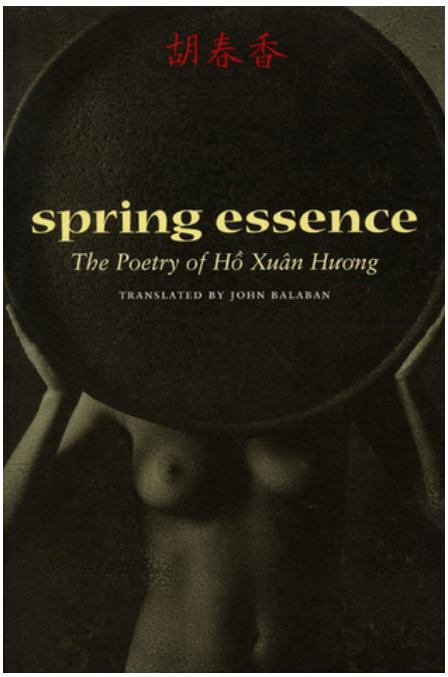

Spring Essence: The Poetry of Hô Xuân Huong

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H? Xuân H??ng — whose name translates as "Spring Essence" — is one of the most important and popular poets in Vietnam. A concubine, she became renowned for her poetic skills, writing subtly risqué poems which used double entendre and sexual innuendo as a vehicle for social, religious, and political commentary.

"The Unwed Mother"

Because I was too easy, this happened.
Can you guess the hollow in my heart?

Fate did not push out a bud
even though the willow grew.

He will carry this a hundred years
but I must bear the burden now.

Never mind the gossip of the world.
Don't have it, yet have it! So simple.

The publication of *Spring Essence* is a major historical and cultural event. It features a "tri-graphic" presentation of English translations alongside both the modern Vietnamese alphabet and the nearly extinct calligraphic *Nôm* writing system, the hand-drawn calligraphy in which H? Xuân H??ng originally wrote her poems. It represents the first time that this calligraphy—the carrier of Vietnamese culture for over a thousand years—will be printed using moveable type. From the technology demonstrated in this book scholars worldwide can begin to recover an important part of Vietnam's literary history. Meanwhile, readers of all interests will be fascinated by the poetry of Ho Xuan Huong, and the scholarship of John Balaban.

The translator, John Balaban, was twice a National Book Award finalist for his own poetry and is one of the preeminent American authorities on Vietnamese literature. During the war Balaban served as a conscientious objector, working to bring war-injured children better medical care. He later returned to Vietnam to record folk poetry. Like Alan Lomax's pioneering work in American music, Balaban was to first to record Vietnam's oral tradition. This important work led him to the poetry of H? Xuân H??ng.

Ngo Than Nhan, a computational linguist from NYU's Courant Institute of Mathematics, has digitized the ancient *Nôm* calligraphy.

Spring Essence: The Poetry of Hô Xuân Huong Details

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PGR Nair says

SPRING ESSENCE

Ho Xuan Huong (1772-1822) was a Vietnamese woman poet born at the end of the Later Le Dynasty (Period 1428'1788: the greatest and longest lasting dynasty of traditional Vietnam) who wrote poems with unusual irreverence and shockingly erotic undertones for her time. She is considered as one of Vietnam’s greatest poets, such that she is dubbed “the Queen of Nom Poetry" and has become a cultural symbol of Vietnam. I came across her name first in a travel guide where one her poems was listed. It led me to search for her poetry. It was a sheer delight to read her poems in the book titled "Spring Essence", which is what her name means in Vietnamese language.

The epoch she lived was marked by calamity and social disintegration. A concubine, although a high-ranking one, Ho Xuan followed Chinese classical styles in her poetry, but preferred to write poetry in an extinct ideographic script known as Nom, similar to Chinese but representing Vietnamese. And while her prosody followed traditional forms, her poems were anything but conventional: Whether mountain landscapes, or longings after love, or apparently about such common things as a fan, weaving, some fruit, or even a river snail, almost all her poems were double entendres with hidden sexual meaning.

She brought to life the battles of the sexes and the power of the female body vis-a-vis male authority, human weakness and desire, and boldly discussed various aspects of religious life, social justice, and equality including sexual freedom, as well as a range of other issues and experiences potentially detrimental to the status and aspirations of women. On close scrutiny, her lyrics offer surprising insight into a private Vietnamese past: the candid voice of a liberal female in a male-dominated society.

In a Confucian tradition that banished the nude from art, writing about sex was unheard of. And, if this were not enough to incur disfavor in a time when impropriety was punished by the sword, she wrote poems which ridiculed the authority of the decaying Buddhist church, the feudal state, and Confucian society. So, in a time when death and destruction lay about, when the powerful held sway and disrespect was punished by the sword, how did she get away with the irreverence, the scorn, and the habitual indecency of her poetry? The answer lies in her excellence as a poet and in the paramount cultural esteem that Vietnamese have always placed on poetry, whether in the high tradition of the literati or the oral folk poetry of the common people. Quite simply, she survived because of her exquisite cleverness at poetry.

Her poems were copied by hand for almost 100 years before they finally saw a woodblock printing in 1909.

Below are some samplers of her playful poetry. I am sure it will delight you as much as it did me. The reader will experience Ho Xuan Huong’s lonely, intelligent life, her exquisite poetry, her stubbornness, her sarcasm, her bravery, her irreverent humor and her bodhisattva’s compassion in these poems.

Swinging

Praise whoever raised these poles
for some to swing while others watch

A boy pumps, then arcs his back.
The shapely girl shoves up her hips,

Four pink trousers flapping hard,
Two pairs of legs stretched side by side.

Spring games. Who hasn't known them?
Swingingposts removed, the holes lie empty

Male Member

New born, it wasn't so vile. But, now, at night,
even blind it flares brighter than any lamp.

Soldierlike, it sports a reddish leather hat,
Musket balls sagging the bag down below

Jack Fruit

My body is like the jackfruit on the branch:
My skin coarse, my meat thick
Kind sir, if you love me, pierce me with your stick
Caress me and sap will slicken your hands

Weaving at Night

Lampwick turned up, the room glows white.
The loom moves easily all night long

as feet work and push below.
Nimbly the shuttle flies in and out,

wde or narrow, big or small, sliding in snug.
Long or short, it glides smoothly.

Girls who do it right, let it soak
then wait a while for the blush to show

The man- and -wife mountain

A clever showpiece nature here displays
It shaped a man ,then shaped a woman, too
Above some snowflakes dot his silver head.

Below , some dewdrops wet her rosy cheeks.
He flaunts his manhood underneath the moon.
She rubs her sex in view of hills and streams.
Even those aged boulders will make love.
Don't blame us, human beings, if in youth .

(On a journey, the poetess saw two huge rocks, one poised on top of the other, resembling a couple engaged in sexual intercourse)

The Condition of Women

Sisters, do you know how it is? On one hand,
the bawling baby; on the other, your husband

sliding onto your stomach,
his little son still howling at your side.

Yet, everything must be put in order.
Rushing around all helter-skelter.

Husband and child, what obligations!
Sisters, do you know how it is?

(A very touching poem capturing the social issues of women)

On Sharing a Husband

Screw the fate that makes you share a man.
One cuddles under a cotton blanket, the other's cold
Every now and then, well maybe or maybe not.
Once or twice a month, oh, it's like nothing.
You try to stick to it like a fly on rice
but the rice is rotten. You slave like a maid,
but without pay. If I had known how it would go
I think I would have lived alone.

The Unwed Mother

Because I was too easy, this happened.
Can you guess the hollow in my heart?

Fate did not push out a bud
even though the willow grew.

He will carry it a hundred years
but I must bear the burden now.

Never mind he gossip of the world
Don't have it,yet have it! So simple.

(This poem is a classic gem of leaving unsaid everything but what is needed. A heart unfolding. In those times, for an upper class woman, pregnancy out of wedlock could be punished by being forced to lie down while an elephant trod on her stomach, killing both mother and unborn child. For peasants, socially far more free in sexual encounters, there’s a folk proverb:
“No husband, but pregnant, that’s skillful.

Husband and pregnant, that’s pretty ordinary.”)

Questions for the Moon

How many thousands of years have you been there?
Why sometimes slender, why sometimes full?

How old is the white Rabbit?
How many children belong to Moon-Girl?

Why do you circle the purple loneliness of night
and seldom blush before the sun?

Weary, past midnight, who are you searching for?
Are you in love with these rivers and hills?

Autumn Landscape

Drop by drop the rain slaps the banana leaves.
Praise whoever sketched this desolate scene:

the lush dark canopies of the gnarled trees,
the long river, sliding smooth and white.

I lift my wine flask, drunk with rivers and hills.
My backpack , breathing moonlight, sags with poems.

Look and love everyone.
Whoever sees this landscape is stunned.

(What an amazingly beautiful sketch it is! 'Look and love even men' has a subtle sarcasm.)

Spring -Watching Pavilion

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

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

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

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

(This is my favorite, a masterpiece indeed. Seeking solitude in nature, she realizes that it is nature itself, not any organized religion or other construct of the human world, that holds the key to the search for nirvana and

sometimes can' see heaven upside- down in sad puddles ')

Chris says

‘What does it imply’, Professor Kai asks me, ‘about the national psyche when its national literary heroine is a prostitute?’ ‘Vietnam’s national heroine a prostitute?’ I am alarmed (…)
‘It says everything about the Vietnamese, understand – no?’ say the professor in his lilting pedantic rambling. ‘She is a prostitute. The things she has done are not commendable great deeds. But don’t you see it is the reason why she does things. They are selfless acts. Sacrifices. Everything is there. You must read it’.
Andrew X. Pham ‘Catfish and Mandala’

What can I add to this recommendation?
Perhaps that it is a miracle that Hô Xuân Huong (1772 – 1822) wrote at all in a male dominated Confucian tradition. A tradition in which few women were tutored in the rigorous literary studies given to young men preparing for the imperial examines.
Perhaps that it was surprising what she wrote, constantly questioning the order of things, especially male authority. In her time not only shocking but also personally risky.
Perhaps that she wrote in ‘Nôm’, a writing system that represented the Vietnamese speech, rather than Chinese, the language of the Mandarin elite. Using the ‘Nôm’ gives her poetry a special Vietnamese dimension filled with aphorisms and speech habits of the common people.
Perhaps most surprising that all her poems, written in the ‘lu-shih’ style, have hidden within them another poem with sexual meaning. Very unfortunately I don’t read any Vietnamese. But with the beautiful English translations of John Balaban I come a long way, and sometimes I can
“see heaven upside-down in sad puddles”

Vi Mai says

Great collection but unfortunately some of the English translations are incorrect. I recognize the difficulty of translating Vietnamese poems written in Nôm to English so overall I think this book is excellent.

Penelope says

I've been in the mood for poetry lately; went shopping in my poetry shelves and pulled out Spring Essence. Sat down in the morning and had it read by nightfall. Think I will keep it on my current stack for a while, so I can pick it up and re-read a poems now and again.

Ho Xuan Huang is my kind of poet. I have a strong affinity for certain types of poetry: Asian forms such as Haiku, Tanka (in the case of Ho Xuan Huong, the form is "lu-shih"), actually forms of all kinds, particularly Sonnets; women poets; poems that push against societal constraints; poems that address love, loss, eroticism (I don't mean dirty Limericks!). Spring Essence has it all!

Ho Xuan Huang, if she existed at all, lived in Vietnam; born sometime around 1785, it is thought she died

sometime around 1820. There is some mystery surrounding her very existence and evidently some scholars believe she is a "catch all" character for one or more other poets who did not want to write under their own name due to the dangerous nature of the content (pushing at male dominance, erotic double entendre which was verboten).

It must have been challenging to translate these poems, maintaining the simultaneous "straight" and erotic perspectives. Evidently, this poet was a genius at this type of poetry.

What she wrote over 200 years ago still feels real and current today. And even today, she would piss some people off. I like that about her.

I highly recommend!

Laren says

Tom Robbins sent me this book. The poems grit and flutter. Amazing.

Edward Rathke says

Simple and beautiful poetry.

I've never read Vietnamese poetry, but I like this a lot, and I may need to seek out more poetry from Southeast Asia, if this is anything to go by.

But, yes, I loved it.

Kaion says

> ***"Jackfruit"*** *(t. Marilyn Chin)*
> *My body is like a jackfruit swinging on a tree*
> *My skin is rough, my pulp is thick*
> *Dear prince, if you want me pierce me upon your stick*
> *Don't squeeze, I'll ooze and stain your hands*

Not much is known about the Vietnamese poet Ho Xuan Huong. She lived approximately 1775-1825, spending at least some of that time in Hanoi. Other details of her life —that she was married twice to minor officials, that she was a concubine, that she ran a tea shop where scholars studying for their civil service exams would come to challenge her— tend toward conjecture or are entirely legend. Because the earliest-surviving copy of her poetry is from 1893, it is not even entirely clear which of the ~140 poems associated with her are truly hers and which have been attributed to her from a long folk tradition.

What I did find clear about Xuan Huong (or "Xuan Huong") from her poetry was not only her skillfulness in writing in luc-bat, but her characteristic playfulness and her unabashed sensuality. In some of her best poetry, these qualities impart a sense of a real joy in ordinary experience, as in this poem about country living:

> **"Water-bailing"** (t. Nguyen Ngoc Bich)
> Not a drop of rain for this dry heat!
> Come, girls, let's go bail water.
> Let's drag our delta-shaped buckets to that huge square field
> where our bodies can pulse to the water's lapping.
> Crouched, straining to catch each trickle from the rockheads,
> our buttocks tighten with such labor.
> Indeed we work so hard we forget the effort
> and, taking a final stance to bend and lift—
> you part your legs a second, and it's filled.

Unable to resist bawdy entendre and tricky wordplay, Huong seems equally unwilling to pass up a chance to poke fun of the pompous or inflated. To a weeping widow she scoffs, "If it disturbs your blood, then swear off meat!"; on passing a general's shrine, she grouses (*"Oh, to trade in my lot and be a man!/ Was that all that a hero could have done?"*) [Huynh Sanh Thong].

If you sense some proto-feminism in that last one, you're not alone. Huong is most known for her poems which are equally frank in expressing her frustrations with what she sees as the unique tribulations of being a woman. At times this takes the form of lament, sorrow in the face of her vulnerable place in a patriarchal, Confucian society. Other times she flashes with anger; for instance, on the life of a concubine:

> **"Sharing a Husband"** (t. Linh Dinh)
> One under the quilt, one freezes.
> To hell, father, with this husband-sharing.
> Once in a while, twice a month, maybe,
> I might as well not have it.
> Trade punches for rice, but rice is moldy.
> And work's work, but I'm working for free.
> Had I known things would turn out this way,
> I would have settled for being alone.

In her willingness to speak of her pain and her bitterness, Huong shows she's not cowed. Rather her emotionality is a sign of her defiance, which links her to the heroine of Nguyen Du's beloved epic Tale of Kieu, who could've expressed something like of the following sentiment:

> **"The cake that drifts in water"** (t. Huynh Sanh Thong)
> My body is both white and round
> In water I may sink or swim.
> The hand that kneads me may be rough—
> I still shall keep my true-red heart.

**ETA: It occurs to me to clarify she's talking about the dessert* chè xôi n??c, *which is both fun to make, and delicious (with lotsa ginger).*

It's this defiance that makes her such an irresistible subject of folk legend, and a continuing target of controversy. Look no further than the kerfuffle* in 2008 when *Poetry* published some translations of her work by Marilyn Chin, and a publisher of Balaban's Spring Essence accused her of "noodling" around. This kicked off a series of furious letters/blog posts in the poetry-sphere in which accusations of racism, cultural imperialism, sexism, and more of 'em fighting words were thrown about.

POETS GETTING REAL, which is undeniably a little funny, but why? Cause Ho Xuan Huong gets real.

In his post on the myth surrounding Huong for the *Poetry* website, Linh Dinh says her "enduring popularity testifies to the Vietnamese's need and desire for a masterfully blunt, loose-talking woman". I would argue we could all use some blunt, loose-talking woman. And why wouldn't we when they're this fun and on tap for a penis joke? **Rating: 5 stars**

*Mezzo Cammin: The Women Poets Timeline offers a nice essay on Ho Xuan Huong that puts her into historical context and elaborates the Poetry Foundation incident.

**Notes on English translations
- As for this particular book, **John Balaban's *Spring Essence*** is the only dedicated volume of Ho Xuan Huong's poetry in English. His translations are generally lyrical, if a teensy lacking in fire. He tends to excel at the more melancholy and pastoral selections. He misreads a few poems, but is overall very readable, offering notes on most of the poems. This will be the most accessible volume for many readers, and it's not a bad introduction. (**Rating: 3.5 stars**)

- **Linh Dinh**'s translations of six of her poems in his aforementioned Poetry Foundation post on Ho Xuan Huong are the best of all that I've compared, and he provides nice context on the tradition Ho is coming from. He's also pretty unsparing about Balaban's translations.

- **Marilyn Chin** offers a very modern, fun takes on five of Ho's poems that for the record, I consider very valid.

- For greater accuracy, **Huynh Sanh Thong** has includes some twenty Ho poems in his exhaustive An Anthology of Vietnamese Poems: From the Eleventh through the Twentieth Centuries. I find his more archaic cadence rewarding, though it may take some getting used to.

Moo says

I had to weigh this poetry on complex factors, including that each poem has been translated twice from ch? nôm to qu?c ng?, and then to english. Some historical and cultural references get muddled, and the poetry style often feels diluted, and it takes extra effort to meet those compromises. However you get the sense of her approach, doused with double entendres, nearly all poems are very sexual and ambitious for its time. H??ng is often blunt and unreserved but remains in an unacting, daydream state.

Leola says

I enjoy anything that has survived against the odds of history, and even more so if it's the work of a woman. There's a permanence to these poems, a sense that Ho Xuan Huong's spirit is alive in them still. She writes about mountain passes, wellsprings, rusted coins, willow trees; a second reading reveals the innuendos behind these nouns. So, too, we have poems about men and women, life and death, sexuality and love.

> "Pluck the low branches, pull down the high.
> Enjoy alike the spent blossoms, the tight buds."

The translation is equally fascinating: each poem is printed in three forms, (1) the ancient and near-extinct Nôm script in which Ho Xuan Huong wrote; (2) the modern Vietnamese equivalent, qu?c ng?; (3) the English translation by John Balaban. Having no understanding whatsoever of calligraphic languages, I still enjoyed the sight of Nôm on each page. It gave me a sense of just how vast the gap, not only in time and geography, that Ho Xuan Huong and I had travelled to meet. The work of John Balaban in bringing these poems to a wider readership is applaudable; and this book marks the first time that Nôm has been printed as type.

My favourite poem was Country Scene:

> "The waterfall plunges in mist.
> Who can describe this desolate scene:
>
> The long white river sliding through
> the emerald shadows of the ancient canopy
>
> ...a shepherd's horn echoing in the valley,
> fishnets stretched to dry on sandy flats.
>
> A bell is tolling, fading, fading
> just like love. Only poetry lasts."

W.B. says

Fascinating, often sexual poems written by an eighteenth century concubine.

When I first read this book, I was sure that it was a hoax perpetrated by a scholar or a gaggle of them, but now I'm not too sure and I simply don't care because the writing is so interesting.

This was written in Nom, "(a) nearly extinct ideographic script." From the jacket: "This book is the first in history to have Nom printed as type, and features the 1,000-year old script alongside its modern Vietnamese equivalent, quoc-ngu, and John Balaban's English translations."

The poems vary in quality (as in any collection) but there are some real stunners in here. Like this...

Consoling a Young Widow

Your funeral cries just hurt our ears.
Stop wailing or you'll shame the rivers and hills.

Let me advise you on your tears:
If you've got weak blood, don't eat rich food.

The poet pretty much exhibits the heartlessness and wit one expects of a courtesan, and this keeps the poetry interesting. Of course, the poor translator struggles horribly with the poet's constant punning. Only can only empathize. I think he does very well with a nigh impossible task.

This one's been around for a while. You've probably noticed its distinctive cover in one of the chain bookstores before.

Congrats, Copper Canyon Press. Another winner from you folks.

Ben says

Ho Xuan Huong, whose name means "Spring Essence," was a concubine during the end of Vietnam's second Le Dynasty (1592-1788), a period of unrest and social decay. She was a woman who wrote poetry in male-dominated, Confucian tradition--a remnant, both social and artistic, of the Chinese who had once dominated Ho Xuan Huong's country. Though the poems are full of double entendre, sexual innuendo, and subtle attacks on all levels of male authority (social, religious, political, etc), she and her works have survived because of her charming cleverness and pure mastery of poetry. As the Utne Reader has noted, "Ho Xuan Huong was simply, one of the most remarkable poets who ever lived." I would highly recommend this volume to anyone interested in poetry or women's studies; it is uncomplicated and beautiful. Her words are inspiring, and the scenes she paints elegantly mix disintegration and the sacred. Similar, I imagine to walking through a ruined pavilion.

Steve says

Little seems to be known about the life of H? Xuân H??ng,(*) born between 1775 and 1780 and deceased by the mid-1820’s, or even if she had actually composed the poems attributed to her in the form that has come down to us. The received and much elaborated legend presents her as a professional concubine who ran a tea shop in Hanoi, had a series of relationships with a number of men in the upper class, and wrote risqué poems subversive of the paternalistic culture of late 18th and early 19th century Vietnam, but the paucity of concrete, verifiable facts is striking in view of the relatively small two century distance from the present.

What is known is that the poems circulated orally for at least 70 years, for they were not collected in written form until 1893 and did not appear in print until 1909. So they became/were part of the apparently immense oral poetic tradition in Vietnam, from which - unlike the case in China(**) - the poetic tradition of the literati was not completely estranged. What is also clear is that her lifetime was marked for all Vietnamese by turmoil and ruin as the Le dynasty collapsed, the decades long Tay-Son rebellion took hold, and it in turn was swept away when the Nguyen dynasty was established.

It is also known that she existed and was a poet, for there exist poems by Vietnamese literati which engage with her own, sometimes playfully and sometimes with condemnation. So her work was noted in her lifetime by at least some of the cultural elite. There is a note in a contemporary chronicle mentioning the execution of the governor of Yen Quang province in which is mentioned "the concubine of this man is named Ho Xuan Huong. At that time she was well-known as a talented women in literature and politics." And in 1842 a member of the royal family wrote a poem mentioning her gravesite and legacy with some respect.

It is believed that she was born into a relatively high class family since she had received a very good education,(***) but towards the end of the Le dynasty circumstances changed in ways I don't yet understand so that marriage became so expensive that even women of her class were obliged to become concubines instead of wives.

But what makes *me* believe that she was an actual person and that the long submersion of her poems in the ocean of the oral tradition did not create a sea change in her work are the coherent and consistent voice, in the first place, and the subtlety of the poems, in the second. Part of this subtlety is reflected in many of the poems' penchant to be readable on two levels: one "respectable" and the other sexual.

Jackfruit

My body is like the jackfruit on the branch:
my skin is coarse, my meat is thick.

Kind sir, if you love me, pierce me with your stick.
Caress me and sap will slicken your hands.

(It should be noted that in Southeast Asia, where this very tasty fruit grows, it is standard practice to drive a stick into the fruit to test its ripeness.) But there is also another, very different kind of subtlety in these poems:

Spring-Watching Pavilion

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

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

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

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

But she can also get scathingly direct:

Male Member

Newborn, it wasn't so vile. But, now, at night,
even blind it flares brighter than any lamp.

Soldierlike, it sports a reddish leather hat,
musketballs sagging the bag down below.

Her scorn isn't reserved just for men's tender bits:

Young Scholars

Jostling about by the temple door,
they'd like to be scholars but they can't even talk.

Someone should teach these illiterate fools
to take their brushes and paint the pagoda wall.

She also goes after monks and husbands, widows and wives with sometimes wry, sometimes bitter humor. Some of the poems could now be feminist anthems:

The Condition of Women

Sisters, do you know how it is? On one hand,
the bawling baby; on the other, your husband

sliding onto your stomach,
his little son still howling at your side.

Yet, everything must be put in order.
Rushing around all helter-skelter.

Husband and child, what obligations!
Sisters, do you know how it is?

Like Chinese, Vietnamese is not only a tonal language (which adds an additional important structure to the poetics for regulation and play), it also does not employ all the grammatical filler familiar from European languages. So a literal translation of a few lines from "Spring-Watching Pavilion" reads:

peaceful evening spring go pavilion
light light not dirty little world dust
three times watch bell tolls waves

It is evident that to bring such a poem meaningfully and artfully into a European language will strongly engage the translator's personal tastes. I'll not repeat here the warnings and the reasons for persevering nonetheless made in some of my earlier reviews of classical Chinese poetry, but I shall mention my belief that in order to try to triangulate the original poem it is very useful to read more than one translation, if

available.

Consider the following translations of one of Ho's poems, the first from John Balaban's *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Ho Xuan Huong* (2000), which includes some fifty poems, and the second from Huynh Sanh Thong's *An Anthology of Vietnamese Poems: From the Eleventh through the Twentieth Centuries* (1996), which includes twenty of Ho's poems:

River Snail

Fate and my parents shaped me like a snail,
day and night wandering marsh weeds that smell foul.

Kind sir, if you want me, open my door.
But please don't poke up into my tail.

Snail

Father and mother joined to breed a snail.
I grovel night and day among foul weeds.
Sir, if you love me, take my breastpiece off.
Don't wiggle, please, your finger in my hole.

Both translators note the knotty problem they face: Ho is playing upon a pun possible in Vietnamese but not in English: One homonym means *cache-sein,* and the other means a kind of translucent door in a snail's shell that is developed in case of drought when it must shut itself off from the drying air. I'd say that between these two translations one has a fair idea of Ho's intentions and humor. And I am grateful to both translators for a glimpse into the work of one of Vietnam's most respected poets.

(*) I shall henceforth drop the many diacritical marks displayed in modern Vietnamese; they are used primarily to indicate which of the six tones (at least in mainline Vietnamese) are used in the pronunciation of each syllable. Recall that in a tonal language the meaning of a syllable is a function of the tone used to pronounce it.

(**) Oral folk poetry entered into some of the earliest official collections of Chinese poetry, and these were extremely influential subsequently, but the poetic tradition developed by the Chinese literati deliberately separated itself from the ongoing tradition of folk poetry (though some important poets like Po Chu-i tried to change that). Huynh Sanh Thong asserts that in Vietnam, despite pressures to conform to the Chinese model, there was usually a constructive interchange between the poetry of the literati and the evolving folk tradition.

(***) Not only was she a master of language and form in the Vietnamese poetic tradition, but recently a small number of poems written in Chinese have been found which scholars believe are hers.

Julie says

I love the subversive themes. She's very subtle about being very bold. I typically like more prosish narrative poems, but I respect the intent of these so much that I really enjoyed the book.

I love the fact that the work is translated, because it keeps me wondering where Xuan Huong stops and Balaban (the translator) starts. It's very interesting to read about his translation (read the introduction!). How much of the innuendo, implication was there, and how much did his environment / education / race / gender / politics / etc. etc. etc. impress upon the story? There's so much to think about with this added layer, and it increased my enjoyment of the book tremendously. Every line I found myself asking, "Wait, did she REALLY mean that?!"

Jenna says

Ho Xuan Huong's clever way of loading her poetry with naughty double-entendres and delicate sexual undertones really resonated with me. Her poems on themes other than sex were comparatively uninteresting; I simply wasn't very moved by them. In light of the fact that Ho Xuan Huong is considered one of Vietnam's great poets, I would guess that the fault lies with the translator rather than with Ho Xuan Huong herself, though.

RD Chiriboga Moncayo says

Superb! The translations and cultural notes by John Balaban make the poems of the brilliant Ho Xuan Huong accessible to English readers.

S. says

Nice bite to these poems.

Eric says

it's tempting to compare the poet Spring Essence to some better known women poets who also wrote of their lives with passion and intelligence: Izumi Shikibu and Sappho come to mind. What distinguishes SE from her peers is her rawness and her social protest.

these brief poems will get you inside the mind and body of a vietnamese concubine of the 18th century. in a strictly confucian society, SE talks about what it feels like to be a second wife waiting on the occasional visits of her husband--and how unfair the social system is. she talks about her longings for love and her craving for sex in the plainest, most tangible way, and yet never descends to vulgarity. she is a lady who lets her readers know what being a woman means.

a voice of protest from a neglected genius: Spring Essence is essential reading for anyone interested in great poetry or women's struggle for equality.

Mark says

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

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

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

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

- ?? mari ??- says

fresh vietnamese salt

Krista the Krazy Kataloguer says

What a fantastic poet! Her poems are fascinating to read because they can be read 2 ways-- all have double entendres!
The translator has certainly done justice to this poet's concise, carefully chosen words and images. Highly recommended!
