

# A Mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century Southern Literature 'Lục Vân Tiên', and the Anti-French Resistance\*

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The importance of the "Lục Vân Tiên" derives from the role that it played in mobilizing the southern peasants to fight against the foreign invasion, and it led peasants to make sacrifices for 'their' country. The new stage that appeared in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in southern Vietnam, where peasants were mobilized to fight to the death for 'their' country by the power of the pen, provided a precedent for the role that literature would play in the formidable nationalistic movements that would be prominent during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not only in Vietnam but in countries across East Asia.

Key Words : Lục Vân Tiên, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, southern Vietnam, southern literature, anti-French movement, chữ nôm, Minh Mạng

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## I . Introduction

During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, southern Vietnamese scholars played a significant role in leading peasants into battle against the French invasion. Before the coming of the French, the most popular jobs for these scholars, or *nho sĩ*, were as teachers or administrators in public or private schools and medical doctors. Through their work instructing the minds and curing the bodies of the common population (the basic jobs of the millennium movement leaders), they developed a large influence on the southern society. With their integration both into the society of the peasants and into the central court, the scholars were able to lead the resistance movement in various ways. The resistance started in 1859 in Saigon and the Mekong region, and it lasted until the middle of the 1870s.<sup>2)</sup>

What was the reason for the long, persistent resistance of southern Vietnam? Was it only because the resistance leaders were faithful to the central court? Was it because the concentration of the French troops in Saigon caused a greater animosity among the Vietnamese there? Or can we more romantically attribute the resistance to southerners' personality

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2) As Mark McLeod claims, "Immediately after the fall of the citadel of Gia-dinh on February 17, 1859 the Hue court authorized the southern people to form volunteer militia units to supplement the imperial armies..." Mark W. McLeod, *The Vietnamese Response to French Intervention, 1862-1874* (New York: Praeger, 1991), pp. 61-62. But I don't agree with his claim that the activities of the 'southern Nghia-quan' or righteous armies terminated in 1868 (p. 62). The resistance of the southern righteous forces survived until the 1870s though in punitive forms. One example was Nguyễn Hữu Huân's uprising during 1872-1874.

traits of trust and faithfulness (*tín nghĩa*) and hot temper (*nóng tính, lòng thẳng, or trực tình*)? Other potentially important factors include the roles of the rich landlords in the area, the greater concentration of wealth in southern Vietnam, which allowed for greater financial support of the resistance, and the militarized society that had been created by the introduction of the military plantation system (*đồn điền*) under the guidance of Nguyễn Tri Phương (1800-1873) during the beginning of the Tự Đức reign (1848-1883). Each of these factors played a role, but even together they are not enough to explain the strength and duration of the resistance.

In looking for other reasons, my attention was drawn to the way in which various pieces of Vietnamese literature were interwoven with the southern resistance, and I came to the conclusion that the lengthy resistance of the southerners might have been related to the works of southern literature composed by the *nho sĩ* group. That literature included the works of Nguyễn Đình Chiểu (1822-1888), who composed impressive *nôm* pieces, including the famous “Lục Vân Tiên”; Phan Văn Trị’s (1830-1910) *nôm* poems and public discussions in writings with a Vietnamese collaborator Tôn Thọ Tường; Nguyễn Thông’s (1827-1884) emotional biographies of the martyrs Phan Văn Đạt (1827-1861), Hồ Huân Nghiệp (1824-1864), and Trường Định (1820-1864); and also the *nôm* poems of the two Confucian fighters, Phan and Hồ. Southern intellectuals also played a role in 1865 in transferring the grave of Võ Trường Toản (?-? 18<sup>th</sup> century), who had been regarded as the first teacher of southern Vietnam, from the Saigon area (where French troops were stationed) to Bến Tre

(which was still free from the French rule), and in carving memorial literature into the stele of the grave. The intellectuals fought, and they wrote as well.

Of the examples above, the intellectual who seems to have done the most to encourage the resistance through literature was Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, who has been called “a petit Confucian intellectual who beat off the bandits by pen (*thur sinh đánh giặc bằng bút*).” (Trần Văn Giàu et al. 1987, 256) Among the examples of his “fighting by pen,” the most impressive took place in 1874 (?) in the Ba Tri market plaza in Bến Tre province. Nguyễn Đình Chiểu took part in a mourning ceremony and presented his poem in honor of those who died in the resistance battles, “Văn tế nghĩa sĩ trận vong Lục Tỉnh (ceremonial poem for the sacrificed righteous soldiers of the Southern Six Provinces).” He was standing in front of the ceremonial altar surrounded by the crowds in the market area. While the poem was being read in a trembling voice by another person, tears were pouring from his blind eyes, and finally he fainted, overcome by a heart-breaking bitterness (Thạch Phương et al. 1999, 622).

Nguyễn Đình Chiểu is frequently mentioned in the history of Vietnam as a national hero in the fight against foreign invasion because of his writings. In the study of Vietnamese literature, his works such as “Lục Vân Tiên” have led to him being praised as a pioneer of “resistance literature (*văn học kháng chiến*),” which was to grow and flourish in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This general view on Nguyễn Đình Chiểu’s place in literature has been well described in the huge collection of essays on him written by contemporary Vietnamese writers.

However, the history and the literature have seldom been brought together in one place so that the literature (both the form and the content) can be evaluated in the context of history. One exception is the work of David Marr, who used parts of “Lục Vân Tiên” to examine the Vietnamese response to the 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial society. In particular, Marr examined the traditional virtues of women as described in the “Lục Vân Tiên” to understand the process of social and political change in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He argues that the traditional female attributes such as chastity, obedience, and self-denial were often transposed to the political realm and used to bolster new ideals, such as love of country and unswerving loyalty to the Party (Marr 1981, 251).

I think, however, that the “Lục Vân Tiên” and other literature of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century had a more direct and wider impact on the Vietnamese population in the Saigon/Mekong region. The mid-19<sup>th</sup> century *chữ nôm* writings including the ‘Lục Vân Tiên’ already contained various examples of modern<sup>3)</sup> virtues that pointed to social change and new historical directions. Shawn Frederick McHale, in his recent book *Print and Power*, provides us with certain clues to the role that writings played in the historical changes taking place in

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3) Here my ‘modern’ is, as Woodside argues, ‘manifold, independent, multiple, relative, plural, and separate from the usual landmarks as the growth of capitalism or industrialization.’ Alexander Woodside, *Lost Modernities: China, Vietnam, Korea, and the Hazards of World History* (Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 1; 4-5; 9. In addition, the criteria of my modernity include the elements that were new at the time concerned but became the origins of factors that compose the contemporary history. Choi Byung Wook, *Betnam Geunhyeondaesa* (Modern-Contemporary History of Vietnam) (Seoul: Changbi, 2008), p. 3.

Vietnam. In particular, he points to the ability of printed letters to mobilize the peasants in the course of the resistance movement in 20<sup>th</sup> century Vietnam (McHale 2004, 128-138). Though he says little about how his theme applies to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I believe that the 19<sup>th</sup> century situation in southern Vietnam might have provided the precedent for the power of letters to drive the peasants to the battlefields for “their country.” The only difference between the centuries is that the 19<sup>th</sup> century letters permeated into the peasants’ hearts mainly by “mouths and ears” in the form of songs, while those of the 20<sup>th</sup> depended more on “eyes and ears” because of the availability of the Western invention, printing machines.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. In the first section I provide some historical background by describing the emergence in the nineteenth century of a new generation of southern intellectuals. In the next section I discuss the various writings, particularly “Lục Vân Tiên,” of the blind poet Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, who produced a number of poems in the course of the long resistance fight waged by the southerners. In the third section I describe important elements from Nguyễn Đình Chiểu’s writings, using the example of the “Lục Vân Tiên,” which I believe encouraged the spirit of resistance in southern Vietnam. Through these works I hope to portray a southern society that was home to a new trend that emerged in 19<sup>th</sup> century Vietnam.

## II. Fighting and Writings

In the 1830s, a new generation of intellectuals appeared in southern society. These *nho sĩ* differed from the earlier generations of intellectuals in various ways.<sup>4)</sup> They were more ethnically homogeneous than the intellectuals of earlier generations (many of whom had been descendents of Chinese), and they tended to share the consciousness of the ethnic Vietnamese. They were much closer to the villagers of Vietnam. Cao Tữ Thanh describes this change as ‘*cải tổ*’, meaning “creation by change.” According to him the concept of “*nho sĩ bình dân* (commoner *nho sĩ*),” or “*nho mà không nho, không nho mà nho* (Confucian but not Confucian, not Confucian but Confucian)” became quite common in southern Vietnam, Nam Kỳ, beginning in the 1830s (Cao Tữ Thanh 1996, 147).

These *nho sĩ* men were mainly degree holders who had passed the state examination, although their positions in the government circle were relatively low. The numbers of degree holders and candidates increased significantly beginning in the 1830s. These new men went to work teaching, providing medical treatments, writing poems, and performing official works, if assigned.

Southern *nho sĩ* who took part in the anti-French movement can be categorized into two groups. One consisted

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4) For the process of this change, see Choi Byung Wook, *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mạng (1820-1841): Central Policies and Local Response* (Ithaca: SEAP, Cornell University, 2004), pp. 101-128.

of government officials at the local level, and the other consisted of private teachers in the villages. Nguyễn Thông, Bùi Hữu Nghĩa (1807-1872), and Nguyễn Hữu Huân (1830-1875) belonged to the former group, while Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, Phan Văn Trị, Phan Văn Đật, and Hồ Huân Nghiệp were of the latter group. Except for Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, who was blind, all of these men led armies or at least stood with the Vietnamese military forces against French. Among them, Bùi Hữu Nghĩa, Nguyễn Hữu Huân, Phan Văn Đật, and Hồ Huân Nghiệp were executed by the French forces. Of these martyrs, Nguyễn Hữu Huân belonged to the first group of southern *nho sĩ* who took part in the anti-French movement. Born in Chợ Gạo beside the Upper Mekong River, he passed a local examination in 1852 and became the educational director of a prefecture, *giáo thụ*, in the Định Tường province. When southern Vietnam was invaded by French army, he took part in organizing righteous forces but was captured (in 1862 and 1864) and exiled overseas. When he was released, he sold all of his own property in order to organize another resistance. Unfortunately, he was captured again and was executed in 1875 along with one hundred petit leaders.<sup>5)</sup> Phan Văn Đật, who was of the second group, was a *cử nhân* who passed local examination in 1848 but who worked as a private school educator without taking any official position. Faced with the French invasion, he led a righteous army but was captured and executed.<sup>6)</sup>

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5) *Đại Nam Chính Biên Liệt Truyện Nhì Tập* (Second collection of the primary compilation of biographies of Imperial Vietnam) (1909. Tokyo: The Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, Keio University, 1981), 41:18b.

Nguyễn Đình Chiểu was one of the private school teachers. He was born in the area of Saigon. His father, Nguyễn Đình Huy, was a staff member, *thư lại* (government rank eighth), of the famous southern governor-general Lê Văn Duyệt (1763-1832), married a southern woman. He had come to Saigon when the governor-general took that position in 1824. As Lê Văn Khôi's revolt (1833-1835) broke out, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's father escaped Gia Định to go back to Huế with his family, including his eldest son Nguyễn Đình Chiểu. Later accused of "running away," Huy was fired and eventually came back to Saigon to live there for many years.

Nguyễn Đình Chiểu took the local examination in 1843, and gained the *tú tài* degree. Four years later he went to Huế for the metropolitan examination. However, while in Huế he received news that his mother had passed away. On the way back to Saigon (1848), he got an illness in his eyes and became blind. In Saigon, beginning in 1849, he led a normal life as a private teacher and doctor, and he married a student's sister, Lê Thị Điền.

When the French occupied Saigon, he fled to Cần Giuộc, near the region of Chợ Lớn where his wife's family lived, and when the French captured the Eastern Three Provinces (Biên Hòa, Gia Định, and Định Tường to the bank of Upper Mekong), he moved to Bến Tre of Long An province. Maintaining his contact with righteous army leaders, including the famous Trương Định, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu involved himself in the anti-French struggles through his writings. For

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6) Ibid., 41:14b.

example, he composed the “Hịch Kêu gọi nghĩa binh đánh Tây (Appealing call for righteous soldiers to beat off the Westerners)” in 1862 (Nguyễn Thị Thanh Xuân et al. 1987, 307). The resistance movements ended in southern Vietnam at the end of the 1870s. After that, he remained mostly secluded from society until his death in 1888.

### III. Composition of the ‘Lục Vân Tiên’

It is not clear when the “Lục Vân Tiên” was first written. The general belief is that Nguyễn Đình Chiểu wrote it while he was leading a normal life as a southern *ngo sĩ* after coming back from Huế (Phan Văn Hùng 2001, 26). Nguyễn Quang Vinh suggests more specifically that the “Lục Vân Tiên” was written in the beginning of the 1850s to be used as a text for Nguyễn Đình Chiểu’s students and that afterwards it was copied by hand, leading to the creation of various versions with slight differences in content and form. According to him, “The ‘Lục Vân Tiên’ was a literary creation, but at the same time it can be regarded a novel of society and history in the form of a poem being transferred mouth to mouth.” (Nguyễn Quang Vinh 2001, 370)

The main characters of the poem are Lục Vân Tiên, who was trained by a village *ngo sĩ* teacher, and Nguyệt Nga a charming lady who is talented in composing poems and in painting and who displays fidelity to Lục Vân Tiên, whom she is destined to marry, filial piety to her father, and

obedience to the order of the king.

The contents of the story overlap in many ways with Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's own life story. In particular, the first part of the “Lục Vân Tiên” is, in many instances, a reflection of Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's experiences. Lục Vân Tiên was a bright student. On the way to the capital to take the state examination, he met various people, including Nguyệt Nga, who fell in love with him. Shortly before he entered the examination site, he heard news that his mother had passed away. In bitterness, he immediately prepared to come back home. On the way, however, he became blind, and he met great adversity caused by his former friends and even by the family members of his fiancée, Võ Thê Loan, to whom Lục Vân Tiên had been faithful. In the long run, with the help of a fairy, he recovered his eyesight, passed the examination, became a high official, and contributed to destroying the enemy of his country. Nguyệt Nga, the heroine of this poem, kept herself chaste despite various threats, and she was very active in seeking her lover, Lục Vân Tiên. Finally, Lục Vân Tiên and Nguyệt Nga met again and married.

As pointed out by contemporary Vietnamese scholars, the flowering of *nôm* literature in the Saigon/Mekong region began in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and “Lục Vân Tiên” is the first *nôm* story verse (*truyện thơ*) of southern Vietnam reflecting the social and economic changes taking place in the region (Trần Văn Giàu et al. 1989, 455). At the same time, I think the *nôm* story of “Lục Vân Tiên” proved to have great historical value in the sense that it mobilized many people to fight for their country. If we compare it with the *nôm*

literatures in the north—for example, the famous “Truyện Kiều” (The Story of Kieu) by Nguyễn Du (1765-1820) written in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and introduced to the public in 1820 (?)—we cannot say that the quality of “Lục Vân Tiên” is as high as that of the “Truyện Kiều” strictly in literary terms. But the “Lục Vân Tiên” offers a concrete account of the daily life of southern Vietnam, its characters, its psychology rooted in its geographic reality, and its fighting spirit in the face of an enemy contending for the people’s land. Certainly, the content, style, subject, and artistic skill of the *lục bát*<sup>7)</sup> in the “Lục Vân Tiên” are simpler and even coarser than those of the “Truyện Kiều.” But the content of the “Lục Vân Tiên” is more substantial, and the mode of expression is straighter and more direct. We might say that the “Truyện Kiều” is an example of a pure literature at the national or world level with more lyrical words and a background of colorful fantasy, while the “Lục Vân Tiên” is an example of purpose-driven literature that opened a path to the patriotic-resistance literature of the modern times while still keeping a high literary quality and that deeply touched the hearts of the southern Vietnamese people.

The song of “Lục Vân Tiên” spread quickly to the whole land of the Nam Kỳ, or southern Vietnam, via singing and listening.<sup>8)</sup> Realizing that the “Lục Vân Tiên” was so popular

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7) Literally, ‘*lục bát*’ means six and eight. The main skill of this form of literature is to keep the sound of the sixth word in the ‘line six (the line *lục*, consists of six words)’ properly corresponding with the sixth word of the ‘line eight (the line *bát*, consists of eight words),’ and the word at the end of the ‘line eight’ with the sixth word of the next ‘line six.’

8) If we consider Ramsay’s charming suggestion that the *quốc ngữ* was already used

among the southerners, French authorities hurried to collect the various versions of this poem, which they studied and translated into French in 1864 and into *quốc ngữ* at a later point, sometime during the 1880s. In the introduction to the French translation, Gabriel Aubaret wrote, “This story verse, “Lục Vân Tiên,” is so popular among the southerners that no fisherman or boat rower will drive his or her boat without singing some part of the verse.”<sup>9)</sup>

Aubaret did not mention the threatening aspects of the “Lục Vân Tiên,” but he praised the high quality of the literature and its popularity among the commoners. In explaining what he saw as the value of this verse, he pointed to how it captured local characteristics specific to southern Vietnam. For example, the region’s natural beauty and the religious sincerity prevalent in the psychology of the southern commoners, both of which were emphasized in the poem, were interpreted as elements that would make it easy to convert the population to Catholicism.<sup>10)</sup>

In fact, however, I think the more important southern characteristics in the “Lục Vân Tiên” were hidden out of Aubaret’s sight.

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in southern Vietnam in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, so that some of Nguyễn Đình Chiểu’s work might have been translated from *chữ nôm* to *quốc ngữ* for printings by the printing machine smuggled by the initiatives of the Western missionaries, the part of the ‘Lục Vân Tiên’ may have had the same fate, then the *quốc ngữ* version of the ‘Lục Vân Tiên’ might have gained quicker circulation. Jacob Ramsay, *Mandarins and Martyrs, the Church and the Nguyen Dynasty in Early Nineteenth-Century Vietnam* (Stanford, University Press, 2008), pp. 127-134.

9) In the *Journal Asiatique*, 6, Vol. 3, 1864. Cited from Nguyễn Đình Chiểu về Tác Giả và Tác Phẩm, p. 623.

10) Ibid.

#### IV. Ethics for Southern Patriotism

‘Lục Vân Tiên’<sup>11)</sup> is filled with the desirable virtues found among southern Vietnamese in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as loyalty, filial piety, charity, friendship, faithfulness, and, particularly, love for country.

It opens with the famous sentence “If you are men, the loyalty and the filial piety should be the first; if you are women, charity should be the most important word of you (*Trai thời trung hiếu làm đầu, Gái thời tiết hạnh là câu trau mình*).” (Tuần Thành and Anh Vũ 2005, 7) In addition to this poem, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu composed a series of *chữ nôm* works, including “Đương Từ-Hà Mậu (a story of Dương Từ [a Buddhist], and Hà Mậu [a Catholic], 1850s),” “Văn Tế Tướng Sĩ Cần Giuộc (a ritual verse for the Cần Giuộc righteous fighters, 1862),” “Văn Tế Trường Định (a ritual verse for Trường Định, 1864),” “Thơ Điếu Phan Tông (poems of endorsement for the late Phan Tông, 1868),” “Văn Tế Nghĩa Sĩ Lục Tỉnh (a ritual verse for the righteous fighters of the Six Provinces who were killed, 1874?),” and “Ngư Tiều Y Thuật Vấn Đáp (questions and answers between fisherman and firewood-collector over medical skills, 1880s?).” In these writings, he was advocating loyalty to Vietnam by praising the resistance leaders, soldiers, and the people who refused to compromise with French power, while he was severely

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11) I use the contents of the ‘Lục Vân Tiên’ from the translation and footnotes in Tuần Thành and Anh Vũ (ed), *Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, Tác Phẩm và Lời Bình* (Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, produces and critics) (Hanoi: Nxb Văn Học, 2005).

criticizing collaborators, Catholics, and even the behavior of the king in an indirect way.

Thanh Lăng writes, “Nguyễn Đình Chiểu is a person of two generations: of the 1820s and of 1862. ‘Lục Vân Tiên’ and ‘Ngư Tiều Y Thuật Vấn Đáp’ are of the 1820s generation, while his collection of anti-French literature places him in the generation of 1862.” (Thanh Lăng 2001, 116) In this characterization, the decade of the 1820s represents the beginning of the reign of Minh Mạng, while the year 1862 saw the loss of the Eastern Three provinces of southern Vietnam and the composition of the ‘Văn Tế Nghĩa Sĩ Cần Giuộc.’ In other words, according to Thanh Lăng the first generation is characterized by the traditional virtues and the second generation by the new spirit of the patriotism, which could be regarded as the origin of 20<sup>th</sup> century patriotism literature (*văn học yêu nước*) (ibid).

I think, however, that those two trends were not separate but were within one continuous stream. The instructions of neo-Confucianism, such as loyalty to the king, filial piety, and trust, are the part of basic moral underpinning for fighting against foreign invasion. The numbers of the *nho sĩ* group had increased substantially from the 1830s, and without the appearance of this large group of literati armed with neo-Confucianism in southern Vietnam, the relentless and long-lasting resistance could not have taken place. Only with a deep knowledge of both classic Chinese letters and the vernacular vocabulary could the *nôm* literature have been developed.

The *nôm* literature produced by Confucian intellectuals

inevitably possesses Confucian ethics, but there are more important elements as well. The characters and the psychology that Nguyễn Đình Chiểu portrayed were, as Vũ Khiêu affirms, of Vietnam's Six Provinces (Vũ Khiêu 1987, 204). What, then, are the southern characteristics and psychology? Of the various teachings in Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's writings, I like to introduce two examples that are very specific to the tradition of Saigon/Mekong region in arousing the spirits of southerners for fighting against the enemy.

First is the spirit of doing benevolence, *nhân*, for others, but without any expectation of being compensated. This *nhân* itself is the most important element of Confucian virtue, but the condition of “without expectation of being compensated” is very southern, having arisen under the geographic conditions of a rich land with sparse population. In the beginning of the “Lục Vân Tiên,” the author describes Lục Vân Tiên's rescue of Nguyệt Nga from the hands of bandits. When Nguyệt Nga invites Lục Vân Tiên to her family in order to express her gratitude, Lục Vân Tiên's response was: “If you do something for others, why do you expect others to repay you (*Làm ơn há để trông người trả ơn*)? ... You know the sentence, ‘See what to do for righteousness but no action (*kiến nghĩa bất vi*).’ If you, as a man, do so, you are not a hero (*Làm người thế ấy cũng phi anh hùng*).” (Tuấn Thành and Anh Vũ 2005, 13-14) The same moral is emphasized in the situation when the blind Lục Vân Tiên is rescued by an old fisherman and this old man offers to share his shelter and food. Lục Vân Tiên expresses the highest thanks to him, only to receive the response, “[This is only] the heart of

benevolent righteousness; why do you think you should repay my kindness (*Đốc lòng nhân nghĩa, há chờ trả ơn?*)” (Tuấn Thành and Anh Vũ 2005, 43) An old man who lives by collecting firewood says after he has helped Lục Vân Tiên, “If you calculate after you help someone, what good is it (*Làm ơn mà lại trông người sao hay?*)?” (Tuấn Thành and Anh Vũ 2005, 48) Thus one southern characteristic is the spirit of pure sacrifice.

Second virtue emphasized in the poem is faithfulness (*tín nghĩa*). Among the countries that use the Chinese ideograms, *tín nghĩa* commonly has been accepted as a desirable virtue. But, according to Insun Yu, it is especially important among southern Vietnamese, whose consciousness of village solidarity is not so strong and who thus keep this virtue, [*tín*] *nghĩa*, as the most important element of personal relationships (Yu 1999, 375). Nguyễn Đình Chiểu emphasized *tín nghĩa* in the way he framed the story. Usually, characters in a story can be divided into two categories, the good and the bad. In the “Lục Vân Tiên,” however, the main division is between two groups of seemingly good persons. The typically bad characters such as bandits and foreign enemy are marginal in this story. Instead, the seriously bad characters in the “Lục Vân Tiên” are the men and women who betrayed faithfulness, while the good characters are those who kept faithfulness in the face of adversity. The former includes Võ Công and his daughter, Võ Thê Loan, who had been the fiancée of Lục Vân Tiên. Trịnh Hâm and Bùi Kiệm are two acquaintances of Lục Vân Tiên, but they harm and even try to kill Tiên after he becomes blind. Among the good, Nguyệt Nga is the first character who

remains faithful to Lục Vân Tiên. Hôn Minh and Vương Tử Trực are friends who never betray Lục Vân Tiên. Tiểu đồng, which means “small boy,” is also an impressive character as a faithful servant who is willing to die for his master, Lục Vân Tiên.

Another characteristic of the poem can be seen in the role of the commoners in supporting the hero and the heroine in adversity. In his discussion of the northern *nôm* literature of Hồ Xuân Hương and Nguyễn Du in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Anthony Reid describes the appearance of this literature as “the popularization of Vietnamese literature, which created much of the country’s modern sense of identity.” (Reid 1997, 16) The “Lục Vân Tiên,” however, not only played a role in popularizing the *nôm* literature, but it also served to normalize the roles of the common population in the story—or history. These common people include fisherman, firewood collectors, and old ladies in a certain religious community of Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương. Thus, it is usually claimed that one of the reasons for the popularity of the ‘Lục Vân Tiên’ is its folklore nature with many of its characters being commoners (*nhât vật bình thường*) (Ca Văn Thịnh 2001, 160). Nonetheless, the important role of the commoners in this poem is not simply their appearance. They play active roles in the story. They save, care for, and return the hero and heroine to the main arc of the story, so that the story can continue. This is a very important theme that Nguyễn Đình Chiểu made: It is only by the active roles of the commoners that the story—or history—continues in the right direction.

Women also play significant roles in the poem. The main

heroine, Nguyệt Nga, has an impressive personality that includes two very different features. One is characterized by how she abases herself in front of Lục Vân Tiên to the extent of calling herself *tiện thiếp* (humble concubine) (Tuần Thành and Anh Vũ 2005, 13) and how she supports him through any hardship. On the other hand, she is a strong and active lady who does her best to try to have Lục Vân Tiên. She carries Lục Vân Tiên's portrait, which she drew with the purpose of catching or of possessing the man, and she pays sincere respect, swearing that she will be with him until her death. Her journey is also very long and arduous. She meets Lục Vân Tiên for the first time when she is on a long journey with only a female servant, Kim Liên, and afterwards she wanders by herself in many places until she meets Lục Vân Tiên once again. This combination of chaste (Confucian) and active and strenuous (Vietnamese) characteristics in a woman was what Nguyễn Đình Chiểu was offering as an ideal model for his people.

Yet another characteristic of the poem is the love of mountains and waters (*núi nước*), i.e., the country or fatherland. In the “Lục Vân Tiên” Nguyễn Đình Chiểu frequently emphasizes the beauty of nature with descriptions of the songs of charming birds, beautiful trees, colorful flowers, lovely butterflies, handsome mountains, and clean water, which are all very deliberate ways to make the readers or the listeners feel a proud love of their land. In one part of the poem, for example, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu chants:

“[... ]

Has been going quickly in the long way,  
 (Ra đi tách dặm băng chùng)  
 The southern wind has now brought the time from spring to  
 summer.  
 (Gió nam rày đã đưa xuân qua hè.)  
 Seeing also the roads with willow trees and hoe trees,  
 (Lại xem dặm liễu đường hoe.)  
 Hearing the dazed news of bees and the far resounding  
 voices of cicadas.  
 (Tin ong ngơ ngáo, tiếng ve vang dầy.)  
 Happily watching the scene of those lakes, rivers, and  
 mountains,  
 (Vui xem nước nọ non này.)  
 Waves are rippling the water surface, and the high  
 surrounding stones make mountains.  
 (Nước sao sóng dợn, non vậy đá cao.)  
 [...]”<sup>12)</sup>

The beauty of the country and pride in the nature of the country is a basic source of reasons for the people to be willing to die for that country. This element reminds us of the last poem of José Rizal (1861-1896), who is regarded as the first leader of a nationalist movement in East Asia. A very important motif in his last poem, “My Last Farewell (Mi Ultimo Adios),” is the bright beauties of his Fatherland, the Philippines. This is a very modern motivation for mobilizing the peasants to take to the battlefields for the sake of their country.

Interestingly enough, the importance of “Lục Vân Tiên” continued into the next century, until the southerners overcame

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12) Tuấn Thành and Anh Vũ (2005), p. 19. English translation is by Nguyễn Nhật Linh.

the French and the Americans. I will introduce a fascinating example of the way that the “Lục Vân Tiên” ideology was spreading through the southern society through reading, listening, and singing, and by being carried by the small boats that move along the river branches and creeks that shape the very special southern landscape. The following is part of childhood memories from the 1930s recounted by Nguyễn Thị Định (1920-1992), the former vice commander of the NLF:

“The whole family loved to listen to Chấn [\* Định’s brother, 20 years old at this time] read the *Lục Vân Tiên* poem. Whenever we had nothing to do at night, we would gather around the oil lamp – my mother lying in the hammock, cradling her grandchild, my father sitting silent in front of a small tea pot, my sisters sitting around mending clothes. We all kept quiet and listened to my brother read the story [...] People in my neighborhood also loved to listen to the *Lục Vân Tiên* story. Whenever they heard of an opera being performed somewhere, they would try to go and see it, no matter how far they had to go. Then, the next morning, as they rowed their sampans the opera addicts would repeat the new sections of ‘Lục Vân Tiên’ they had just learned. So, in the evenings [*Lục Vân Tiên* was recited in our home], as soon as my brother or I began to read, the neighbors would all come. Sometimes, when I reached the part of the story where Nguyệt Nga, Vân Tiên, and his young valet were harmed by the wicked people, I wept and the neighbors also wept. Once in a while, my father nodded his head in approval and commented: “This story teaches people all the virtues they must have in live: humanity, kindness, filial piety, courage, determination, and loyalty.” To show her agreement, my mother did not say anything but

softly sang a few verses to lull her grandchild to sleep [...]  
(Nguyễn Thị Định 2000, 36)

Through literature, common ethics were spread across the lower level of society as people read, listened, and sang such poems. The waterway and the boats that moved along them made it possible to spread the “Lục Vân Tiên” quickly and widely around the country. Women also played an active role in spreading the story, and groups of performers had an important role in circulating this knowledge as well. The next generation learned the ethics of the “Lục Vân Tiên” by hearing them sung in lullabies.

If the “Lục Vân Tiên” was the source of general moral base for fighting against enemy, the series of ritual verses (*văn tế*) provided the practical weapons to mobilize peasants to battle. This literature for the dead was to be read and heard in public, which made it particularly effective. In all the history of the Vietnamese literature, Nguyễn Đình Chiểu is thought to have produced the highest quality *chữ nômi văn tế* (Trần Đại Vinh 1997, 181). His works such as “Văn Tế Nghĩa Sĩ Cần Giuộc,” “Văn Tế Trường Định,” and “Văn Tế Nghĩa Sĩ Trận Vong Lục Tỉnh” are filled with direct and indirect messages to the peasants to fight against enemy. The “Văn Tế Nghĩa Sĩ Cần Giuộc” has a particularly important place in the resistance literature in that it pays great attention to the role of peasants. As Cao Tự Thanh points out, “Peasants had appeared in the literature many times, but only with the “Văn Tế Nghĩa Dân Chết Trận Cần Giuộc” [Văn Tế Nghĩa Sĩ Cần Giuộc] do the peasants begin to be described

as heroes.” (Cao Tự Thanh 2001, 276) This *văn tế* includes the following sentences: “If we remember the past times of these soldiers, [they] were busy living and only worried about poverty. [They] were not familiar with riding horses, had not been to battlefields at all. The works of plowing, digging, and planting are familiar for their hands to do. They had never exercised swords, spears, and flags before [...] but they hate the barbarians like the farmers hate weeds [...] When you live you attack the enemy, when you were killed you still attack the enemy, please let your spirits follow our soldiers, and we want revenge against that enemy for millions and millions of years.” (Trường Bửu Lâm 1967, 68; Tuấn Thành and Anh Vũ 2005, 131; 134)

## V. Conclusion

Nguyễn Đình Chiểu was a typical southern *nho sĩ* who was grown and educated during the Minh Mạng period. Though because of his blindness he was not able to lead the anti-French forces, he took part in the fighting by his writing of great verses. “Lục Văn Tiên” was his most prominent *chữ nôm* story verse. The importance of the “Lục Văn Tiên” derives from the role that it played in mobilizing the peasants and commoners to fight against the foreign invasion.

Because of its knowledge of the local characteristics and psychology and its sympathy for the local heritage and culture, the literature could be popularized. In other words, the creation of popular works of *nôm* literature such as “Lục Văn Tiên” had to do with the fact that the Confucian intellectuals

to begin to pay attention to the common or local lives, which led to the new phenomenon of combining the higher ideals of Confucianism with the grass-root level of local lives.

The localization and popularization of the literature through the initiatives of the higher intellectual class can be understood in a wider context. That is, it can be seen as part of a common phenomenon in the East Asian world, including Burma, Thailand, Vietnam, and Korea, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As Liberman argues, in Burma the late 1700s and early 1800s saw a marked increase in the number of professional puppeteers, singers, musicians, and dancers thanks to the popularized forms of Ramayana, the Jatakas, and Burmese historical events (Liberman 2003, 191). In Thailand, the Siamized version of Ramayana, “Ramakien,” was composed at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century through the initiatives of the Thai kings from the Rama I (1782-1809), and it was more actively performed in public. In Korea, the six popular stories that contain Confucian virtues were compiled in the forms of petit operas (*pansori*) by a Confucian intellectual, Shin Jae-hyo (1812-1884), and these operas spread the upper class ethics into the bottom of the society during this century. In Vietnam the greatest number of *nôm* works, such as the works of Hồ Xuân Hương (1772-1822) and of Nguyễn Du (1765-1820), were produced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In short, the localization of literature in the various parts of East Asia can be seen as a reflection of the social changes that were occurring in the area at that time.

Because of their closer relationships with the peasants, the southern *nho sĩ* leaders were able to bring the peasants to the

battlefields by the writings of the *chữ nôm* verses. As for the elements that played a significant role in this successful mass mobilization, I figured out several characteristic features from the “Lục Vân Tiên.” Apart from its Confucian ethics, it also included virtues that were very specific to Vietnam in general and southern Vietnam in particular: benevolence without any expectation of repayment, *tín nghĩa*, the emphasis on the role of commoners, women who were chaste but active, and the love of country.

In Vietnam, beginning in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, literary works led peasants to make sacrifices for their country, *non nước*. This was an important and, more correctly speaking, a horrible creation, but it was an effective tool for the development of nationalism. The new stage that appeared in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century in southern Vietnam, where peasants were mobilized to fight to the death for ‘their’ country by the power of the pen, provided a precedent for the role that literature would play in the formidable nationalistic movements that would be prominent during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not only in Vietnam but in countries across East Asia.

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## 19세기 남부베트남 문학과 반불투쟁 - ‘룩 번 띠엔 (Lục Vân Tiên)’을 중심으로

최 병 옥  
인하대 사학과

본 연구는 19세기 중반 남부베트남 즉 사이공-메콩 지역에서 출현하기 시작한 찌놈 (*chữ nôm*) 문학과 반불투쟁의 상관관계를 조명한다. 특히 응우옌 딘 찌에우 (Nguyễn Đình Chiểu)의 장편 서사시 ‘룩 번 띠엔’이 주요 분석 대상이다.

필자는 ‘룩 번 띠엔’이 출현하게 된 사회적 배경을 검토하고 작품 내용에 대한 분석을 통해 이 작품이 남부인을 항전에 동원하고 그들로 하여금 자신의 땅을 위해 기꺼이 죽게 만들었던 요소들이 무엇이었는가를 찾고 있다.

남부베트남에서 찌놈 문학이 출현한 것은 19세기 전반 사회 변화의 결과이다. 민 망 (Minh Mạng) 황제 시기 (1820-1841) 중 특히 1830년대부터 적극적으로 수행되었던 남부에서의 교육 및 국가 이념의 확산 작업으로 인해서 1840년대 동안 사이공-메콩 지역에는 유학적 지식인층이 두터워졌다. 이들은 중앙 조정과 촌락민을 중계하는 존재로서 향촌사회에 영향력을 확대하고 있었다. 찌놈은 한자의 독특한 합성으로써 현지인의 입말을 표현하는 방식이다. 향촌사회에 밀착한 식자층의 확대는 찌놈으로 지어진 문학의 출현과 전파의 전제가 되는 것이다.

19세기 중반 남부 사회에서 발전하고 있던 찌놈 문학은 프랑스군이 들어오고 항전이 시작되면서 저항문학으로서의 면모를 보이기 시작했다. 1859년 프랑스군의 사이공 공격에 촉발되어 전

개된 남부의 항쟁은 약 20 여 년 간 지속되었으며 이 긴 항쟁 여정은 여러 형태의 쯤놈 문학 작품들을 동반했다. 필자는 남부 항전이 갖는 생명력이 쯤놈 문학에 기초하고 있다고 주장하며 항전을 지속시켰던 가장 대표적인 쯤놈 문학 작품으로 ‘룩 번 띠엔’을 들고 있다.

필자는 ‘룩 번 띠엔’에 대한 세밀한 분석을 통해 이 작품이 남부인을 항전에 동원하고 그들로 하여금 자신의 땅을 위해 기꺼이 희생하게 만들었던 요소들이 무엇이었는가를 찾아내고 있다. 이 요소들의 기저는 단순한 애국심 내지 항전 의식이 아니다. 그 보다는 남부인의 심성을 자극하고 희생을 감내하게 만드는 매우 독특한 남부적 덕목들이다. 보상을 바라지 않는 무조건적 인애(仁愛), 인간관계에서의 신의, 이야기의 흐름 (또는 역사의 흐름)을 제자리로 갖다 놓는 평민들의 역할, 매우 순종적이지만 또 한편으로는 억척스럽기까지 한 여성상 등이 그것이다. 이에 더해 산하의 아름다움과 그에 대한 사랑 등도 남부인의 애국 정서를 자극하는 장치였다.

서사시 ‘룩 번 띠엔’은 불려지고, 들려지고, 전해지면서 남부인들 사이에 퍼져나가는 가운데 남부인의 항전의식을 고양했고 그들을 전장으로 끌어냈고 죽음으로 인도했다. 우리는 20세기 민족주의 시대에, 그리고 혁명의 시대에 인민대중이 국가와 민족 또는 이데올로기를 위해 자신의 목숨을 초개같이 버리게 만드는 데 문학이 큰 역할을 했던 사실을 기억한다. 붓으로써 사람들을 죽음으로 내모는 이 기술은 20세기의 공포스러운 발명품이었다. 필자는 이런 발명품의 베트남에서의 기원지를 19세기 중반 남부 베트남으로 보고 있으며 ‘룩 번 띠엔’을 대표적 사례로 간주해야 할 것이라 주장하고 있다.

주제어: 룩 번 띠엔, 응우옌 딘 찌에우, 남부베트남, 남부문학, 반 불항쟁, 쯤놈문학, 민 망