

Calendar

Sexy Rebel

The Poetry of Ho Xuan Huong

The poet's name, Ho Xuan Huong, means "spring essence" in Vietnamese, says John Balaban, her translator, who slowly gives the pronunciation key in four syllables: "It's 'ho.' Then 'swan,' like the bird. And then 'who-ung.'" *Ho. Swan. Who-ung.*

But the poetry of Ho Xuan Huong isn't slow. It's nimble and quick-witted — and not about spring. "It's about social injustice," says Balaban, speaking by phone from North Carolina, where he teaches. "It's particularly about injustice from a woman's point of view." Her poem, "The Condition of Women," says in part:

LOCAL EVENTS

"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 howling at your side..."

Today, Ho Xuan Huong's feminism seems unremarkable; during her own time, it was shocking. Born at the end of Vietnam's feudal era (c.1775), she wrote, "When the traditional strength of women in Vietnamese society was being eroded," Balaban says. "She was part of a rebel movement that took charge of the throne. It was called the *Tay Son*, a populist movement against the conservatism of the Le dynasty, which the movement overthrew."

Ho Xuan Huong's poetry is also about love, a particular kind — "Enduring love," says Balaban. "Or fated love. It was something she hungered for and never really had." Love that was "meant to be"? he is asked. "Absolutely. Made in heaven, even."

Ho Xuan Huong, whose love life consisted of being a concubine, or second wife, wrote about sex, too, in clever ways. "She loved the double entendre, the sexual innuendo," says Balaban. Her poem, "Male Member," goes like this:

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,
musket balls sagging the bag down below.

Balaban is aware that Ho Xuan Huong is sometimes compared to Emily Dickinson and Sappho, but he discounts the Dickinson, because of Ho Xuan

佳人遺墨 GIAI-NHAN DI-MAC

Sự tích và thơ-từ Xuân-Hương



Mã chi văn giữ tâm lòng son.
Xuân-Hương.
東京印刷
IMPRIMERIE TONKINOISE
14-16, Rue du Celen, 13-16
HANOI

Portrait of Ho Xuan Huong, from the 1914 woodcut edition of her poetry

Huong's sexual content. True, Sappho's "interest in and hunger for love are certainly similar" to Ho Xuan Huong's, and her "sharp bite, caustic bite" is similar to Anne Sexton's. A poem of Ho Xuan Huong's, called, "Consoling a Young Widow," illustrates his last point:

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.

"But, in fact, there's no one who does what Ho Xuan Huong does, no one with her issues and her dexterity," says Balaban.

And what life experiences prepared Balaban to be not only Ho Xuan Huong's translator but her champion, giving readings of her work around the country, as he will do this week in San Diego? Did he, for instance, grow up in a houseful of women?

A Philadelphia native, the son of Romanian immigrants, Balaban laughs. "I did grow up in a houseful of women, but I never thought of it that way. Two older sisters and my mother. But I also had an older brother." More

importantly, he says, "I went to Vietnam as a conscientious objector in 1970. Later, I traveled around Vietnam, on a government grant, collecting oral folk poetry. And during that time, while talking to Vietnamese about poetry, inevitably Ho Xuan Huong's name came up." His translation of her work, *Spring Essence*, was published in 1999.

Balaban, who has traveled to Vietnam a dozen times since the war ended, will also read from his own poetry and from his memoir, *Remembering Heaven's Face: A Moral Witness in Vietnam*, published in 1991. Avoiding the subject of the war for so many years (and reluctant to speak about it now), still he felt compelled to write about it. "I don't think memories of things like that go away so conveniently."

Do a lot of Vietnamese-Americans come to his readings? "Lots and lots," he says. But their language is English...? "Well, the book is bilingual. So Ho Xuan Huong is put into their hands in their own language. And it also puts into print for the first time in history the script that she wrote in, a calligraphy called *nom*."

Even Vietnamese natives "are probably not familiar with *nom*," says Balaban, since it hasn't been used for 100 years. "But everyone knows about

盜帆嚇至暑創傷館
物慈陰琢秩兵喂使
朱啞長椅空永師廚
鉞拱曷鯨景几包習
沛邈点淹挾框化景
論西拱吏技椎疊永
縹竺初掠蔡檟猶蕭

Chưa Quên sủi.

Quân-sử chưa sủi cỏi vàng tạo.
Chường ôi sủi đã lisa ra sủi
Đang bauh vãng kả khua dui mỗ.
Lolisa chốt khương ngời quết hân
Glin chis chuy kên cun lơi dẫu.
Lâm dẫu chong hat đến cườg đeo.
Bướm hủ rập cườg oang. Cây dẫu
Giỏ sủi cho nên nhồi lộn lèo.

Woodcut poem by Ho Xuan Huong

it and knows it's part of their cultural past."

And what of the natives' reactions to poems like the bawdy "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.

"The Vietnamese have loved those poems since they were written," says Balaban. "That's why her work is still alive 200 years later. There's nothing so conservative about the Vietnamese culture that it forbids that kind of interest. I think the Vietnamese like her because she rebelled against the conservative, Confucian strain."

— Jeanne Schinto

The Poetry of Ho Xuan Huong
Reading and discussion
by John Balaban
Wednesday, September 18
7:00 p.m.
Mira Mesa Branch Library
8405 New Salem Street
Free
Info: 858-538-8165