the people did not abate. As George Dutton asserts, for the majority of the people living in Việt lands, the Lê/Trịnh, Tây Sơn, and Nguyễn regimes were virtually identical.⁷¹ "Even before capturing Thăng Long in July of 1802, the Nguyễn forces had already begun to create difficulties for the population of Đàng Ngoài."⁷² The Nguyễn regime forced contributions in cash and kind from the population, their corvee demands were said to be twice those of the Tây Sơn. These heavy corvee demands and other difficulties during the first part of the 19th century under Gia Long sparked widespread uprisings. There were in fact a total of 105 uprisings during Gia Long's 18 year reign.⁷³ Compounding the discontent of the population of Đàng Ngoài, was the fact that Nguyễn Ánh, who had promised to "restore the Lê" instead took the throne for himself. "The Tonkinese...waited impatiently for him (Ánh) to deliver them from the tyranny of the Tây Sơn rebels and to reestablish the former royal family on the throne, but these Tonkinese were cruelly deceived in their expectations."⁷⁴ Indeed as Lieberman notes, the people of Đàng Ngoài had no tradition of loyalty to the Nguyễn or to Gia Long who treated their realm like one that had been conquered, his policies caused bitter resentment amongst the people.⁷⁵ Like the Tây Sơn before them, the Nguyễn did not bring great relief to the people of Đàng Ngoài, rather, it appears that in their treatment and interaction with the people that they were more similar to the Tây Sơn and Lê/Trịnh regimes than different.

In addition to these difficulties was the official corruption that occurred during the Tây Sơn and Nguyễn periods, a phenomenon especially to be found in decaying dynasties and those that are newly established. As one missionary noted in 1789: "The enemy (*the Tây Sơn*) enters the homes, examines and takes that which pleases them. This is the state of the poor villagers, who are not in a condition to pay the tribute."⁷⁶ Systematic corruption within the Tây Sơn governmental structure was encouraged by the weakness of those structures and the inability of the Tây Sơn to establish a functioning judicial system. As the *Tây Sơn Thuật Lược* states: "there was no establishment of written rules and

⁶⁹ Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 131.

⁷⁰ Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 138-139.

⁷¹ Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 121.

⁷² Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 168.

⁷³ Woodside, 135.

⁷⁴ Pierre Jacques de la Bissachere (missionary). In Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 169.

⁷⁵ Lieberman, 428.

⁷⁶ Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 145.

regulations, matters regarding civil suits were all adjudicated orally before officials, and as for punishments, the majority consisted of public caning.”⁷⁷ This lack of justice compounded the difficulties that the people faced, as did corruption of the officials whom were supposed to be guarding the people’s interests: “All of the mandarins look for ways to enrich themselves at the expense of the poor people. Justice is served in weighs of gold, with the balance always tilted to the side of those who offer the most money.”⁷⁸ A lack of systematic justice and corruption are often consequences of long periods of political turmoil and warfare. As society was devolving into political ambiguity, with no stable power reigning, a power vacuum was created. In Đàng Ngoài during the 18th century, as the political situation proceeded to worsen, commercial activity and monetization was also occurring. The new wealth and power created by the developing commercial sector due in part to private landownership and foreign trade filled the vacuum created by lack of political stability. Thus, rather than any kind of uniform law code, justice was made to be material, it could be bought and sold as the French missionary Le Pavéc noted above and as Nguyễn Du observed in the “Tale of Kiều” below.

Although the people of Đàng Ngoài might have experienced much of the same treatment under Gia Long as they had under the Tây Sơn and the Lê/Trịnh, in many ways Gia Long’s reign marked a real break from the Lê/Trịnh period. Gia Long not only depended on military officials over their civil counterparts, he moved the capital from Thăng Long in the north to Phú Xuân, now Huế, he also enacted a new law code, the Gia Long Code in 1812, disposing of the more than 300 year old Lê code. The officials that held power during Gia Long’s reign were almost exclusively military, men from the central and southern parts of the realm, many of whom had served with Gia Long since his days in exile in Siam.⁷⁹ Furthermore, Gia Long only nominally controlled his entire realm from Thăng Long to Gia Định. In the first years of his reign, he appointed military overlords to rule over the north and the south.⁸⁰ Gia Long himself only had real control over the central part of the realm.

When Huế became the capital of the newly named “Việt Nam”, Thăng Long and the north in general, formerly Đàng Ngoài, became marginalized. The population of Thăng Long decreased in the early part of the 19th century due to the move to Huế. The National University (Quốc tử giám), officials – both military and civilian, the court, soldiers et al moved south.⁸¹ Gia Long changed the name of Thăng Long to Bắc Thành (northern citadel), which was ruled by the military overlord of the north from Ninh Bình province (south of modern Hà Nội).⁸² The north, the heart of literati culture in Việt Nam, now became a political backwater. As Keith Taylor points out, not only did the northern part of the realm lose geographical significance, but the court at Huế never incorporated officials from the north to any significant degree.⁸³ Thus, after years of political

⁷⁷ Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 149.

⁷⁸ Le Pavéc (missionary, 7/3/1799). In Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 149.

⁷⁹ Woodside, 222.

⁸⁰ Whitmore, 241.

⁸¹ Hy, 108-109.

⁸² Hy, 114. Woodside, 18.

⁸³ Taylor, 969.

ambiguity in the north, which forced scholar-officials to take sides in the various conflicts outlined above, the reign of Gia Long marginalized both the north and northern literati, they never again enjoyed the power and influence at court that they once wielded.

The Scholar-official

Northern scholar-officials living during this period were faced with a multiplicity of difficult choices. Witnessing the down-fall of the Lê/Trịnh regime, they were forced to choose sides between the various political contenders, or to retreat from political affairs and go into self-imposed exile. Indeed, before the flight of Lê Chiêu Thống in 1788, there were four viable political contenders in Đàng Ngoài, the Lê, Trịnh, Tây Sơn, and Nguyễn. Faced with this situation, some scholars chose a side, others went into exile, and still others, viewing the difficult times in which they were living, chose to take their own lives rather than be forced to prostitute themselves to a regime that they viewed as illegitimate.

The Ming occupation of 1407-1427 brought with it Chinese bureaucratic agencies, legal norms, and a strong sense of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy.⁸⁴ This period marked the beginning of the literati culture in which the scholars of the late 18th century were immersed. Irrespective of how much power and influence these civil administrators wielded throughout Vietnamese history, their constant presence in Vietnamese society from this point did influence life in Đàng Ngoài, from the court to the village *đình*. To be certain, various kings and lords patronized the literati for their fairly affective form of bureaucratic management. As is noted above, akin to pre-modern Japan and Korea, the Vietnamese (in particular this 'class' of literati) of Đàng Ngoài were part of the East Asian classical world. They regarded themselves as the heirs of traditions of government, philosophy, literature, and moral and social theory which first developed in China.⁸⁵ Literati had the Confucian view that society was held together by the "three bonds" (*tam cương*), the officials' loyalty to the emperor; the sons' obedience to the father; and the wife's submission to her husband. This view of an ordered society, and one of the chief Confucian virtues, *trung* – loyalty to one's monarch, would provide much heartache for the literati of the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

As has been outlined, the 1780's in Đàng Ngoài were a period of political turmoil and socio-economic change. The relatively stable relationship between the Lê emperors and their Trịnh overlords began to deteriorate. Following the death of Trịnh Sâm in 1782, the Trịnh house itself was embroiled in political intrigue and conflict for supremacy. Compounding this already volatile political situation was the Tây Sơn conquest of the north in 1786. As John Whitmore states, even prior to the Tây Sơn, there was a great sense of social and intellectual disjuncture in Đàng Ngoài.⁸⁶ The late 18th century in Đàng Ngoài was a period in which some of the most important intellectuals in Vietnamese history were active. This era was one of the high points of Vietnamese

⁸⁴ Whitmore, 234.

⁸⁵ Woodside in Huỳnh Sang Thông "The Tale of Kiều", x.

⁸⁶ Whitmore, 239.

philosophical thought.⁸⁷ Faced with the troubles of their day, these scholar-officials took it upon themselves to seek solutions. Eminent scholars such as Ngô Thì Sĩ and Lê Quý Đôn looked towards Confucian wisdom and philosophical thought for remedies to the problems of their age.⁸⁸ However, the solutions that some of Đàng Ngoài's most preeminent Lê/Trịnh era scholars sought were not adequate in harboring this generation from making difficult political choices in consequence to political and military events that were out of their hands.

When Nguyễn Huệ, now the Quang Trung emperor consolidated his power in the north in 1788, he began to look for "worthy men" to serve his regime. Coming from the distant south, Quang Trung was unaware of many of the different cultural traits of Đàng Ngoài society. However, he knew that if he was to be able to rule over Đàng Ngoài in any capacity, he would need to use the services of its scholar-officials. Not only were these literati versed in the customs, habits, and form of rule of Đàng Ngoài, the bureaucratic model which they practiced tied them to the rural areas of the realm and its people. As Alexander Woodside points out, district officials were virtual neighbors to the people.⁸⁹ In this way, scholar-official's close connection with their rural roots would not only provide the Tây Sơn regime with legitimacy and status, it would also help the population follow their new rulers.⁹⁰

Quang Trung's ambition to have scholar-officials serve his regime would prove difficult as he vied for their loyalty. Not able to tempt them into service through proclamations' penned for him by the former Lê/Trịnh official Ngô Thì Nhậm, Quang Trung forced many literati into service.⁹¹ Those who received the order to serve, but were unwilling had two options, to withdraw from political life or commit suicide, it seems that in most cases the former option was chosen. As George Dutton states, "Most Đàng Ngoài scholars, however, decided not to serve the new regime, a decision motivated either by philosophical reasons of loyalty to the old regime or by more practical concerns. The majority of scholars who chose not to serve the Tây Sơn regime simply went into retreat, waiting for the situation to resolve itself, a common course of action in times of political turmoil."⁹² Dutton also notes that Quang Trung actively searched for these "men of talent" who chose not to serve the regime.

The community of literati in Đàng Ngoài was a tight-knit unit. Many families had for generations produced scholar-officials to serve a regime. Furthermore, these families often inter-married. Two examples of scholars whose families had long traditions of service were the Ngô Thì and the Phan Huy families. Both Ngô Thì Nhậm (1747-1803) and Phan Huy Ích (1751-1822) were scholar-officials who had served the Lê/Trịnh and then decided to serve the Tây Sơn upon their conquest of the north. Both men's families had produced scholar-officials for generations; both had brothers that were also scholar-

⁸⁷ Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 27.

⁸⁸ Whitmore, 239.

⁸⁹ Woodside, 150.

⁹⁰ Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 110.

⁹¹ Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 112.

⁹² Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*, 112-113.

officials. The two close friends were also brothers-in-law. The difficult choices of this era often divided families; the Phan Huy and Ngô Thì families were not an exception. While some of their lineage chose to serve the Tây Sơn, most did not, preferring either to fight the new regime, follow Lê Chiêu Thống to China, or withdraw. As will be examined below, Nguyễn Du also came from such a family; that with a long tradition of service to the Lê/Trịnh, the events of this period divided his family.

Undoubtedly, some literati chose not to serve the Tây Sơn regime out of political loyalty to the Lê/Trịnh. As Liam Kelley asserts, “In the eyes of many Lê dynasty officials still scattered about the Southern Kingdom (*Đàng Ngoài*), the Tây Sơn were usurpers. They had overthrown the Lê dynasty and had no mandate to rule. Instead they were ‘bandits’ who deserved to be punished for their evil deeds.”⁹³ I would also argue that many of these scholars viewed the Tây Sơn as foreigners who had no right to rule in *Đàng Ngoài*. Recall that for almost three hundred years at this point, the Việt realm had been separated into two distinct realms, *Đàng Ngoài* and *Đàng Trong*. The Tây Sơn came from the southern portion of *Đàng Trong*, making their way north only in 1786 to conquer *Đàng Ngoài* after ruling in *Đàng Trong* for over a decade. As is stated above, during this long period, *Đàng Ngoài* and *Đàng Trong* had virtually no contact other than through warfare. Each realm developed independently of the other. Culturally, politically, and economically these realms were distinct. Therefore, when Quang Trung came north in 1786, it would have been akin to a foreigner invading a separate and unique realm. His speech, pronunciation, habits, customs, and political perspectives regarding the manner in which to rule would have been very different from his counterparts in *Đàng Ngoài*. This is one of the main reasons that he needed the literati to serve his regime, and I believe it is also one of the main reasons that many chose not to.

Given their political choices, many of the scholar-officials in *Đàng Ngoài* chose to withdraw from political activity. This action, to abscond from direct involvement in a political situation that you feel is unsavory is in fact a deeply ingrained part of the Confucian moral order, sanctioned by Confucius himself.⁹⁴ Vietnamese religious beliefs are in large part an amalgamation of three great ideologies: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism (*tam giáo* – three religions). Thus Confucian doctrine is permeated with Taoist, and to some extent Buddhist concepts, the case of the virtue of “withdrawal” is not an exception. The Vietnamese term for this Taoist principle is *vô vi* that of “non-action”. Many scholars chose to *vô vi* not only out of loyalty to the Lê/Trịnh, or because they perceived the Tây Sơn as foreign and illegitimate, but also because they wanted to protest the political events of their day. *Vô vi* was a form of protest that was sanctioned by their beliefs. This is the principal that I believe Nguyễn Du was practicing when he chose not to serve the Tây Sơn regime and the principal that he wished to practice, but was unable to during the reign of the Nguyễn emperor, Gia Long. For Du, these political and moral turns were not only unsavory; the war that accompanied them was reprehensible. It is my contention that Du chose to withdraw not out of overt loyalty to the Lê/Trịnh, or abhorrence of the Tây Sơn, but rather in protest to the miseries that surrounded him during the first thirty plus years of his life. These miseries, those of

⁹³ Kelley, 178. My italics.

⁹⁴ Smith, Ralph. *Việt Nam and the West*. London: Heinemann, 1968.

political chaos, socio-economic change, flood, famine, and above all the constant warfare, tired Du of the political realm he had previously sought to inhabit and made him wish to be released from it all.

Nguyễn Du in space and time

Nguyễn Du was born into this period of conflict in 1766 in Thăng Long, to a family with a long history of serving the Lê/Trịnh regime. Du's father, Nguyễn Nghiêm (1708-1775), held various high posts, including 'Consul of National Historiographers Office' (Tổng tài Quốc sử quán) and the 'Director of the National College' (tể tử Quốc tử giám).⁹⁵ Du's many brothers also served the Lê/Trịnh regime.⁹⁶ His eldest brother, Nguyễn Khả had been Trịnh Sâm's tutor, the lord viewed Khả as one of his "best friends".⁹⁷ Thus Du was from a good lineage, one of the most prominent in Đàng Ngoài at the time. However, due to his family's close ties with the Lê/Trịnh, their decline would also bring heartache and turmoil to Du's family.

Du was coming into maturity at the same time as political chaos began to overwhelm Đàng Ngoài in the 1780's. Following the death of both of his parents in the 1770's, Du went to live with Khả, who was around thirty years his senior. He took the first in the series of imperial examinations in 1783, becoming a tú tài degree holder (the lowest rank of three imperial examinations, the others being cử nhân and tiến sĩ).⁹⁸ Du passed this examination the year following the death of Trịnh Sâm and during a period of political contestation within the Trịnh house that would engulf his family.

Following the coup of Trịnh Tông to replace Trịnh Cán, Nguyễn Khả was named 'Minister of the Interior' (thượng thư bộ lại), another brother Điều, also took a high position in Tông's regime.⁹⁹ As is outlined above, political infighting and factions backed by military power followed the 1782 coup. In 1784, this turmoil forced Nguyễn Khả and Nguyễn Điều out of Thăng Long, along with Trịnh Tông.¹⁰⁰ Khả and Điều, their houses having been burned to the ground by other political contestants within the Trịnh house, regrouped in Sơn Tây province, raising an army of their own. His two older brothers then attempted to wrest power back from the other political factions, only to be forced to return to their fatherland of Nghệ An later in that same year. Later, when the Tây Sơn came north in 1786, Khả and Điều were part of the factions fighting in the countryside for supremacy. Khả again raised an army, attempting to aid Tông, but was defeated by other factions within the Trịnh house.¹⁰¹

⁹⁵ Đinh Công Vĩ. *Nguyễn Du: Đời và Tình*, 12-14.

⁹⁶ Nguyễn Thạch Giang and Trương Chính, 39-40.

⁹⁷ Nguyễn Thạch Giang and Trương Chính, 35.

⁹⁸ Đinh Công Vĩ, 14.

⁹⁹ Đinh Công Vĩ, 17.

¹⁰⁰ Nguyễn Thạch Giang and Trương Chính, 37-38.

¹⁰¹ Nguyễn Thạch Giang and Trương Chính, 48.

Du witnessed the events of the mid 1780's firsthand. I have found in a number of Vietnamese sources that he briefly worked for the Lê/Trịnh regime as an official after he passed the examination in 1783 although this has not been corroborated by the dearth of English scholarship on Du's life.¹⁰² In any case, Du's family and by connection Du himself seemed to have been intimately involved in the political infighting that was occurring in the Trịnh house in the 1780's. As a young man he was full of promise and talent, he later recalled in his poem "Liu Zihou's old residence in Yongzhou" that "in my younger days I was likewise a talented one" the events of his early life were to shape the duration of Du's existence.¹⁰³

In 1786, Quang Trung led the Tây Sơn armies to the north, disposing of the Trịnh lords and "reestablishing" the Lê house. It is indicative of Du's family's position, that following these events, his family was dispersed, fleeing in various directions. Indeed, as Phan Ngọc states, "those who are loyal to the Lê must first be loyal to the Trịnh"¹⁰⁴ This seems to have been the position of Du's family – they served at the pleasure of the Trịnh and only ostensibly for the Lê. Du's mother, Trần Thị Tân (who was the third wife of Nguyễn Nghiễm) had three other sons, Nguyễn Nễ (1761-1805) and Nguyễn Úc (1767-?) (the third brother died in 1784). When war engulfed Đàng Ngoài in 1786, Nễ fled in one direction, Úc to another, and Du escaped to yet another local - his wife's hometown of Hải An, in modern Lạng Sơn province.¹⁰⁵ Du's family was very much part of the Đàng Ngoài elite, the constellations of scholar-officials previously discussed. His first wife was the daughter of Đoàn Nguyễn Thục, an old friend and colleague of Nguyễn Nghiễm's, and the younger sister of Đoàn Nguyễn Tuấn, a school friend of Nễ's.¹⁰⁶

The events following the Tây Sơn conquest of Đàng Ngoài tore Du's family apart. Nễ, Úc, and Du were in separate locations, awaiting the outcome of the events unfolding. His other brothers, Khản and Điều, raised an army to support their faction of the Trịnh. Yet another older sibling, Nguyễn Quýnh was killed in Nghệ An as he fought the Tây Sơn on behalf of the Lê and his faction of the Trịnh.¹⁰⁷ Du's thoughts during this period are illustrated by his poem about the Vị Hoàng River in Thanh Hoá province.

The bank of the Vị River serves as the army's base,
The watchtower sits on high under blue skies.
In the afternoon at the ancient port, only horse's drinking water can be seen,
In the middle of a desolate night, fireflies zigzag over the barren fields.
In days gone by, one never saw a dynasty hold its ground for a thousand years.
The scene here serves as a reminder of the outcome of a hundred battles.
Never look towards Thanh Hoá again,
For the Địch sơn range has yet to change its green complexion of yore.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰² See for example: Nguyễn Thạch Giang and Trương Chính 40, Nguyễn Lộc 33, Phan Ngọc, 79.

¹⁰³ Kelley, 140.

¹⁰⁴ Phan Ngọc, 32. My translation.

¹⁰⁵ Đinh Công Vĩ, 44.

¹⁰⁶ Nguyễn Thạch Giang and Trương Chính, 40.

¹⁰⁷ Đinh Công Vĩ, 19.

¹⁰⁸ Nguyễn Du in Duy Phi. *249 bài thơ chữ Hán Nguyễn Du*, 14-15. My translation of the quốc ngữ transliteration of Chinese.

This poem seems to be of two perspectives, as it appears Du's mind was at this point. In Vietnamese, the term "bản khoăn" or "of two minds" describes Du's state. The first four lines of this poem paint a dark picture. The Tây Sơn had come north, conquering as they went. They are camped on the banks of the Vĩ River in Thanh Hoá Province (north central Việt Nam). Due to the havoc and carnage they have wrought, they are the only ones on the scene – otherwise it appears abandoned. The barren fields remind us of the harsh times the people have been and are going through as did Phạm Quý Thích's poem above. "Barren fields" not only connote famine caused by natural disasters or poor harvests, but in this case they are also a consequence of the conflict occurring at the time. Furthermore as was noted concerning Thích's verse, a regime that cannot feed its people, one which nature seems pit against, does not have a mandate to rule the realm. In contrast, in the second half of this poem Du seems to be of a more sympathetic voice. He evokes historical memory explaining that no dynasty lasts forever. The scene on the Vĩ River is a "reminder of the outcome" of the battles that were waged there. This statement and apparently the scene at Vĩ River are emblematic of the end of the Lê/Trịnh reign. For one whose family served this regime for generations, this is a surprisingly neutral statement. The last two lines are also interesting. One need not be reminded of the events that occurred in this region. They have ended and the mountains have remained – the events of war and change in dynasty have not fundamentally changed the nature of the realm. Thus, it seems that at the same time as Du is mourning the conquest of the north and the effects of warfare, he is also not completely pessimistic about the future. His attitude changed as the years passed. Again, Du witnessed the corruption and in-fighting of the Lê/Trịnh first-hand. He was under no illusions that the regime his family served was morally just and correct. Du, a scholar deeply versed in classical East Asian (Chinese) history, knew that no dynasty was able to "hold its ground for a thousand years".

In 1788, after Quang Trung's defeat of the Qing forces sent by the Chinese on behalf of Lê Chiêu Thống, Du must have been assured that the old dynasty was not to return. Following Quang Trung's victory and his attempts to consolidate power in Đàng Ngoài, Du's older brother Nguyễn Nễ and brother-in-law Đoàn Nguyễn Tuấn agreed to serve the Tây Sơn regime after accepting the appeals written by Ngô Thì Nhậm on behalf of Quang Trung.¹⁰⁹ Nễ urged his younger brother, still in Hải An to serve the Tây Sơn. Du responded that he would not, noting that even after 60 years had passed, there were still those who would not serve the Chu dynasty, which had replaced the Han.¹¹⁰ It is telling that Du used this analogy. He did not repute the Tây Sơn, he simply cited historical precedent for his actions. Again, this was a period of confusion for Du. He saw his older brother and brother-in-law agree to serve the Tây Sơn, while other family members were fighting them. He was a young man, in his prime and must have wanted to serve a ruler, while at the same time he thought it best to withdraw from the chaos around him.

For the following ten years, from 1786 until 1796, Du would stay with his wife's family, having withdrawn from political life at the age of only 20. Du later described this ten

¹⁰⁹ Đinh Công Vĩ, 20.

¹¹⁰ Nguyễn Thạch Giang and Trương Chính, 62.

year period, as his period of “gío bụi”, his years of “wind and dust”, of hardship.¹¹¹ During this time, Du attempted to practice herbal medicine, but was not successful. The talented young man was dependent on someone else for his sustenance; he lived at his wife’s family’s expense (ăn nhờ ở đậu). Du’s untitled poem below demonstrates his attitude at this juncture in his life.

Life has yet to bring glory, it has only weakened.
My disheveled grey hair flies in the wind.
The long legs of the crane are a natural endowment, why cut them short?
Where is there a life soft as goose down?
Heaven endows one with strength and youth,
Age shrivels the appearance, bringing a grey and white beard.
A slender blade of grass departs before a western gust blows it away,
In the end, who knows where it will end up?¹¹²

Although the exact date of the composition of this poem is not known, it is believed that Du composed it while in Hải An due to the fact that it is coupled with another poem in which Du refers to his age – 30 years old.¹¹³ The first thing that strikes one when they have this knowledge is that the composer was only thirty at the time of composition, perhaps younger! Du’s years of hardship in Hải An have obviously taken their toll on his health and mental outlook on life. He describes himself as the possessor of grey hair flying in the wind; age has brought him a grey and white beard. On the other hand, Du’s “old age” and experiences in life have not brought him glory or happiness; they have only served to weaken him, physically and mentally. His endowments of “strength and youth” have been robbed from him, the “long legs of the crane” (a metaphor for longevity) cut short. One wonders if Du is referring to the Tây Sơn, when he mentions departing before a “western wind” (tây phong, tây meaning west) blows him away. Due to the imagery of this poem, I tend to think that Du was referring to escaping death rather than taking flight from the Tây Sơn. In any case, it is clear from the picture that Du paints that his years in Hải An have indeed been a period of hardship. In contrast with the earlier images described in his poem on the Vĩ River, Du seems to have lost his optimism. He is no longer “bản khoản”, he is of one mind, which is predominantly pessimistic regarding his situation and certainly regarding his society.

Despite the fact that Du would not serve the Tây Sơn, he maintained a close relationship with both his brother Nễ and brother-in-law Tuấn whom both served the dynasty. Du went to visit Nễ twice during the period he was in Hải An, in 1793 following Nễ’s promotion and move to Phú Xuân and again in 1794 when Tuấn was given a similar honor.¹¹⁴ By maintaining a relationship of this sort with both Nễ and Tuấn, one can hypothesize that Du was not “angry” at them for having “betrayed” the Lê/Trịnh. Du did not completely disagree with the Tây Sơn enterprise; rather he felt that he could not serve

¹¹¹ Nguyễn Thạch Giang and Trương Chính, 66-67.

¹¹² Nguyễn Thạch Giang and Trương Chính, 70. My translation from the quốc ngữ transliteration of Chinese.

¹¹³ Nguyễn Thạch Giang and Trương Chính, 70-71.

¹¹⁴ Nguyễn Thạch Giang and Trương Chính, 63, 71.

during times that he found were morally bankrupt. Du's views on the Tay Son during this period can be viewed from the following section of his "Lament":

There were also those men who tread the proud road,
Their will sought to conquer the country
Why talk of the period of their competition?
Think of when their power was subdued, their destiny at an end and grieve.
All of the sudden a storm broke, their roofs crumbled
Could their judicious minds be swapped for those of a boar?
The more they grew high and wealthy, the more they bred resentment and hatred
Fresh blood spilled profusely, dried bones crumbled.¹¹⁵

In the first part of this passage, Du's empathetic voice can be heard. One should not recollect of the period of their "competition", but rather think of their downfall and "grieve". This is indicative of Du's point of view regarding the Tay Son. He was not inherently against the enterprise, some of those closest to him served it; rather he was against the atrocities committed during their period of competition. His two chief qualms are then discussed in the following section. Their form of justice is comparable to that of an animal, during their regime they accumulated wealth while blood spilled and bones piled up in their cause. Du was witness to this; he chose not to serve the regime because he found this "compromise" reprehensible.

The period between the coup of 1782 until Du left his wife's hometown upon her death in 1796, shaped Du's outlook on the world. As was stated in a previous section of this paper, this was a period of tremendous hardship, and social and political change for the people of Đàng Ngoài. When Du returned to his fatherland in Nghi Xuân district, Nghệ An province in 1796, he was only thirty years old, but had tired of the world around him. This period of his life, from 1796, until he was called to serve the Nguyễn dynasty in 1802, seems to be amongst the most content of his life.

In 1795, Du's wife died in childbirth after giving birth to their son Nguyễn Tứ.¹¹⁶ Du decided to take his infant son and return to his father's ancestral land of Nghi Xuân, where he had several relatives. I view this period of Du's life as his idealized existence, especially when he reflects on this time after being forced to serve the Nguyễn in 1802. Du describes Nghi Xuân as a beautiful local; he lived at the foot of Hồng Mountain, near the ocean. He roamed the mountains and took up hunting for his livelihood.¹¹⁷ He exclaimed in his poem "Fishing house on the south sea" ("Nam hải điều đồ") that his only purposes in life were to go hunting and seek pleasure. Indeed, it seems that during this period he did just that – he went hunting to escape the world, visited friends, sang, drank wine, and composed poetry. This is truly the life of one that is practicing vô vi – he had withdrawn from the world and was seeking pleasure and contentment. Again, in my view Du had cognitively made this decision. He knew of the political events swirling around him, of the factions in Cảnh Thịnh's court and of Nguyễn Ánh's increasing

¹¹⁵ Nguyễn Du in Nguyễn Thạch Giang, 608. Lines 21-28. My translation.

¹¹⁶ Đỉnh Công Vĩ, 78.

¹¹⁷ Nguyễn Thạch Giang and Trương Chính, 90.

strength (due to his regular contact with Nễ and Tuấn). Du however did not want to serve. He had viewed his society and only sought to disassociate himself from it. He had witnessed the warfare, corruption, and societal changes that I have outlined above. He did not want to be a public servant in a society that had these characteristics. He would rather have used his talents to compose verse, sing, and go hunting. Du's view regarding the plight and conduct of officials during this period can be glimpsed from this passage of his "Lament":

Over there the men who wore high hats and dragon shirts,
With red brush in hand, they dealt life and death.
Managing affairs of state, their pockets filled,
By night they'd read Quan Cat, by day Y Chu.
Their prosperity came to an end, resentment and hatred flourished.
One hundred types of ghosts and tombs were born in the surrounding area.
Even one thousand pieces of gold could not change their fate,
Their halls of singing and pleasure have crumbled,
All those they held dear have deserted them,
Who will bring them a cup of water or a stick of incense?
Their souls stumble though they were once on high,
Heavy their burden of injustice dispensed, they search for the road to salvation.¹¹⁸

Again, the exact date of composition is not known, but widely believed to be at the beginning of Du's service to the Nguyễn. Therefore, the commentary that Du makes should be interpreted towards not only those who chose to serve the Tây Sơn enterprise, but also of his brethren from the Lê/Trịnh era. This passage gives the reader a window into Du's conception of the scholar-official and the transitory and eventually worthless nature of power that they held. The illusions that Du makes to corruption are inescapable in the first part of this passage. High officials dealt life and death and lined their pockets with the sweat of the people only to brew resentment and hatred at their actions. This resentment and hatred is directly correlated to the downfall of these officials – "One hundred types of ghosts and tombs were born". Having so disserved those whom they were charged to protect, not even their families will bring their stumbling souls relief in the form of a cup of water or a joss stick. Their helpless souls, weighed down by crimes committed, are alone in their search for salvation. This dark portrait of officials, the actions that they perpetrated and the consequences that ensue from those actions are, I believe, indicative of the way that Du perceived officialdom. How could one maintain virtue while being associated with these kinds of practices? Du it seems would rather not have that association scar his soul. The view of officials in his "Lament" is akin to his use of officials in the "Tale of Kiều" analyzed below.

In 1802, with Gia Long's victory at Phú Xuân, Nguyễn Nễ followed the new emperor north on his conquest of Thăng Long.¹¹⁹ Many northern scholars that had retreated during the Tây Sơn years heeded Gia Long's call for talented men. I believe that the reasons for this were probably three-fold. One, they saw Gia Long as more 'legitimate'

¹¹⁸ Nguyễn Du in Nguyễn Thạch Giang, 609. Lines 45-56. My translation.

¹¹⁹ Đinh Công Vĩ, 20.

than the Tây Sơn. Despite the fact that the Nguyễn ruled Đàng Trong for almost 300 years in opposition to the Trịnh, in all that time they pledged their allegiance to the Lê monarchs. Upon conquering the north in 1802, although Gia Long did not 'restore the Lê', he did not bring about their downfall, as many believed the Tây Sơn had. Secondly, after a period of over 20 years of political disunity and warfare in the north, many of these literati saw this as their last opportunity to serve a monarch. Like Du, many of the scholars that had withdrawn were not living extravagant lifestyles. As Alexander Woodside points out, Du spent this period as an "impoverished backwoods scholar"¹²⁰ Thus, this was their opportunity to serve a monarch, improve their livelihood, and for many follow their family's tradition of serving as scholar-officials. Lastly, some literati emerged from political seclusion due to the fact that they felt they could not do otherwise. It is this last possibility that I believe was the reason that Du 'chose' to serve the Nguyễn.

In August of 1802, Nguyễn Du left Nghệ Xuân to serve the Nguyễn dynasty in Sơn Nam province.¹²¹ As Trần Trọng Kim states, "Gentlemen had to heed the call to serve as officials, to refuse two or three times would not do."¹²² Du appears to have recognized that under the new regime he could no longer refuse to serve. If he continued his attempts to abscond, he would never recover from the consequences. As Liam Kelley has asserted, Du came out of 'retirement' only when he was "ordered and could not refuse."¹²³ Thus began the period in which Du was forced to prostitute his talents to serve a master, in my view another period of "wind and dust".

Du spent the next 18 years of his life in the service of Gia Long. "His attitude towards service over roughly the next two decades was often lackluster."¹²⁴ In my opinion, this is an understatement. During much of Du's time as an official, he practiced what I would call non-violent protestation. He did this through two principal methods, one of which was his poetry, specifically the "Tale of Kiều". The other was his repeated requests to quit working and return to Nghệ Xuân.

In the period between 1802 and 1812, when he was selected as an envoy to China, Du asked to return to his home a total of four times.¹²⁵ He returned to service only when he was asked. Nguyễn Du, unlike others that chose to serve the Nguyễn for pragmatic reasons, did not desire the recognition or wealth that came with being an official. "For Du, the purpose of being an official was only food and clothing; it was certainly not for position and fame."¹²⁶ In his poetry from this period, he always talked of missing home, of the Hồng Mountain, of hunting. His attitude towards being an official and his desire to return to his leisurely existence, away from the world, is demonstrated in the following poem, "Ký hữu":

¹²⁰ Woodside in Huỳnh Sanh Thông, xiii.

¹²¹ Nguyễn Thạch Giang and Trương Chính, 104.

¹²² Trần Trọng Kim in Nguyễn Thạch Giang and Trương Chính, 104. My translation.

¹²³ Kelley, 105.

¹²⁴ Kelley, 105.

¹²⁵ Nguyễn Thạch Giang and Trương Chính, 104-140.

¹²⁶ Nguyễn Thạch Giang and Trương Chính, 111. My translation.

Tonight above the Hồng Mountain, the sesame shaped moon shines brightly,
 In Trường An, a thousand miles distant, my heart is immersed in sorrow.
 The pearl within my breast can no longer maintain its luster.
 A little fame in a mountain district is worth nothing.
 What is the use in becoming a great official?
 Not yet dead, there will come a day when I again befriend the deer.
 Craving to lounge by the north window each day,
 No work to make my soul weary.¹²⁷

Du expresses his attitude towards service very clearly in this verse. His slice of fame in the district in which he is serving is worthless. Worse than this, it is soul draining. Du's "true nature" is being sullied by his prostitution; the "pearl" in his breast has lost its sheen. In Du's typically morose and moribund fashion he exclaims "not yet dead" (the term he uses is "vô tử" which can be literally translated as – "not yet croaked") after which he tells of his hopes for the future. He wishes to be at the foot of the Hồng Mountain, of walking in the woods, contemplating nature, and befriending the deer. Du craves to lounge by the window of his Nghị Xuân abode, with no official work to tire him; he can resume his life of hunting and seeking pleasure.

Du's attitude towards service and withdrawal is akin to that of another scholar-official, Nguyễn Bình Khiêm, who lived over 200 years before. Nguyễn Bình Khiêm (1491-1585) was also born into a period of turmoil, during the rise of the Mạc, and the subsequent Lê/Mạc wars. Khiêm served the Mạc for a brief period, passing the examination when he was over 40 years old. Following his brief period of service, Khiêm retired to an abode in the mountains. In his poem "Time and again you've seen them win or lose" there are clear parallels between the feelings the poet possesses regarding his period of history, society, and his hopes and aspirations, and those of Nguyễn Du during his service under the Nguyễn in the early 19th century.

Time and again you've seen them win or lose;
 For leisure you've exchanged their hectic world.
 You take your own sweet ease at the White Cloud,
 So loath to plod your way through dust and mud.
 They visit you till dark – the flowers, your guests.
 It sees your heart at night – the moon, your lamp.
 Don't glance past things – look closely; you can tell:
 Vermillion will stay red, and ink pitch-black.¹²⁸

This poem reads more like Du's dreams when he was an official for the Nguyễn than his reality. As has been stated, Du wanted to exchange the hectic world of service for leisure; time and again he attempted to do this, only to be called back. Like Du, Khiêm talks fondly of his home in the mountains – "the White cloud", where "flowers" visit till dark and the moon is his lamp. It is telling that over two hundred years have passed between the lives of these two poets and yet their situations and emotions seem to be

¹²⁷ Nguyễn Du in Duy Phi, 112-113. My translation from the quốc ngữ transliteration of Chinese.

¹²⁸ Huỳnh Sanh Thông. *An Anthology of Vietnamese Poems*; 42.

entwined. In the last line of the poem, Khiêm seems to be asserting that the nature of his times and society will not change, even if one attempts to “glance past” the obvious. Du certainly shared this feeling, although dynastic change had accompanied his existence, the many of the troubles that he found in the Lê/Trịnh period were still present when he was serving the Nguyễn in the early 19th century, thus his constant desire to follow the path that Nguyễn Bình Khiêm had tread and withdraw.

In 1812, Du asked to return for the third time, his excuse was to mourn the passing of Nguyễn Nễ, who had died in seven years previously. Du actually retired from office and did not plan to work as an official again.¹²⁹ However, in 1813, Du was called to serve as an envoy to Beijing. His poetry from this embassy reflects the fact that he was not happy to be on this mission. Despite having his son Tứ accompany him, he missed home and family, he wanted to return, as is illustrated in his poem, “Setting off by boat on the Ming River”:

The clamor of fife and drum upon exiting the frontier post,
Through the breaks between myriad mountains this single raft races,
Floating clouds abruptly disperse, the stones look scraggly.
New flood waters just arisen, the river water is turbid.
Crossing the mountains and passes since departing, I think of my brother and sister.
Viewing the crags and peaks before me, I see my children and grandchildren.
When the sun goes down I hope that we will not continue on toward Mount Hua,
For fear that I will hear the gut-wrenching calls of gibbons.¹³⁰

It appears that one of Du’s most important duties in his service to the Nguyễn was as an envoy to China, due to the fact that he was asked to make this journey twice. Rather than being an honor for Du, this trip seems more of a burden. The celebrations noted at the beginning of this prose give way to darker images of the rough journey. When Du composed this poem, he was journeying from the Việt realm into the Chinese realm, it appears that he viewed this as the point of no return – he was going to be away from his home, friends, and family for a long period of time. He recalls family as he makes his way through the “mountains and passes”, seeing the images of loved ones in the “crags and peaks”. The last two lines of the poem are especially indicative of Du’s melancholia, he begs not to continue on their journey, for hearing the call of gibbons will only further his sorrow. This journey seems to be more than a chore for Du, it is torture. He sees no value in the honors bestowed on him for making this seemingly important trip, he only views it as a source of sadness and the reason that he must be separated from his loved ones for an extended period of time.

After returning from China, Du returned home for six months before being asked to serve in Huế.¹³¹ It seems that by this point, Du had reconciled himself to serving the Nguyễn dynasty, seeing that he had no other option. Du was again asked to be an emissary to China in 1820, the year of Gia Long’s death. Upon preparing to depart, Du fell ill. He

¹²⁹ Nguyễn Thạch Giang and Trương Chính, 113.

¹³⁰ Nguyễn Du in Kelley, 108.

¹³¹ Đinh Công Vĩ, 89.

died on the 16th of September, 1820. As has been demonstrated, from 1802, Du's poems are those of a man who was forced to serve, he did not find pleasure in his service or the comforts that it presumably brought him. Du had not tired of the world itself, he still found beauty in many things, yet he had tired of his existence, of his forced servitude, of others hijacking his talents for their own purpose. The poems that have been examined here demonstrate Du's thoughts and emotions during this period. I will now examine what I believe to be Du's personal criticism of the society in which he lived, the "Tale of Kiều".

The "Tale of Kiều": An analysis

The purpose of this paper thus far has been to examine the era in which Nguyễn Du lived, placing the author in historical context. Furthermore, it has highlighted some of the societal changes and problems that I believe run parallel to the society which Du created in the "Tale of Kiều". The final section of this work seeks to examine the "Tale of Kiều". As has been stated, it is my contention that Du composed "Kiều" as a heart wrenching critique of his own life and times. Precedent for this type of social commentary through literature and poetry in this epoch has already been addressed above. I have also pointed out precedent for Du's having critiqued his own society through his other compositions, namely his "Lament for the ten types of wandering souls". The "Tale of Kiều" is a complex poem, while the entire tale runs only 3250 lines, every word that Du chose is chalked full of meaning. Du strung his words together to construct a picture of both the characters of the epic and the society which they inhabited. I am particularly interested in examining three different interconnected issues that I believe Du draws attention to in the "Tale" as a veiled criticism for his own world. These are: injustice, corruption, and concepts of value/worth, in conjunction with the role that scholars and officials (both civil and military) play in the facilitation of the three. By this analysis, I hope to convey not only the image that Du constructs of Kiều's society, but also and by connection the way in which the author perceived his own life and times.

Du paints a picture of a society that is rotting from bottom to top. Kiều represents the good of humanity, its worth and value. Society however throws Kiều to the wind, batting her here and there. The only value that society places on Kiều's talents and beauty is monetary, they have no value beyond that which can be bought and sold. She is bought and sold a total of four times in the poem. In her 15 years of "dust and wind" Kiều is married seven times, is a concubine twice, a slave once, works as a prostitute twice, is once a mistress, and is a nun on four separate occasions. In all of these situations, Kiều maintains her character, that of a person that has a self-awareness of their own worth, even if society does not.

In order to ascertain the commentary that Du was making, in particular aspects of injustice, corruption, and value, I have chosen to analyze eight different episodes in the "Tale". With cohesion in mind, I will discuss these scenes in the sequence in which they occur in the "Tale". They are the following: the arrest of Mr. Vương (Kiều's father);

Mã Giám Sinh's purchase of Kiều, her stay in the brothel of Tú Bà, and interaction with Sở Khanh; Kiều's marriage to Thúc Sinh and subsequent enslavement in the house of his first wife, Hoạn Thư; Kiều's felicitation of 'justice' when she is with Từ Hải; the death of Từ Hải and the role that Kiều plays in it, the devious plan of Hồ Tôn Hiến and his treatment of Kiều; and lastly Kiều's salvation at the end of the saga. In undertaking this analysis, I will quote at length from the tale, all translations are my own.

The arrest of Mr. Vương

The arrest of Mr. Vương and his son Quan is the pivotal moment in the early part of the epic. It is because of this act that Kiều is forced to sell herself in 'marriage' to Mã Giám Sinh, thus beginning her 15 years of hardship. Recall that the episode takes place after Kiều's family has returned from birthday celebrations and after Kiều has betrothed herself to Kim Trọng. Du describes the scene as follows:

At a loss, Kiều was moving to and fro,
When her family returned from the birthday feast.
There was no time to open her heart, to express her feelings,
All of the sudden, district officials and soldiers rushed in from all sides,
making a great racket:
Armed with clubs and knives,
The ruffians move about impetuously,
They put a cangue on the old man and his son,
One rope tied the two,
Like insects buzzing through the house,
They smashed workbaskets and shattered looms to bits.
They grabbed all the jewels and personal objects,
Picking the house clean to fill greed's bag.
What had they done, Kiều's family?
Who had caught them in a net, snared them in a trap?
Later they discovered:
A silk merchant had denounced them.
Their house stricken with panic, its inhabitants astounded
The sound of injustice resounded, cries of innocence rose-up,
All day they groveled, begged, and prayed!
Their cries fell on deaf ears, the miserable victims were badly beaten,
Then they were tied to a beam, their heads hanging down
Even stones would have felt pity for their plight!
Their faces contorted with pain and fear,
To correct this injustice, they could only appeal to heaven, yet it was so far away!
On this day, strange the habits of officials,
All of these disastrous events were after all due to money!¹³²

¹³² Nguyễn Du. *Truyện Kiều*. Lines 573-598. My translation.

The first thing that I would like to draw attention to is the behavior of the “district officials and soldiers” who rushed into Kiều’s house. The scene that Du sets is one in which these “ruffians” enter the house, put the men in shackles, and rather than taking them off to a higher official or to jail, they destroy and rob the house. As all of this is taking place, Kiều and her family are clueless as to the cause. Only later, after the destruction and pillaging has been wrought do they ascertain the “problem” – a silk merchant has denounced them. Again, this is a vital moment in the poem, it is the reason that Kiều has to sell herself, the reason that she embarks on a life of tremendous hardship. Yet Du gives the reader no viable reason for this to occur, he simply spends one line on his ‘explanation’.

As interesting as the words that Du uses to construct this poem are, perhaps it is more telling to look into the areas where he does not use words, where there is no explanation for terrible injustice. It stands the reason that Du expends so few words on the explanation, it is simply arbitrary. In the system of justice that Kiều lives under one can be falsely accused, their life ruined, all on the pretense of accusation. More than mere accusation, the purpose of the arrest of Mr. Vương was that of robbery and extortion. Again, the first action taken by the officials and soldiers after ‘arresting’ Mr. Vương and Vương Quan was to rob the house. Du tells us that all of these events were due to money.

It is fairly obvious the type of commentary that Du is making on Kiều’s society. It is a place where lives can be ruined, possessions stolen, people beaten all because of people’s greed for monetary treasure. This behavior would not be surprising if its origins were that of pirates or bandits (which were ubiquitous during the late 18th and early 19th centuries), but it is “officials and soldiers” who are the culprits – they behave like bandits. Rather than being arbiters of justice in society, these parties are the catalysts of injustice and corruption. Thus Kiều’s society is one in which injustice reigns. As Du tells us, the victims only chance for justice is to appeal to ‘heaven’, there are no just powers on earth. Those who are supposed to be the guardians of justice on earth are the proprietors of injustice and cruelty.

Not satisfied with their take in booty from Kiều’s house, the officials and soldiers whom arrested Mr. Vương also seek ransom from Kiều’s now devastated and helpless family. All of their possessions have been taken and their house has been ruined, but the officials of Du’s epic are not content with these riches, they are in need of coin as well:

Old Chung was a scribe,
He felt compassion for their plight
He saw Kiều’s piety, her deep affection for her father
Because of her, he thought of how much they would have to pay
He reckoned they would have to bribe the officials for Mr. Vương’s release,
For 300 pieces of gold, all would come to an end.
Until the money was in hand, they would remain in custody,
Kiều was told to find the money in three days.¹³³

¹³³ Nguyễn Du, Lines 607-614. My translation.

The same officials that robbed Kiều's family and put her father in custody in the first place now seek to extort money from her. Kiều is told by old Chung, who basically feels sorry for her and her family, that in addition to everything else that they have gone through, she will also have to pay for her father's release – Du does not say what will happen if he is not released, but we can assume that he will either be beaten, killed, or exiled – standard punishments in Du's age. Old Chung is actually being kind to the family – he is facilitating the bribe. He is however of no help with the problem of where to come up with the money. The only solution that Kiều can find is to sell herself in marriage. She is a woman in pre-modern 'Chinese' society.¹³⁴ There is little opportunity for her to earn this amount of money in general, in such a short period of time it would be impossible. Kiều is a supremely beautiful and talented girl, she presumably knows that she can fetch a good price – at least enough to pay the bribe and free her father.

This is where the reader is first accosted with Kiều's 'worth' to society. At the beginning of the epic Du paints Kiều as the most beautiful and talented woman that had ever lived. For Du, Kiều is the ideal woman. When faced with these circumstances, the only value that beauty and talent can bring her is a few hundred pieces of gold. It is telling that she also recognizes this fact – this is her solution to the problem. Kiều is aware of how to play the game of justice, she knows that money is the solution to her family's difficulties and that she can obtain the desired amount through the sale of herself.

It is from this point that Kiều begins her life of woe. The antecedents for this are the injustice and corruption that pervade Kiều's society. The official's greed has caused Mr. Vương to be arrested and has forced Kiều into selling herself. It is clear from this point in the epic that Kiều's society is sick and dying. It is the type of place where officials are the cause rather than the cure of injustice and where scholars become pimps.

Two scholars and a lady: Mã Giám Sinh, Sở Khanh, and Tú Bà

An intermediary from the state is brought in to find a worthy buyer for Kiều. In this case a 'worthy buyer' is a man that has the money to pay for Kiều. The call goes out that a girl of talent and beauty will sell herself in marriage. Mã Giám Sinh enters the "Tale" upon hearing of the potential to purchase a concubine:

When asked his name, he said "Mã Giám Sinh",
When asked his hometown, he replied, "Lâm Thanh district, near here."
Past his prime of youth, he was over forty,
But he had a clean shaven face and was smartly dressed,
He walked ahead of his noisy servants,
The agent from the bank welcomed them into the house.
Insolently, he took the highest chair,

¹³⁴ Although this statement is technically true, I believe that Du veiled his criticism by placing Kiều in the context of Ming China, rather than the era in which he lived in Việt Nam. It is my contention that "Kiều" is in fact an image of Vietnamese society.

The agent urged Kiêu to enter.¹³⁵

This is the description that Du provides for Mã Giám Sinh. The name, “Mã Giám Sinh” actually connotes that Mã is a scholar from the Imperial University (Quốc tử giám), thus its English rendition might be something like, “Scholar Mã of the Imperial University”, for ease sake I will refer to him as Du does – Mã Giám Sinh or simply as “Mã”. Mã Giám Sinh’s appearance is unique for a scholar who is over forty. Unlike his contemporaries, who let their beards grow as they sprout, Mã is clean shaven. This connotes two things. One is that Mã is trying to hold on to his youth, although he is past his prime. In connection, Du is seeking to tell us that Mã is a false scholar. Not only is his appearance of a clean shaven face and “smart” clothes not compatible with a scholar from the Imperial University, what is more, a man over forty who does these things and comports himself in the manner in which Mã does is indicative of one who lacks “culture”. Du lends additional hints to Mã’s true station when he mentions his ‘noisy servants’ and the fact that Mã took the highest chair in the room. True men of culture and education compose themselves quietly in public, especially when going to meet a potential bride. Furthermore, scholars are humble (at least outwardly), a true scholar would never walk into a room ahead of his boisterous entourage and take the seat of importance, especially when a guest in another’s home. Mã Giám Sinh is however not a ‘normal’ scholar. It is telling that such a person exists in society, just as talent and beauty have no true value, so too are a scholar’s humble nature and quiet virtue thrown to the wind.

After taking his place in the highest chair, Mã Giám Sinh is ready to view his potential bride. He bargains over the bride with the intermediary agent:

Her beauty and talents were weighed and measured,
They made her play a tune on the lute and write verse on a fan.
He was pleased with her appearance and charms,
Satisfied, he wanted to make the deal,
He said: “I came to Lam Kiêu for a bride,
How much am I to pay for the bridal price?”
The agent replied: “She is worth at least a thousand pieces of gold!
But since misfortune has befallen her family,
They don’t dare ask that much!”
They bargained over the bride, going down one and then up two,
After a while, they came to an agreement,
he would pay around 400 pieces of gold for her.
After that was said, all was smooth.

The money was in hand, the deed was done, the problem solved.¹³⁶

This scene, in which Mã Giám Sinh and the agent barter over Kiêu, is remarkably like that of a person bargaining over a piece of meat in the market. Kiêu was brought before

¹³⁵ Nguyễn Du, lines 625-632. My translation.

¹³⁶ Nguyễn Du, lines 639-649 and 652. My translation.

Mã, her talents and beauty were “weighed and measured”. After Mã was satisfied with his potential purchase, he bartered with the agent over Kiều’s price – “going down one and then up two”. It was of course common place for the groom to pay a bridal price in pre-modern Việt Nam. The groom and bride’s parents would meet, exchange gifts and pleasantries, and then decide on the bridal price, date for the ceremonies etc.¹³⁷ In Kiều’s society however, this ritual is turned on its head. Despite the fact that Kiều’s family is in a dire situation, Mã Giám Sinh and the agent could still have behaved with some dignity, this is after all Kiều’s potential husband (as far as we know at this point). Instead, Mã and the broker haggle over Kiều’s worth, which is of course only monetary and even at that we have to assume the price Mã pays is a bargain, due to the fact that Kiều’s family is in great need of the money – to secure her father’s release. Du brings this whole episode – from the arrest of Mr. Vương to the sale of Kiều – to its conclusion when he says “The money was in hand, the deed was done, the problem solved”. Again, due to the corruption and materialism in Kiều’s society, money is the solution to injustice, as will be illustrated continually below. Money has great power in any society, but the fact that it came to play a larger role in Du’s society during the 18th century cannot be overlooked with regards to the prominent place it plays in Kieu’s society. Furthermore, the official corruption coupled with the lack of justice during the Tây Sơn period in Đàng Ngoài, and in large part continuing into the Nguyễn period would have made Du keenly aware ‘monetary justice’. In the power vacuum that this prolonged and complex conflict created, commodities would have been the arbiters of justice. As Du puts it, “With money in hand, it is not difficult to change white to black!”¹³⁸

After Mã Giám Sinh buys Kiều, the two are married; Mã proceeds to take her back to his home. The following passage is Mã’s ‘inner-monologue’ in which he is debating whether or not he should deflower Kiều. As Kiều later discovers, Mã is not her ‘husband’, but a pimp married to a Madame, Tú Bà.

The beauty is in my hand, he happily thought,
 The more I view her beauty the more I crave her:
 “An extraordinarily gorgeous girl with a heavenly scent,
 One smile is certainly worth 1000 pieces of gold, it’s true!”
 When she is in the brothel, to be the first,
 The aristocrats will be pushing and shoving.
 She’ll bring at least 300 pieces,
 After that, it’s all profit!
 When something so good is in your hand,
 Should you protect your investment or take advantage?
 A heavenly peach within a mortals grasp,
 Then I will bend the branch and eat the fruit!
 In this world, how many men,
 Who play with flowers really know a true rose?¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Trần Tuyết Nhung. *Vietnamese Woman at the Crossroads: Gender and Society in Early Modern Đàng Ngoài*, 84-85.

¹³⁸ Nguyễn Du, line 689. My translation.

¹³⁹ Nguyễn Du, lines 823-836. My translation.

It should be remembered that these are the words of a 'scholar'. Mã Giám Sinh actually was a scholar who fell into the immoral practices of frequenting brothels, eventually marrying an old courtesan, the two opened a shop together. In this passage, Mã is once again weighing and measuring both Kiều's beauty and whether or not he should deflower her. Before Mã comes to his decision, he talks of the money that Kiều will be able to earn for he and the Madame. For the privilege of being the first, "aristocrats" will be pushing and shoving. She will be able to earn back the money that they paid for her the first time, after that all he and the bawd earn will be profit. Mã however decides against "protecting his investment", the temptation to take advantage of Kiều is too great. Furthermore, he later says that he and Tú Bà will still be able to sell her virginity, believing that the client will be fooled, "though not so new, she will fetch no less money."¹⁴⁰

Kiều's worth in strictly monetary terms in this passage is inescapable, so I will not spend much time on it here. What is perhaps more interesting and just as indicative of Kiều's society, and I believe Du's criticism is that a person like Mã Giám Sinh can exist at all. As was stated, Mã is a fallen scholar. But he has so lost his moral compass that he is not only in the process of cheating Kiều into prostitution; he also wants to have her for himself, for free! Moreover, Mã mentions that the other part of the 'ruling class' (thống trị), the "aristocrats" will be fighting over Kiều's virginity at the whorehouse.¹⁴¹ Du is painting a distinctly negative picture of those who rule his society, both parties lack virtue and are corrupt.

When Mã Giám Sinh brings Kiều to his home, the brothel, the reader is introduced to Tú Bà, Mã's wife and the Madame of that establishment. Tú Bà was an ex-courtesan herself, whom upon growing older decided to open a house of ill-repute with the jaded scholar Mã. Kiều, when confronted by Tú Bà is still fairly clueless as to her predicament (she has ascertained Mã's true character, but is yet unaware that he is a pimp). She openly admits to Tú Bà that she and Mã have known each other as husband and wife. At this point Tú Bà becomes very angry, not least at Mã, but especially at Kiều. She exclaims: "Now that you have known a man, the money I paid for you is wasted!"¹⁴² She proceeds to beat Kiều, who pulls a knife from her cloak and stabs herself. Tú Bà's business sense then returns, and she has Kiều tended to so that her wounds will heal. Tú Bà of course cares nothing for Kiều, she wants to make sure than she can somehow recoup her investment. The bawd then promises Kiều that she will not have to take customers, but that Tú Bà will look for a proper marriage partner for her.

Kiều becomes a virtual prisoner in the whorehouse when she is visited by another scoundrel posing as a scholar, Sở Khanh.

¹⁴⁰ Nguyễn Du, line 840. My translation.

¹⁴¹ Note: I believe that in pre-modern Vietnamese society the 'ruling classes consisted of two distinct parts, the aristocrats (vua/chúa – kings and lords) and officials (quan), both civil and military.

¹⁴² Nguyễn Du, line 969. My translation.

She was surrounded on all sides by sea and mountain,
 In her anguish she composed four lines.
 A cry for compassion through her beaded curtain,
 Somewhere over the wall came a voice, rhyming its verse with hers
 It was the voice of a man, still in his prime,
 He was well-groomed and beautifully dressed.
 She thought that he must have been brought-up amongst fine books
 She asked and learned his name, Sở Khanh.¹⁴³

Du's description of Sở Khanh in this passage is decidedly that of a scholar. In fact, although not as detailed or complimentary, it is akin to the description he gives of Kim Trọng, Kiều's forlorn love, at the beginning of the tale. Sở Khanh is young, properly dressed, and what is more is able to compose verse at a moment's notice in accordance with the rhyme scheme that Kiều had used in her plea. From her first impression, Kiều also believes Sở Khanh to be of learned stock – “brought-up amongst fine books”. Kiều is in a desperate situation, a prisoner against her will, she pleads with Sở Khanh to help her, where upon he says: “Fair lady, know your hero! To help you get free from this prison, it's so easy!”¹⁴⁴ Sở Khanh and Kiều then plan Kiều's escape, when they do in fact escape, Sở Khanh leaves Kiều alone in the woods, where she is “found” by Tú Bà and taken back to the brothel. Sở Khanh has been working with Tú Bà all along, as will be discussed in greater detail below.

Tú Bà is furious at the “discovery” that Kiều made an attempt to escape. Kiều is dragged back to the brothel, where Tú Bà proceeds to beat her. At this Kiều exclaims:

You hold my life in your hands,
 This body has already come this far,
 I have resigned myself to my fate,
 But would you lose the money you paid?¹⁴⁵

This is the outcome that Tú Bà desired. She planned Kiều's entire escape with Sở Khanh so that when she “found” Kiều, the young girl would be forced to take clients, rather than taking up space by waiting for a suitor. It is not surprising that Tú Bà committed these actions, she has after all been partaking in the selling and buying of flesh all of her life. What is telling is that a “scholar” did. Although a scholar and official himself, Nguyễn Du does not characterize their ilk in a positive manner throughout his epic. Perhaps Sở Khanh was a scholar, but again, in this society “money can turn white to black”. It appears that Sở Khanh, rather than taking the highroad of books has fallen prey to the temptations of materialism and the life of one who frequents whorehouses, as a fellow courtesan of Kiều's, Mã Kiều explains:

Who doesn't know of Sở Khanh?
 He is a faithless scoundrel famous in brothels!

¹⁴³ Nguyễn Du, lines 1055-1062. My translation.

¹⁴⁴ Nguyễn Du, lines 1071-1072. My translation.

¹⁴⁵ Nguyễn Du, lines 1143-1146. My translation.

His hand has picked many a bud!
He tricked you in your escape,
He and Tú Bà were in cahoots!
Some 30 pieces of gold changed hands,
Do you think he would have done it if it had been otherwise?¹⁴⁶

Sở Khanh was willing to take part in Tú Bà scheme, to turn Kiều into a whore, for a mere thirty pieces of gold. He shows more of his true character when he goes to the brothel, following Kiều's capture:

He proudly sauntered in, his face brazen,
In a loud voice, Sở Khanh spoke ill:
"I've heard that a whore lives here
Who's spreading rumors that I led her astray,
Show yourself so that I can see who you are!"
Kiều said: "Ok, let's let it pass!
If you say we never met, then I agree!"
Sở Khanh stormed angrily,
Stepping back, he went to strike her.
She said: "Oh heaven!
You know he meant to cause me harm, don't you?
Who carried a person and pushed her down a deep well
He swore and swore again, only to immediately go back on his word!
Here it is, by his own hand,
I met him face to face, it was no one else!"
Her words were heard by one and all,
They cursed his unrighteousness, his ruthlessness!
His false love was as plain as day,
Shamefaced, the scoundrel beat a quick retreat.¹⁴⁷

It is interesting to juxtapose Kiều with Sở Khanh as well as the description that Du gave of Sở Khanh when he introduced him in comparison with the way Sở Khanh makes his exit from the "Tale". Sở Khanh returns to the brothel determined to save face with the ladies there. Despite the fact that Kiều has agreed to take clients and is technically a "whore", her character and morality still far surpass those of Sở Khanh. Sở Khanh yells at her and threatens to hit her. Kiều in contrast tells him that they should let it be, and when she is about to be struck, exposes the truth for all to see (she not only tells the story of his betrayal, she produces a piece of paper that he wrote to her telling her when they would make her escape). This is one of the aspects that embodies Kiều throughout the "Tale", although she must endure tremendous hardship, she maintains her moral character, she still has her sense of worth. Sở Khanh on the other hand has been proven to be a deceitful playboy. Du introduced Sở Khanh as a young man of learning, as a scholar. After going to the brothel to attempt to save face, Khanh is outwitted by Kiều. Rather than disputing her contentions any longer, Du simply tells us that he "beat a quick

¹⁴⁶ Nguyễn Du, lines 1158-1164. My translation.

¹⁴⁷ Nguyễn Du, lines 1170-1189. My translation.

retreat". Not only has the "scholar" been proved a faithless cheat who will do whatever will earn him money, he is not able to defend himself or his actions against Kiều, who has been relegated to the position of "whore" – a class in and of itself in pre-modern Vietnamese society.¹⁴⁸

Thúc Sinh and Hoạn Thư: The spineless scholar and the jealous aristocrat

One of the clients that goes to see Kiều at the brothel was a man by the name of Kỳ Tâm or Thúc Sinh. Thúc Sinh is another scholar and the son of a rich merchant who married the daughter of a high official, Hoạn Thư, with the hopes of social mobility. As Du states, "The Hoạn house was a famous lineage, The child of the Minister of the Interior was named Hoạn Thư."¹⁴⁹ Thúc went to Kiều's part of the realm with his father to open a business. At his father's absence, Thúc frequently visits Kiều, falls in love with her and wishes to make her his concubine. Kiều is cautious to this plan, she foretells that their might be turbulence in their relationship due to Thúc's marriage to Hoạn Thư. Thúc assures Kiều that he will protect her, that there was nothing to worry about. Thúc then pays Tú Bà for Kiều's release, as Du says: "Kiều was transformed, from a whore into an honest woman."¹⁵⁰

Kiêu and Thúc live together as husband and wife for a year, when Kiều implores Thúc once again to return to his wife's home and tell her of their marriage. Thúc however fails to carry out Kiều's request. It is obvious that he married Hoạn Thư with the hopes of gaining new power and position. He is afraid to tell her of his marriage to Kiều for the consequences that might fall on his head. Therefore he keeps his secret, which his wife was aware of in her breast the whole time. Thúc is yet another depiction of a scholar in Kiều's world. He has the ability to spend money with both hands, the mindset to marry the daughter of a high official, but not the courage or the character to stand up to his wife and tell her the truth. Thúc later gives Kiều the excuse for his inaction – he owes his clan an heir.

Hoạn Thư is furious at Thúc's betrayal and hatches a plan to separate the two lovers forever. Du describes Hoạn Thư's plan as follows:

Hoạn Thư said: "I've arranged for my servants to man a boat,
They will bring her back here bound in chains.
Then I will work her into the ground,
I will torture her for all of the world to see!
First, I will rent my anger on them both,
Then I will make them a laughing-stock forever!"
The mistress of the Hoạn house praised this marvelous plan
She spoiled her daughter with all the means to carry out her scheme.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Trần Tuyết Nhung, 124-125.

¹⁴⁹ Nguyễn Du, lines 1529-1530. My translation.

¹⁵⁰ Nguyễn Du, line 1378. My translation.

¹⁵¹ Nguyễn Du, lines 1615-1621. My translation.

Hoạn Thư's plan is carried out. Kiều is kidnapped by her thugs and brought to her mother's house to work as a slave. Upon Kiều's arrival, Hoạn Thư's mother says:

“You were brought here and sold to me,
But you still act so high and mighty!
There are rules in this house!
Deal her thirty strokes, she will learn!”
“Yes mam” all of the housemaids cried
Even one hundred voices could not have found a cause for this treatment!
The thin bamboo slashed her back,
What flesh wouldn't be torn, what soul wouldn't quake!¹⁵²

Kiều is once again the innocent victim that has fallen prey to a cruel society. She told Thúc repeatedly that he must tell his wife of their marriage, now she must suffer the consequences of his timidity. The two passages above stand out for their cruelty and inhumanity. Above all of the other characters in the “Tale” who committed wrongs against Kiều, Hoạn Thư stands alone. Her gall is evident from the first passage above. Nguyễn Du only briefly mentions Hoạn Thư's station, in the passage cited above. Though he only spends two lines on describing Hoạn Thư and her family, the events that unfold at Hoạn Thư's bequest and the consequences for Kiều are dependent on and indeed because of the position that Hoạn Thư holds in society.

The daughter of the Minister of the Interior, Hoạn Thư is from a rich and powerful family.¹⁵³ This is in fact the only reason that she is able to enact her revenge in such a cruel manner. As is stated in the first passage above, Hoạn Thư's mother (“the mistress of the Hoạn house”) has given this “marvelous” plan her consent and supplied her daughter with the means to undertake it. Because Hoạn Thư is from a family of wealth and power, she is above the law; she has the ability to do as she wishes. Justice does not apply to the Hoạn house, they are justice. They have the ability to dispense justice as they see fit. In this case they create a slave out of an innocent woman.

Kiều is in fact brought to the house of the Minister, realizing this fact when she observes the plaque reading “Heaven's Prime Minister” (Thiên quan trùng tể) on the wall. At the beginning of her enslavement, rather than serving Hoạn Thư, she serves her mother – the Minister's wife. Upon her arrival, she is beaten, as is depicted in the citation above. There is no cause for Kiều's beating; Hoạn Thư's mother simply wants to make it be known to Kiều that she is now a slave. Within this high officials own house then injustice reigns. Kiều, a kidnapped slave is beaten and worked to the bone under his own roof! Again, his power and position made it possible for Hoạn Thư and her mother to carryout this plan. This is indicative of how power is used by those who wield it in Kiều's society. Not only are those who have power above the law, they are also corrupt and lack any kind of morality or conception of what is right and what is wrong. Right

¹⁵² Nguyễn Du, lines 1733-1740. My translation.

¹⁵³ Note: Hoạn Thư's father is the “Lại bộ” of the regime. He holds the highest position in the most important of the six Ministries of government. (Nguyễn Du. *Truyện Kiều*, 145)

and wrong are subjective; they are to be molded in the hands of those who have the means. Hoạn Thư has the means and can therefore mold these truths as she sees fit.

Hero and heroine: Từ Hải the rebel and Thúy Kiều the prostitute

Kiều is confined to another brothel when she meets the epic's hero, Từ Hải. Từ Hải sees true value in Kiều, as a woman that knows his heart. He buys her and makes her his mistress. After they spend a period of time together, Từ Hải leaves Kiều to begin his rebellion. Before he returns to her, Du describes Kiều and the period thus:

The eagle vanished into space,¹⁵⁴
Kiều kept her eyes on heaven's edge.
Day and night, she silently waited,
The flames of war roared through the region!
A murderous haze filled heaven and earth,
Rivers filled with fierce rebels, roads were packed with armor clad soldiers.¹⁵⁵

The consequences of the corruption and injustice in Kiều's society have led to rebellion against the reigning dynasty. Du never directly mentions the reason for Từ Hải's rebellion, but from the picture that has been painted thus far in the epic one can surmise that it is the nature of Kiều's society that has led to warfare. While Du repeatedly describes Từ Hải as a 'hero', he does not romanticize the acts committed by this warrior. Du's description of Từ Hải and the rebellion that has erupted in the realm are neutral, as the passage above indicates. Du appears neither to support Từ Hải's cause or the emperor's response, although he has made the reader aware of why there is rebellion in Kiều's society. In the "Tale of Kiều", Du's attitude towards warfare seems to be parallel with his description in his "Lament for the ten types of wandering souls" (cited above). Du is keenly aware of the problems in society, but he is not in favor of a bloody conflict as a solution to those problems.

Du however does illustrate a bloody end to many of the "Tales'" villains. After Kiều has joined Từ Hải at his camp, she tells him of her past, the wrongs committed against her. Từ Hải, furious, dispatches his men to round up all of those who have done Kiều wrong, as well as those who have been kind to her. In one of the most interesting scenes in the epic, Kiều rewards good and ill as she sees fit. She rewards those who have been kind to her before she takes her revenge. Interestingly, her rewards are monetary – she gives gifts of gold and jewels to those who have helped her. Her punishment is death.

A long line of prisoners were guided in,
Kiều said: "Heaven above reigns on high!
Evil deeds expunge evil deeds!"
Bạc Hạnh and Bạc Bà went first,
At their side Ưng, Khuyển, and Sở Khanh,

¹⁵⁴ The "eagle" is a reference to Từ Hải.

¹⁵⁵ Nguyễn Du, lines 2247-2252. My translation.

Tú Bà and Mã Giám Sinh trailed behind,
 What sentiment did those guilty names merit?
 The order went out to the executioner to raise his sword,
 He kept his word and meted out punishment according to the law
 Blood poured, flesh was chopped to bits,
 Of those who saw this, whose soul wasn't frightened!
 All are at heaven's mercy,
 Those who commit wrongs often forget that they will have to pay!
 Those ruthless, cunning people,
 You reap what you sow, who would have heed the call of their pleas?¹⁵⁶

Despite Kiều being mired in the mud of her society for most of the epic, Du seems to place Kiều's morality above its evils – its corruption, its injustice, its materialism. This episode places Kiều square in that society. It is now Kiều who has the wealth and power; she does not use these privileges very differently from those who have wronged her. Firstly, although I have not cited the passage here, as was previously stated, Kiều rewards those who were 'good' to her in gold.¹⁵⁷ Their good deeds and help for her along her path of wind and dust have monetary value, which she rewards accordingly. In the passage cited above, those villains rounded up by the rebel troops are brought before Kiều, she orders them to be put to death. According to Du, the executioner "meted out punishment according to the law". What law might this be? This is Kiều's law, it is Kiều's justice. Just as she had been ill-treated and abused by those who had power and wealth, so too can she make her own law with these assets in her possession. This is Du's statement regarding his society. Whether a high official, as is the case with the Hoạn clan, or a rebel leader and prostitute, money and might make the rules – this is 'heavens' law.

Two names are conspicuously missing from the list of those who face Kiều's justice. These are Hoạn Thư and her mother. In their stead are the names of the thugs, the servants that Hoạn Thư and her mother paid to kidnap Kiều – Ưng and Khuyển. Certainly Ưng and Khuyển have wronged Kiều, but they were hired hands, it was not their plan to turn Kiều into a slave, they did what they were told for money. The true perpetrators behind this plot go unpunished. Hoạn Thư is brought before Kiều, who forgives and releases her. According to Kiều, to punish Hoạn Thư would make her as bad a person as Hoạn Thư, and after all, the thing that Hoạn Thư is truly guilty of is jealousy. Hoạn Thư's mother does not appear at all in this scene. Those who meet their end by Kiều's word are buyers and sellers of human flesh (Tú Bà, Bạc Hạnh, Bạc Bà, and Mã Giám Sinh), ex-scholars disgraced into a life of immorality (Sở Khanh and Mã Giám Sinh), and hired thugs (Ưng and Khuyển). Từ Hải has the power and Kiều the will to bring them to 'justice'. However, those of the upper-class, those officials and their families – Hoạn Thư and her mother – are still out of reach of the law. Du states, "Those who have committed wrongs often forget that they will have to pay!" and "you reap what you sow", but he makes the point that this is actually not the case, a clear contradiction. Ưng and Khuyển are not the real criminals who forced Kiều into a life of servitude, beat

¹⁵⁶ Nguyễn Du, lines 2380-2394. My translation.

¹⁵⁷ This includes: the nun Giác Duyên, her fellow consort in Tú Bà's brothel Mã Kiều, and Thúc Sinh.

her, and treated her with the utmost disrespect; Hoạn Thư and her mother did this. It seems however that Kiều has not the power or the will rain down her justice upon these parties. In Kiều's world then there yet exist people that are above justice and above her laws of revenge taken and gratitude rewarded.

The emperor's virtue

Following this episode, Từ Hải reigns supreme over his large swath of territory until Hồ Tôn Hiến, a provincial governor and general of the imperial troops goes to Từ Hải feigning to seek a truce. Hồ Tôn Hiến's role in this plot and his behavior will be examined below. I would now like to discuss Kiều's role in persuading Từ Hải to accept the truce, which I believe is indicative of two things. One is Du's larger message that peace is better than any rebellion, not matter how 'righteous', the second being Kiều's view of the empire and her ambitions for her and Từ Hải. Kiều states:

Thinking of myself, a simple duckweed,
I have long drifted and tread a hard path.
We should swear allegiance to the emperor.
That road is wide and smooth, its fame not narrow!
Public and private aspects will both be served,
Soon, I may arrange to go back home.
We shall also have high rank and stately bearing,
I will be able to return to my parents with my head held high.
Above the nation, below the family,
I'll have served both the nation and my family well.¹⁵⁸

Kiều, along with Từ Hải are traitors and usurpers of power in the eyes of the empire. However, given the opportunity, Kiều wishes to swear allegiance to the emperor rather than continue the rebellion that Từ Hải has begun. Her goals in this are twofold. One, she wishes to end her life of hardship. At this point, it has been over ten years since she was forced to leave her home. She wants a "smooth" life, one in which she is able to return to her home and see her family. Kiều's second point is that there are multiple roads to achieve wealth and power. If Từ Hải swears allegiance to the emperor, they will have traveled one of those roads, and tread off the path they are currently on – the one of rebellion. In the last two lines of this passage, Kiều mentions serving the nation well. It is interesting that Du places these lines in Kiều's mouth. She has, obviously, been severely mistreated by this nation. She was sold into prostitution as a result of the emperor's officials wrongfully arresting her father, she was a kidnapped slave in the house of a high Minister. After all of her woes at the hand of the 'nation', she still prefers to be a loyal subject rather than a rebel. Ending her life of hardship and being able to return to her family is one explanation, Du states the other in this passage, Kiều says:

The emperor's favor is profuse; she said,
It has showered down everywhere, and been absorbed deeply,
His virtues have brought stability for a long time,

¹⁵⁸ Nguyễn Du, lines 2475-2484. My translation.

Everyone in the realm is greatly indebted to him!
Think over your rebellion of fire and sword
Bones have piled head-high in the Vo dinh river.
Why continue this only to be famous for the death that has been caused?
In one thousand years, who has praised Hoang Sao?
Why not take a large salary and great power?
Aren't there different paths one can cross to achieve position and fame?¹⁵⁹

The first part of this passage is again interesting for the fact that it finds Kiều praising a nation, system, and society that have harmed her so. Surely, by the content of Kiều's life she does not truly believe that the emperor has long brought stability to the realm? After all, who better than Kiều knows of the instability, injustice, and official corruption that reigns in his realm? It seems to me that what Kiều truly seeks is her own stability and contentment, and by connection that of the realms. In the second part of this passage Kiều reprimands Từ Hải for his rebellion and asks him to think over the consequences of his actions. The point that Kiều is trying to make here is that no matter how unjust and corrupt the realm is, it is better to live in peace than through the miseries of war.

This seems to be Du's point of view concerning conflict. He was surely able to perceive the corruption and injustice during the times of the Lê/Trịnh regime. However, no matter how unjust this regime might have been, it was better than the alternative – the war and conflict of the following years. Du, like Kiều, knew the trials of hardship. Furthermore, as has been stated, Du did not seem to overtly 'hate' the Tây Sơn or 'prefer' the Nguyễn. Neither were heroes, neither was legitimate or just in Du's eyes. However, what Du wanted to see more than anything was an end to the brutality of war, this was Du's statement, this was Kiều's statement.

Therefore, the last two lines of the passage are a plea for Từ Hải to walk the road of peace, rather than continuing down the path of war. Kiều knows of Từ Hải's ambition, he can achieve "position and fame" by being a high official and serving the emperor just as he has by rebelling. Kiều's sense eventually persuades Từ Hải. He walks the road of truce only to be slaughtered by a dishonest general and the emperor's troops.

Hồ Tôn Hiến enters the area which Từ Hải has taken from the emperor nominally to seek a 'truce' with the rebel leader. However, the emperor and Hồ Tôn Hiến's plans for Từ Hải are not peace, but extermination. Du introduces Hồ Tôn Hiến and his scheme in the following manner:

There was an imminent provincial governor,
His name was Hồ Tôn Hiến, he was a talented manager of state affairs.
The emperor sent him on a special mission,
He was vested with full authority to quell the revolt,
as the commanding officer of a large force
He knew Từ Hải was a hero,
He also knew that Kiều had a say in his decision-making

¹⁵⁹ Nguyễn Du, lines 2489-2498. My translation.

He garrisoned his troops and feigned a call for truce
An envoy was dispatched bringing gems and gold, silk and satin
And a special bribe was sent for Kiều:
Two maids of honor and one thousand pound of gems and gold.¹⁶⁰

In the first lines of this passage, Du introduces Hồ Tôn Hiến as a high official in whom the emperor has vested full authority to rid the realm of Từ Hải. Hồ Tôn Hiến later tells Kiều, after his plan has been carried out, that it was in fact the emperor's plan. Of course the linchpin of this plot is Kiều. Hồ knows that Từ Hải is a 'hero' (which Du constantly refers to him as). In contrast with this line, the following line asserts that Kiều has influence over Từ Hải's decisions. Hồ sends the pair lavish gifts, which blind Từ Hải and Kiều to the truth, but are not the reason that Kiều persuades Từ Hải to accept the truce, as is explained above. The gifts do lend legitimacy to Hồ's word, which Kiều takes as truth. As Du states, "Kieu still had faith in people".¹⁶¹ It is Kiều's misguided faith in the good of humanity, her wish to end her life of woe, and to see peace reign in the realm that causes her to believe Hồ Tôn Hiến, the emperor's envoy, and cause the death of her Từ Hải. Hồ's scheme unfolds as follows:

Hồ's troops spied on Từ Hải and knew that he had laid down his guard,
planning to surrender
Hồ decided to seize his opportunity,
His troops hidden behind a pile of gifts, poised to attack,
The imperial flag of truce led the vanguard.
A procession of peace lined the front, uniformed troops in the rear.
Từ was unaware, how could he have known?
Dressed in the uniform of a great official, he left his camp.
Hồ gave the secret signal on the battlefield,
Shots rang out from the four directions, on all sides battle flags unfurled.¹⁶²

This kind of conduct in battle is surly a disgrace. That this was the emperor's plan, carried out by one of his high officials is again indicative of the dark portrait that Nguyễn Du paints of those who rule Kiều's society and by connection his own. Từ Hải had accepted Hồ's plea for truce, yet Hồ still sent his soldiers to spy on Từ Hải's camp, making sure that he and his troops let down their arms so that they could be slaughtered unarmed. As Từ Hải leaves his camp, going out to the battlefield to accept Hồ's offer, Hồ and his troops go to meet him, behind a wall of gifts and a delegation of diplomats. Du continues with his theme of the unjust and immoral official. Hồ Tôn Hiến knows that Từ Hải is a hero, that he is a strong man who has yet to lose a battle. He abuses Từ Hải's one weakness – his love for Kiều – to defeat him. After the shots ring out from all directions, Hồ and the imperial forces slaughter the unarmed Từ Hải and his men. This is truly a cowardly act and is meant to be seen as so. Furthermore, it is an act sanctioned by the emperor. Từ Hải had agreed to make peace, to lay down his arms, to swear allegiance

¹⁶⁰ Nguyễn Du, lines 2451-2460. My translation.

¹⁶¹ Nguyễn Du, line 2473. My translation.

¹⁶² Nguyễn Du, lines 2506-2514. My translation.

to the emperor. The emperor however, prefers to kill Từ Hải and be rid of him, no matter how immoral and craven the means.

The district officials who robbed Kiều's home and placed her father under wrongful arrest, the Minister of the Interior's house, the provincial governor, and the emperor himself – all of the officials in Du's epic are unjust, immoral, and corrupt. There is however one last episode in which Du again illustrates the moral bankruptcy of officialdom. It occurs after a night in which Hồ Tôn Hiến is celebrating his glorious 'victory' over Từ Hải. Kiều is made to wait on him at the party. He makes her play the lute. When he over drinks, overcome with desire, he proposes marriage to her. He realizes his drunken actions of the previous night upon waking and finds a solution to his behavior:

Having celebrated his victory, Hồ had gotten very drunk,
Upon waking at day-break, he realized:
"I am a respected high official,
Those both above me and below me, they saw what happened.
I must clear the air of these events,
How will I solve this affair that my actions caused?"
In the public office a meeting was held at dawn,
The decision was made, Hồ had conjured up a solution,
The official ordered a decree, who dared to argue or find fault with it?
Kiều was forced to wed a tribal chief.¹⁶³

The previous night, Kiều was brought to Hồ Tôn Hiến, distraught over the death of Từ Hải, which she had a hand in. Hồ made a drunken proposal of marriage to her in the heat of lust. Here again, Kiều is the victim of plans set in motion by officialdom. She was forced to service Hồ Tôn Hiến. When he proposed to her, she rebuffed his advances. Upon waking, Hồ did not have a thought for Kiều, the fact that she just lost her husband, or that he has treated her ill. His only concern is himself and his reputation at having made a drunken advanced towards the ex-whore widow of a rebel leader. He solves this problem by clearing the "air" – getting rid of Kiều. How does one dispose of a person such as Kiều? – by making her wed a lowly tribal chief. As Du states no one dared to argue with this decision or find fault in Hồ actions. Hồ is a high official, he is the law, he provides justice in the realm. Kiều, has once again been thrown to the wind by another person in a position of power who sees no true value in her talent, beauty, proven virtue, or moral character – Kiều is to be used only, bought, sold, played with, and then thrown away.

Clear, calm winds and withdrawal:

Kiêu is forced to wed the tribal chief. After sharing his bed on their wedding night, in her despair, she flings her life in to the river, in an attempt to finally bring her woes to an end. The old nun, Giác Duyên, having been told by the prophetess Tam Hạp that she would

¹⁶³ Nguyễn Du, lines 2589-2598. My translation.

once again meet Kiều by that river is waiting to fetch Kieu from the water and save her life. Upon meeting the prophetess, Giác Duyên inquires about Kiều's fate, Tam Hợp replies:

She harmed one person to save countless others,
She new right actions from wrong, fair deeds from foul.
Who else has equaled her good deeds for society?
Thus all of her previous sins have been washed away!¹⁶⁴

In accordance with these comments, when Kiều has just been pulled from the water by Giác Duyên, she is still in the realm of dreams. She sees the ex-courtesan from the beginning of the "Tale", Đạm Tiên, who tells her:

She said: "My heart has been waiting,
I have spent over ten years here,
How difficult your fate, your happiness fought for through trying times,
Through all of this woe how strong your spirit has been!
Even heaven knows of your sincerity,
To sell yourself was filial piety, to save people the scourge of war benevolence.
Alone, you did this for the country, for the people,
Such hidden merits have now tipped the scales,
Your name has been withdrawn from the book of the damned."¹⁶⁵

At this point in the "Tale" it has been 15 years since Kiều was forced to sell herself, beginning her life of hardship. Interestingly, the culmination of her period of wind and dust seems to be the death of Từ Hải and her hand in it. In other words, the end of her hardship was marked by the end of the rebellion and warfare. As Tam Hợp says, "She harmed one person to save countless others", Đạm Tiên asserts, "to save people the scourge of war (was) benevolence, Alone, you did this for the country, for the people."

This is one of the most interesting commentaries that Du makes in the poem, made even more so by the fact that we have witnessed the moral decrepitude of Kiều's society under the current regime. Kiều is undoubtedly this "Tale's" heroine, Từ Hải its hero. Du repeatedly expresses the fact that Từ Hải is a hero. Many have considered Du's dreams for society to be embodied by the character of Từ Hải.¹⁶⁶ Từ Hải is an unusual character in Kiều's world, he knows her true worth. By bringing 'justice' to Kiều, Từ Hải is bringing justice to all of those who have been walked on by society as Kiều has (I say this despite the fact that I believe Kiều's 'justice' is no better than that of the people that have persecuted her – see above). Từ Hải does in this way represent the hope for a better society, a more just leadership. However, often times the means of going about achieving these goals do not justify the ends. Từ Hải was a 'hero' for having the courage

¹⁶⁴ Nguyễn Du, lines 2685-2688. My translation.

¹⁶⁵ Nguyễn Du, lines 2713-2721. My translation.

¹⁶⁶ See for example: Nguyễn Lộc. *Văn Học Việt Nam: Nửa cuối thế kỷ XVIII nửa đầu thế kỷ XIX, tập II*. Phan Ngọc. *Tìm hiểu phong cách Nguyễn Du trong Truyện Kiều*. Đăng Thanh Lê. *Truyện Kiều và thể loại truyện nôm*.

to rise-up against such a system and society, alas, his efforts were for not, the slaughter he wrought came to not, a few years later those in the region did not even recall his name when Kiều's family came inquiring about her whereabouts. Recall Du's poem "Song for the Dragon Citadel Zitherist" composed on his stay in Thăng Long before his journey to China in 1813. In the poem Du recalls meeting the Dragon citadel zitherist twenty years previously. On this visit, after so many events have taken place in the previous twenty years, he barely recognizes the once beautiful woman. Thinking of the past and the futility of man's efforts, Du remarks "The Tây Sơn enterprise was completely lost, And of the entertainers, only one remains, A hundred years fly by in the blink of an eye."¹⁶⁷ All of the effort that was put in to the Tây Sơn "enterprise", the establishment of a new dynasty came to not. Like Từ Hải's rebellion, it was lost "in the blink of an eye".

In all Du's poetry that I have read and come across, I have not read one that contains the illusion that Du was overtly against the Tây Sơn or for the Nguyễn. Du wasn't against the dreams that a new regime might bring a more just society in which talent and virtue were truly prized. He was against the means of achieving these ends if it meant the countless years of warfare and bloodshed that marked the first thirty-six years of his existence.

As this analysis has indicated, the officials and powers that be who occupy Kiều's world are totally immoral and corrupt. I believe that Du was drawing a parallel to a similar situation during his own time that he saw concerning the Lê/Trịnh, Tây Sơn, and Nguyễn. Although Du seems to have recognized the ills of his period, he still abhorred the bloodshed that occurred to "remedy" the situation, having seen this torment revert to the status quo.

With the death of Từ Hải, two things happen, one there is an end to the warfare and bloodshed that has plagued the realm. Secondly, Kiều is freed from her earthly wants and desires; this has brought her cycle of hardship to an end. Once fetched from the water by Giác Duyên, Kiều lives a nun's life by the edge of the river. By sheer chance of fate, her kin, led by her old love Kim Trọng and brother Vương Quan (now officials) come across Giác Duyên who informs them of Kiều's whereabouts. Kiều's family is overjoyed that she is alive, and implores her to go with them to Kim and Quan's new posts. Kiều says:

I was brought to this small pagoda for a reason,
To live amongst the grass and trees befits my age,
I have become attached to the ways of the Buddha,
accustomed to the smell of salted greens.
I have become fond of the wonderful ways of the dyhana and to wearing its brown robe.
The fire of greed in my soul has been extinguished; I no longer seek the common pleasures of this world.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ Nguyễn Du in Kelley, 106.

¹⁶⁸ Nguyễn Du, lines 3041-3045. My translation.

Despite her joy at being reunited with her family after 15 long years, Kiều tells them that she prefers to remain where she is. The second and fifth lines of this passage are particularly telling. Kiều only seeks to live “amongst the grass and trees” – removed from the world of want and woe. She has indeed ended her cycle of desire, and no longer seeks the pleasures that earthly love and attachment can bring her. Her family however repeatedly asks her to go with them, she only consents when they agree to allow Giác Duyên to come along as well.

After the family is reunited, Kiều’s sister Vân, her father, and her old love Kim Trọng all tell Kiều that she should marry Kim. Kiều refuses, but eventually gives in to their requests. On their wedding night, Kiều begs Kim Trọng that they not “share a mat”. She is truly through with material attachment. Kim, seeing the wisdom of Kiều’s words and her true heart acquiesces to her request. Kim and Kiều embark upon a friendship. Kiều spends the rest of her days free of want, withdrawn from the world and all of the pain that it has brought her. She plays chess and drinks wine with Kim, composes verse, and converses amongst loved ones.

Concluding Remarks

Times of disjuncture, political conflict, and social transformation create in many a disassociation from their society. The turmoil that plagued Vietnamese society in Đàng Ngoài during the late 18th and early 19th centuries certainly had this effect on Nguyễn Du. From the conflict and miseries of this age sprouted a literary movement which captured the effects of societal inequity, warfare, and political chaos on humanity. It has been the goal of this paper to place Nguyễn Du’s the “Tale of Kiều” with in this context. The Nguyễn dynasty’s “veritable records” described Du as a “frightened man who, each time he presented himself at an imperial audience, was terrified and anxious and could not reply”.¹⁶⁹ As has been demonstrated in this work, Nguyễn Du was perhaps the person most capable of “replying” to the state of his society of any member of his generation of scholar-officials and indeed, possibly in all of Việt Nam’s long history. At the same time that Du bore the hardship of withdrawal from political life followed by its servitude, the miseries he endured created in him a well from which sprang the most profound statement on the society in which he lived.

At the conclusion of the “Tale of Kiều”, Thúy Kiều achieves what I believe to have been Nguyễn Du’s dream – to be permitted to withdraw from society, to go home, to be freed of wants and desires, to have never again to serve a master. As has been documented, during his time serving the Nguyễn dynasty, Du repeatedly asked for permission to leave his post and return to Nghị Xuân. I do believe that Kiều’s time of hardship, her 15 years of wind and dust were a metaphor for Du’s own period of wind and dust, his own period of hardship, his own life. Du called his 10 years in Hải An, his wife’s hometown, his years of ‘wind and dust’. However, I believe that the years in which Du served under the Nguyễn dynasty were more likely the impetus for his creation of the “Tale of Kiều”. By

¹⁶⁹ Woodside in Huỳnh Sanh Thông, xv.

the time that Du began to serve the Nguyễn in 1802, he had tired of the world. In his young life he had been witness to the devastation of war, separation from loved ones, and the heartbreak of seeing his obviously immense talent wasted. During Du's years in Nghị Xuân, from 1796 to 1802, he reconciled himself to this fate, to his life as a "backwoods scholar", to his withdrawal from society and political affairs. After this period, he was called to service, a call that apparently he could not refuse.

Du appears to have been no great admirer of the Nguyễn dynasty. During his period of service he saw scholar-officials like himself marginalized, made to serve, but given no great power, their talents wasted. He saw power placed in the hands of what I am sure he considered uneducated military men. He saw the capital of the realm moved from Thăng Long, the capital of Đàng Ngoài, to Phú Xuân, the capital of Đàng Trong. He saw the more than 300 year old laws of the realm discarded and changed. As in the 1780's when Du was in a privy position to witness the political turmoil of the Trịnh court, so too did he witness these events in the Nguyễn house.

Like Kiều, Du found his talents prostituted, in his case to a regime that he did not want to serve. He only found comfort in the woods of Nghị Xuân and solace in that fact that if there, he could maintain his virtue. He wanted the life of one who has withdrawn from political affairs, one who is practicing 'vô vi'. Du dreamed of a conclusion to his life like we find in "Kiều". He wished to play chess, to drink wine, to contemplate nature, and compose verse with friends. Du ended Kiều's years of wind and dust, sadly, Du's never came to an end. He was never able to return to his hometown permanently and withdraw from society. He died on the eve of a planned second trip to China for the Nguyễn as an emissary. Surrounded by a few relations, he lay deathly ill, refusing to take medicine or seek help. He asked someone to touch his feet to see if they were cold. When the servant replied that they were, he said "good" and died.

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