

Classic Poetry Series

Ho Xuan Huong
- poems -

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Ho Xuan Huong(1772 - 1822)

Ho Xuan Huong was a Vietnamese poet born at the end of the Lê Dynasty who grew up in an era of political and social turmoil: the time of the Tây Sơn rebellion and the reactionary rule of Nguyễn Ánh. She wrote poetry using the Chữ Nôm script. She is considered one of Vietnam's greatest poets, such that she is dubbed "the Queen of Nôm poetry" by Xuân Diệu, a prominent, modern Vietnamese poet.

The facts of her life are difficult to verify but this much is well established. She was born in Nghệ An province near the end of the rule of the Trịnh Lords, and she moved to Hanoi while still a child. The best guess is that she was the youngest daughter of Ho Phi Dien.

According to the first researchers about Ho Xuan Huong like Nguyen Huu Tien and Duong Quang Ham, she was Mr. Ho Phi Dien's daughter (born in 1704) at Quỳnh Đôi Village, Quỳnh Lưu District, Nghệ An Province (*).

He acquired the baccalaureate diploma at his age of 24 under Le Bao Thai's Dynasty. Due to his family's poverty, he had to work as a tutor in Hai Hung, Hà Bắc for his earnings. At that place, he got cohabitation with a girl from Bắc Ninh as a concubine - Ho Xuan Huong was born as a result of that love affair.

Nevertheless, as per a newly-launched document by the literature researcher, the late Professor Tran Thanh Mai, Ho Xuan Huong's hometown was the same as mentioned above, but she was Mr. Ho Si Danh's daughter (1706-1783) and a younger stepsister with Ho Si Dong (1738-1786)"

She became locally famous and obtained a reputation of creating poems that were subtle and witty. She is believed to have married twice as her poems refer to two different husbands: Vinh Tuong (a local official) and Tong Coc (a slightly higher level official). She was the second-rank wife of Tong Coc, in Western terms, a concubine, a role that she was clearly not happy with ("like the maid/but without the pay"). However, her second marriage did not last long as Tong Coc died just six months after the wedding.

She lived the remainder of her life in a small house near the West Lake in Hanoi. She had visitors, often fellow poets, including two specifically named men: Scholar Ton Phong Thi and a man only identified as "The Imperial Tutor of the Nguyen Family." She was able to make a living as a teacher and evidently was able to travel since she composed poems about several places in Northern

Vietnam.

A single woman in a Confucian society, her works show her to be independent-minded and resistant to societal norms, through her social-political commentaries and use of sexual humour or expressions. Her poems are usually irreverent, full of double entendres, but erudite. The sexual allusions in her work are ambiguous, however, though this may be more a result of the translation.

By composing the vast majority of her works in Nôm she helped elevate the status of Vietnamese as a literary language in Vietnamese literature in the 1800s. However, recently some of her poems have been found which were composed in classical Chinese, so she was not a purist. In modern times, chữ nôm is nearly a dead script having been supplanted by Quốc ngữ during the period of French colonization. Some of her poems were collected and translated in John Balaban's work *Spring Essence*. Most cities in Vietnam have a major street named after her.

** Contemporaries**

An important Vietnamese poet and her contemporary is Nguyễn Du, who similarly wrote poetry in demotic Vietnamese, and so helped to found a national literature.

Autumn Landscape

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

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

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

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

Ho Xuan Huong

Confession Iii

Her lonely boat fated to float aimlessly
midstream, weary with sadness, drifting.

Her hold overflowing with duty and feeling,
bow rocked by storms, adrift and wandering.

She rows on, not caring who tries to dock,
sails on, not caring who tries the rapids.

Whoever comes on board is pleased
as she plucks her guitar, sad and drifting.

Ho Xuan Huong

Day And Night

Peekaboo we used to play;
my hands covered my face,
your hands covered your face,
incredible, there we were gone.

That is what we play now, your
hands on my face and my hands
on your eyes. Incredible
how we disappear into each other.

Ho Xuan Huong

Day Sleeping Girl

Summer breeze is sporadically blowing,
Lying down the young girl slides into sleeping.
Her bamboo comb loosely attached to her hair,
Her pink bra below her waist dropped down fair.
On these two Elysian mounds, the nectar is still remaining,
In that one Fairy rivulet, the current seems to stop flowing.
At such a view, the gentleman hesitated,
Odd to leave, yet inconvenient if he stayed.

Ho Xuan Huong

Floating Sweet Dumpling

My body is powdery white and round
I sink and bob like a mountain in a pond
The hand that kneads me is hard and rough
You can't destroy my true red heart

Ho Xuan Huong

Lamenting Widow

A woman wails, boo hoo, mourning her man
Shut up, shame on you, don't cry to the hills!
O little sister, I should have warned you
Don't eat the meat, if it makes you cough blood!

Ho Xuan Huong

On Sharing A Husband

Screw the fate that makes you share a man.
One cuddles under cotton blankets; 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 the maid,

but without pay. If I had known how it would go
I think I would have lived alone.

Ho Xuan Huong

Picking Flowers

If you want to pick flowers, you have to hike.
Climbing up, don't worry about your weary bones.
Pluck the low branches, pull down the high.
Enjoy alike the spent blossoms, the tight buds.

Ho Xuan Huong

Snail

Mother and father gave birth to a snail
Night and day I crawl in smelly weeds
Dear prince, if you love me, unfasten my door
Stop, don't poke your finger up my tail!

Ho Xuan Huong

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.

Ho Xuan Huong

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?
Swingposts removed, the holes lie empty.

Ho Xuan Huong

The Cake That Drifts In Water

My body is both white and round.
In water I may sink or swim.
The hand the kneads me may be rough,
But I still shall keep my true-red heart.

Ho Xuan Huong

The Fan

Are you seventeen or eighteen?(1)
Let me cherish you by all means.
Thin or thick you display a triangle, and
Large or small I hold you with one hand.
The more it is hot the fresher you will submit,
Not enough love at night, daytime will make it.
Your cheeks are rose pink and give you grace,
Lords and kings love you because of your face.

Ho Xuan Huong

The Jackfruit

I am like a jackfruit on the tree.
To taste you must plug me quick, while fresh:
the skin rough, the pulp thick, yes,
but oh, I warn you against touching --
the rich juice will gush and stain your hands

Translated by Nguyen Ngoc Bich

Anonymous submission.

Ho Xuan Huong

The Temple Of Fragrance

Who could have fashioned this marvel?
The mountain cracks into a wide, hollow cave.
Pious Buddhists struggle to set foot inside,
others gaze at it tirelessly.
Drippings form a sweet streamlet,
as sailors on incoming junks bend their heads.
City folk also flock to these springs and woods.
Clever, indeed, the Old Man in Heaven!

Ho Xuan Huong

Three-Mountain Pass

A cliff face. Another. And still a third.
Who was so skilled to carve this craggy scene:

the cavern's red door, the ridge's narrow cleft,
the black knoll bearded with little mosses?

A twisting pine bough plunges in the wind,
showering a willow's leaves with glistening drops.

Gentlemen, lords, who could refuse, though weary
and shaky in his knees, to mount once more?

Ho Xuan Huong

To A Couple Of Students Who Were Teasing Her

Where are you going, my dear little greenhorns?
Here, I'll teach you how to turn a verse or two
Young drones sucking at withered flowers,
Little goats brushing horns against a fence.

Ho Xuan Huong

Viewing Cac-Co Cavern

Heaven and earth brought forth this rocky mass
its face cut by a deep crevasse

crack's dark mouth shagged with moss
pines rocking in wind rush.

Here sweet water spatters down
and the path into the cleft is dark.

Praise whoever sculpted stone
then left it bare for all to see.

Here is another translation of the same poem:

Yin and Yang created this chunk of rock;
A deep and dark crack split it into two blocks.

Moss covered openings expose themselves with impudence
Wind enhanced firs produce sound of rhythmic cadence.

Drops of romantic water fall with splash
Roads to nowhere lead in dark labyrinth.

Praise to the sculptor inventing this distortion
Indecent exposure invites lots of observation.

Ho Xuan Huong

Wasps

Where are you wandering to, little fools
Come, big sister will teach you how to write verse
Itchy little wasps sucking rotting flowers
Horny baby lambkins butting gaps in the fence

Ho Xuan Huong

Water-Bailing

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.

Ho Xuan Huong

Weaving At Night

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

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

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

Girls who do it right, let it soak.

Here is another translation of the same poem:

Light turned on, it is found such a white,
The stalk moves slightly and repeatedly all night.

Pushing with the feet, but lightly release,
Shuttle passing through brings joy and ease.

Large or narrow, small or big they all fit,
Long and short, size and form so be it.

To make it best, girl needs to soak it with care .
The cloth color won't fade before three whole years.

Ho Xuan Huong