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CHINH PHU NGAM
OR LAMENT OF A WARRIOR'S WIFE

TRANSLATED FROM THE ANNAMENE OF DOAN THI DIEM

BY WILLIAM D. BORROWES

SANTA BARBARA AND PARIS

INTRODUCTION.

It has often been said that one of the outstanding characteristics of the Vietnamese is that they are a melancholy people, that they have a sort of gentle sadness about them which pervades even their pleasures. The "Lament of a Warrior's Wife" is about as good an example of this, in literature, as can be found. The original is exquisitely tender and sad, with a gentle melancholy which touches all the Vietnamese who read it.

In Indo-China, all the classic literature was written in either Chinese characters, or in "Chu-nom," a script, the base of which is Chinese, but with added strokes and different pronunciation. This has now totally disappeared before the new script using latin letters, called "Quoc-ngu," or "National Language".

"Chinh Phu Ngam" was written originally in Chinese characters by Dang Tran Con, about the year 1740. At that time, under the Later Le dynasty, the country was torn with wars, and the sadness and separations which resulted, were the inspiration for his poem. During this period, because of the numerous conflagrations in the capital of Thanh-long, the present Hanoi, an Imperial edict was proclaimed forbidding the lighting of fires in the houses. Tradition tells us that Dang Tran Con was an ardent scholar, and being deprived of light for his studies as a result of the edict, he dug a subterranean room where he could study by candlelight. The poet, hearing of a famous woman scholar, Doan Thi Diem, sought her out and presented her with a poem. Upon reading it she mocked him publicly, and he returned home profoundly hurt, but

even more determined to pursue his studies. He finally succeeded and was given a post in the Censorate. After his death, his poem was translated into the national language by the poetess who had previously mocked him. The translation of Doan Thi Diem has remained, ever since, one of the masterpieces of Vietnamese literature.

To understand this translation, one must first realize that all place names are Chinese; the author has gone back to Chinese sources, both geographical and literary for his inspiration. The same place names appear as occur throughout T'ang poetry; the provinces of Shensi, Shansi and Kansu, especially the western frontiers of the latter, the rivers Hsiao and Hsiang in Hunan province, the ancient capital of Hanyang, and the names of the frontier fortresses and mountains where China was forced to defend herself against the barbarian tribes on her periphery. Again as in T'ang poetry, the same symbols reappear; mandarin ducks signifying conjugal happiness, the wild goose or the magpie as messengers, the willow, the lotus, the moon, and the Herdboy and the Spinning Maid, two stars separated by the Milky Way, symbolizing separated lovers. Almost all the people mentioned in the poem as well as the allusions to literature or legend are from Han or T'ang times. One must not think, however, that this going back to ancient sources constitutes, necessarily, an adverse criticism of the work; the greatest of the T'ang poets, such as Li Po, Tu Fu, Kao Shih and Po Chü-I, to whose works allusions are constantly made by our author, never hesitated to take and rework an old theme, and the constant reoccurrence of the same ideas and symbols was completely accepted in ancient Chinese poetry, particularly that of the classical period.

In the Orient, love as a theme is rare. The oriental poet poses not as a lover but as a friend. When love does appear, the words are usually put into the mouth of a deserted wife or concubine. Such poems are generally not long. "The Lament of a Warrior's Wife" is quite unusual in this regard as well as for the fact that the love element is, for the Oriental, unrestrained, and constitutes the main theme of the poem.

I have chosen Chinh Phu Ngam for my first translation for two reasons, first, because it is a universal favorite in Vietnam, and secondly, because it is timely. I have heard peasants recite some of the simpler verses from it, and it has always been a favorite with the greatest scholars in the land.

There exists a translation into French of this poem, made by Bui Van Lang and published in Hanoi in 1943. Taking full cognizance of the debt I owe to my predecessor, I feel, however, that he has made some grave errors in translation and that his work is entirely too flowery throughout. It is for this reason that I have re-worked the poem with the aim of keeping as close to the original as possible in order to preserve the simple elegance which forms the beauty of the poem.

We all know at the moment the sorrows and separations of war. The desolation of women whose men are gone, is a theme which has equal value for the Orient as well as for the Occident and perhaps will be a good starting point for the understanding of a people whose culture is practically ignored in the West.

I will take this opportunity to thank Drs. Emeneau, Boodberg and Eberhard of the University of California at Berkeley, as well as all the other friends who advised and encouraged me in this translation.

SEPARATION

When dusty winds of war rise on the earth
 Young wives' cheeks of rose are blanched with fear.
 Oh sky above, so blue, so deep,
 Tell me who is to blame for these misfortunes!
 Beyond the Great Wall the war drums tremble in the moonlight; 5
 Over Cam-toan Mountain the signal fires reddens the clouds.¹
 Out through the nine Imperial gates the precious royal sword
 Is brought to the hand of the general;

1. Cam-toan Mountain – A mountain near Sian in Shensi province.

Late at night, the Imperial edict fixes the day of war.
 Three hundred years our ancient land had peace,
 But now the mandarins leave in battle dress
 And early morning sees the royal envoy
 Leading on the road into the distance.
 When the people's sacred rights are threatened
 Individual thoughts are disregarded.
 Carrying bow and quiver, warriors hurry on the roads,
 Wives and children accompanying them awhile with troubled hearts.
 The fluttering banners and the rolling drums in the distance
 Make poignant the sadness mounting to the frontiers;
 Make poignant the sadness awakening in the boudoirs.
 You, my love, young and scion of a race of heros,
 Put down your writing brush
 To follow along the path of sword and bow.
 You hope to offer the enemy fortress before the Dragon Throne;
 You resolve, mercilessly to destroy the barbarous
 Enemy with your sword.
 The noble ambitions of youth are these:
 To be buried in a horse's skin one thousand leagues from home!
 To lift Thai-son Mountain and put it down again²
 As lightly as fall the feathers of the wild goose;
 To say goodbye to families and leave
 Bearing armor and accoutrements of war!
 On the bridge that spans the River Vi³
 You crack your whip in the gusty autumn wind;
 I, accompanying you awhile with melancholy heart,
 Envy the horse you ride upon the earth;

2. Thai-son Mountain – T'ai Shan in Shantung province, one of the five sacred mountains, representing the Eastern Quarter.

3. River Vi – The River Wei.

Envy the boat you sail upon the waves.
 Beneath the bridge the stream is pure, transparent;
 Beside the road the grass is tender, green;
 The stream rushes, but its current cannot wash away my worry; 40
 The grass is fragrant, but its perfume cannot dissipate my sorrow.⁴
 After many goodbyes ... Your hand is still in mine.
 As step by step we go ... only to stop again.
 My heart will follow my lord as does the moon;
 Will search your heart, far off across the Thien-son Mountains.⁵ 45
 Your lips not finished with the stirrup-cup
 Your sword you brandish;
 You lower your lance toward the panther's lair.⁶
 You talk of the ruse of Gioi-tu who chased the rebels of Lau-lan;⁷
 You think of the exploits of Phuc-ba against the Man-khe!⁸ 50
 Your robe, my love, is like the pink clouds at sunset;
 Your horse is white as snow upon the mountains
 And his harness-bells ajingle blend with rolling of the war drums.
 Face to face one moment, the next our hands are separated;
 At the bridge of the River Ha our ways are divided.⁹ 55
 Sadly, beside the road, I watch the banners fluttering in the distance.
 The advance guard already nears the enemy camp at Te-lieu.¹⁰

4. It is thought by some Annamese that in these four lines the stream symbolizes the man and the grass the woman. In this case, they can be interpreted thus:

You are pure of spirit; I am young and helpless.
 Your courage cannot wash away my worry;
 My youth cannot aid me in my sorrow.

5. Thien Son Mountains – The T'ien Shan Range near Mukden.

6. The enemy camp.

7. Gioi-tu – Fu Chieh-Tzu, a Han general who was sent to Lou-lan (Annamese: Lau-lan) i.e. Krorain in Eastern Asia, near Lopnor. He betrayed and then murdered the King of Lou-lan in 77 B. C.

8. Phuc-ba – This is an honorific title, “fu-p’o” (Subduer of Waves), given to Ma Yüan after his defeat of the Man (Annamese: Man-khe) population of South China. He died in 49 A. D. on one of his many expeditions against the native tribes.

9. River Ha – The Huang Ho.

10. Te-lieu – The name of a locality in Shensi province which I cannot definitely identify.

The rear-guard cavalry already is in ambush near Trang-duong.¹¹
 Your troops, my love, are hastening
 Towards the bloody field of battle !

60

Do you, oh weeping willows, know the pain that tears my heart ?
 The whistling of the flutes is indistinct ;
 The fluttering banners now but silhouettes,
 As you follow the clouds into the mountain passes,
 And I, stunned, turn slowly towards a strange and empty house. 65
 Far you go, exposed to wind and rain,
 And to our inner chamber, then,
 To mat and blanket cold, alone go I.

Each looks back, but the distance is too great ;
 Sees only sun-brownèd mountains and the azure sky. 70

From the heights of the capital Ham-duong you turn to me again ;¹²
 Cross the River Tieu-tuong my eyes follow you in vain.¹³
 For the mists of the River Tieu-tuong are far from Ham-duong ;
 The trees of the capital Ham-duong are far from Tieu-tuong.
 Together we look back, together fail to see ; 75
 Each only sees the green expanse of sombre mulberry trees,
 Like a vast ocean of a single hue.
 Which suffers most, my mind or your heart ?

AFTER THE SEPARATION [ONE]

You who have gone to wastes of wind and sand,
 Where do you sleep this lovely moonlit evening ?
 On battlefields of wasteland, vast and empty,
 You are exposed to danger in immense solitude.
 The cold wind toughens the melancholy faces of the men ;

80

11. Trang-duong – Ch'ang Wu, the name of a royal palace in Hanyang, the western capital of the Ch'in dynasty (247–207 B.C.).

12. Ham-duong – Hanyang in Shensi province.

13. River Tieu-tuong – The confluence of the Rivers Hsiao and Hsiang in Hunan province.

The deep currents weary even the horses' agile legs.
 Tired, the men sleep on the green moss or the white dunes
 With a saddle as cover and a drum as a pillow. 85
 Crossing rough terrain, now high, now low,
 Crossing streams and climbing over mountains,
 Today the troops of Han descend towards Bach-thanh to encamp.^{14, 15}
 The hordes of Ho, lying now in wait,¹⁶ 90
 Will attack near Thanh-hai tomorrow.¹⁷

Since you have gone into the far southeast
 I never know exactly where you fight.
 Is it in the desert of Han-hai,¹⁸
 Or at the mountain pass of Tieu-quan?¹⁹ 95
 Do you penetrate the region of the tiger and the snake?
 Do you brave the fog and brave the bitter wind?
 When mounting the heights you see diaphanous clouds
 Is your heart also saddened and nostalgic?
 The peaks are drenched at evening by the fog;
 In the deep ravines the mountain streams are winding; 100
 The beauty makes nostalgic, sad, the hearts of all who pass there.
 Pity sad hearts of warriors long in armor!
 Behind the royal brocades are they remembered,
 Those pale-faced warriors serving faithfully? 105
 But when have soldiers' lives been things of value
 More important than the lives of plants and grass!
 They must double their efforts in service of the Emperor;

14. Han — The Chinese, from Han dynasty (206 B. C.—220 A. D.).

15. Bach-thanh — The Chinese citadel of Po-Teng in Shansi province in which the Emperor Kao Ti, the founder of the Han dynasty, was besieged; usually called the Po-Teng Road.

16. Ho — The Hu Yueh, who raided the Chinese defences around the shores of the Kokonor.

17. Thanh-hai — Ch'ing Hai, one of the outer dependencies of China West of Kansu province. This area encloses the great salt lake of Kokonor.

18. Han-hai — The Han-hai desert in Mongolia.

19. Tieu-quan — Hsiao Kuan, the name of a mountain pass in Kansu province.

They must not think of the weary years that pass.

Over the tombs on desolate Mount Ky hangs the melancholy moon;²⁰ 110

Past the dead along the River Phi the sad wind murmurs;²¹

The crying of their souls is like the rolling of the thunder

And their faces are illumined by the moon.

Oh warriors! How many of you are dead there?

Who again will see your faces,

115

And who will propitiate your spirits?

The fire of war has scarred our ancient land;

Vague pity fills all travellers who pass there.

Like General Sieu who returned from war²²

With age's frosty sprinklings in his hair,

120

From youth to old age stern duty treads the battlefield.

I think of you who with your sword and saddle

Must brave the windy wastes and suffer hardship;

By wind and moonlight scale the peaks of mountains;

Face arrows whistling past your courser's head

125

And cannons roaring on the fortress walls.

Along the road to fame you hasten forward

Wearying yourself without a rest;

While you are walking near the clouds, I am alone within my chamber.

To whom can I open my heart, to whom?

130

I have yielded to my fate, to rest in my room, alone.

Is it your destiny to rest beyond the far horizon?

With you I wish to live forever,

Happily united as the fish within the water.

I cannot think we will be parted as the water from the clouds.

135

I did not think that I was to be married to a soldier;

20. Mount Ky—The Ch'i-lien-shan or Mount Ch'i-lien in Kansu province. Here, the Han general, Huo Ch'ü-ping, made a great victory over the Hsiung-nu.

21. River Phi—The Fei Shui, a river whose source is in Anhwei province.

22. General Sieu—The Chinese general Pan Ch'ao of the Han dynasty who conquered Turkestan. The area remained firmly in Chinese hands until his death in 102 A.D.

You did not think that you would leave me, never to return.

Oh, why are we parted thus by stream and mountain?

My soul commands me morn and evening, only to be sad.

Elegantly, in carefree youth we lived,

140

Side by side, together, one in marriage.

Who has the heart to separate young lovers?

By mountain passes cold, to split the joys of common living?

The winter oriole was not yet in the willows when you left;

I asked the day of your return, you answered:

145

“When the cuckoo sings for summer.”

The cuckoo’s chant is long finished in the willows;

Before the house the springtime swallow warbles.

The winter apricot had not yet blossomed when we parted;

I asked the day of your return, you answered:

150

“With the springtime bloom of peaches.”

Already the blossoms woo the orient breezes;

The fallen blossoms of the apricot are snow upon the grasses,

And the river banks are red with hibiscus flowers.

We made a rendezvous at Lung-tay Mountain;²³

155

Early in the morning I awaited you, but no one came.

I saw only the gently-falling leaves which brushed my headdress;

Heard only, at dusk, the lovesongs of the birds before they slept.

On the bridge at Han-duong town we were to meet;²⁴

Towards evening I went but found no one;

160

The wind lightly fluttering my robe, sadly I waited

To see the rising tide of darkness slowly flood the world.

News comes often, but my lord comes not.

The faded poplar blooms are scattered on the grass;

I walk upon the soft and verdant carpet

165

But each step brings one hundred sadnesses.

23. Lung-tay Mountain – Lung-Hsi-Shan in Shensi province.

24. Han-duong – Hanyang in Shensi province.

My filagree window slowly sifts the sunlight;
 Alone, I wearily watch the lattice filtering the slanting rays.
 Letters come often, but my lord comes not.
 But words, what are words!

170

Ten promises made and nine will not be kept!
 I calculate the days since time of your departure;
 Three times already has the lotus blossomed.²⁵
 Pity the man who with the passing years
 Is forced to garrison the far frontiers;

175

During the season of chrysanthemums to man the distant forts.²⁶
 Who is there with no thoughts of home and family?
 Your old parents and your wife in her boudoir,
 Your white-haired mother trembling with age
 And your little son upon his mother's breast, think of you lovingly. 180
 Pensive, your parents sit by the doorway, waiting;
 Your little son, with open mouth,
 Impatiently awaits his bit of rice.

To your ageing parents I fill the post of son,
 And give them sweetened and well-seasoned dishes.

185

To your son I fill the post of father,
 And by the lamplight teach his characters.

Alone, I tend the aged, teach and guide the young;
 How long must I support this weight of care?

Spring several times has changed to winter dress;

190

Four years I count since we were separated.
 The skein of sadness of one hundred threads
 Has grown to ten, is tangled and disordered.

By morning dew or starlight I think constantly of you;
 Will I ever be close to you again to open up my overburdened heart? 195
 This hairpin from the palace of the Han, my marriage jewel,²⁷

25. Three years have passed. 26. The Autumn.

27. Han — The Han dynasty (206 B.C.—220 A.D.).

This mirror of Tan in which we have seen our images together,²⁸
 On whom can I depend to send them to you
 So you will know my sad and lovesick heart:

This ring I wear, regarding it from time to time with love,
 This pin of jade, well loved since joyful childhood,
 On whom can I depend to send them to you
 So you will know the precious souvenirs of mutual affection ?
 For several Springs our news has come and gone,
 But in this Spring, no news of you arrived.

I see a swallow and I think he brings me letters with your seal.
 The west wind of Autumn hinders the flying of the wild goose
 Which brings your letters.

The breath of mist is cold ;
 I prepare for you the padded robes of winter.

I think of you who go beyond the borders, who brave the cold,
 Wrapped in a net of rain, behind a snowy curtain.²⁹

I ache for those in the cold beyond the frontiers !

These characters embroidered on brocade,
 A supplication to the Emperor, I take them out,
 Then shut them up again and hesitate to send them.

I throw the oracle coins and read my fortune ;
 They tell me it is bad, but I will not believe it !
 At dusk, I am alone with my shadow ;

Under the midnight moon, my hair in disarray,
 Still I lean upon my elbow on the pillow.

I cannot lose my heart in other things,
 And therefore wander aimlessly and trancelike,
 Blushing to put the hairpin in my hair,
 Blushing when I fasten up my skirt.

200

205

210

215

220

225

28. Tan – The Ch'in dynasty (247–207 B.C.).

29. The “net” mentioned here is the mosquito net used on beds ; an allusion to the mosquito net and curtains of the conjugal couch.

Carelessly coiffed, my hair loose and tangled,
So thin my belt no longer holds my robe,
On the deserted terrace, I slowly walk, alone.

Many times I roll the bamboo curtains up and down;
Beyond the blinds, the magpie does not sing of any news. 230
Inside the blinds, I wonder if the lamp can understand?
Does she understand or does she not?

My wounded heart knows only melancholy,
So poignant, that I have no words to speak.

Of all around, only the lamp-flower is compassionate.³⁰ 235

The idly swaying cassia branches throw their shadows to and fro,
As the crowing of the cock within the mist,
Announces thus the fifth watch of the night.

The moment like the years interminable;

My sorrow infinite as the far oceans, 240

I light incense, endeavoring to ease my overburdened soul.

I look into my mirror, but my tears flow then more freely.

I try to play my lute or my guitar, but when I touch
The mandarin-duck strings or the phoenix bridge,³¹

My fingers are clumsy and I fear to snap the strings. 245

A thousand taels of gold I would give with gladness

If I could send to you by the East Wind

The thoughts of you which overflow my heart.

But how difficult the road to far Mount Yen!³²

I think of you constantly, but the road of my thoughts is long; 250

30. The Annamese lamp is a wick in a small dish of oil, which flickers when the oil is running out. Here, the flickering flame is compared to the flickering spirit of the woman without her husband. As the lamp needs oil, so she needs her husband to blossom, therefore, they understand each other.

31. The phoenix and mandarin-duck are symbols of purity, and of fidelity and conjugal happiness.

32. Mount Yen – Yen-Jan; there are two mountains of this name, one in Chahar and the other in Outer Mongolia.

As long as that which leads to the unfathomable sky.
 The branches of the trees are wet with mist,
 And the insects are humming in the fine rain ;
 Ceaselessly my memories of you haunt me,
 And the sadness of nature increases the pain in my heart.

255

AFTER THE SEPARATION [TWO]

Baseless the willow trees rise,
 Cut off by mist as though it were an axe ;
 The snow obscures the branches of the plane tree ;
 Drops of dew cover the bushes in which the birds are cooing ;
 In the wall the insects are humming

260

And the bell of the temple echos in the distance.

Before the house, the cricket sings in the moonlight ;
 The wind rustles the banana trees and slowly stirs
 The curtain at my window, on which the shadow of a flower
 Mounts slowly with the movement of the moon.

265

The flowers show themselves to the moon's bright disc ;
 The moon, enveloping them, outlines each red blossom
 So distinctly that moon and flowers seem to fill the world.

Before the flowers, beneath the moon,
 A great and poignant sorrow fills my heart.

270

How can I recount the hundred griefs,
 The thousand sadnesses which crush my heart :
 Since you have gone, my duties as a woman,
 And feminine arts alike, are all forsaken.

Unwilling to throw the shuttle, reluctant to hold the needle,
 The pairs of orioles I blush to weave ;

275

The pairs of butterflies I blush to embroider.
 Without desire to rouge my cheeks,
 Without desire to speak to anyone,
 Morning and evening, alone, I lean against the window.

280

In this deserted place, while you are gone,
 For whom, my love, use powder, rouge my lips ?
 My aching heart scorns personal adornment,
 And thinks of you in bitter cold and icy-river regions.
 How am I different from the Ladies Chuc and Hang,
 The Spinning Maid and Lady of the Moon ;^{33, 34} 285
 One bewailing her lover's separation across the Silver River,³⁵
 While the other weeps her solitude eternal
 In the Palace of the Moon ?
 My heaped up heavy sadness forms my pillow ;
 My rice bowl overflows with weary boredom.
 Flowers and wine I try to ease my longing,
 But longing makes the golden wine insipid ;
 Weariness makes the lovely flowers wither.
 I play my castanets, but they are not tuneful ;
 I take down my guitar, but the frets slip through my fingers,
 For I think of him who serves the state, so long, so far away ;
 Who carries as a pack, the burden of his weariness and strain.
 The moor-hen's mocking song makes my tears fall ;
 The story-teller's tom-tom tears my heart.
 My face is thin and changed for one I know not ;
 But now I know the sharp thorn that is separation !
 Its sour, burning taste my heart knows well.
 What occasions this keen bitterness ?
 Because of you my double tears are falling,
 And I appear as one of those who is destitute, forsaken.
300 305

33. Lady Chuc – Known as the Spinning Maid ; the star Vega, condemned to separation from her husband, the Herdboy, across the Milky Way, because she neglected her wifely duties. They are joined once a year on the night of the seventh day of the seventh month by a bridge of crows. The Herdboy is identified with three stars in the constellation of Aquila.

34. Lady Hang – The Lady of the Moon, "Ch'ang O," a woman who stole the potion of immortality from her husband and fled with it to the moon. The price of immortality is eternal solitude and loneliness ?

35. Silver River – The Milky Way.

Since I am not at your side behind the screen,
 My tears do not wet your handkerchief, even a little;
 Only in dreams does my soul come close to you,
 As it searches you each night at the fortress of Giang-tan;³⁶ 310
 As it searches you each night at Duong-dai Mountain.³⁷
 We meet beside the ancient River Lung;³⁸
 We meet upon the bank of Tuong-pho River,³⁹
 And at the ancient fortress of Thanh-quan;⁴⁰
 What happiness these moments of reunion! ... 315
 But it is only a short Spring-dream upon the pillow!
 How I hate my life! ... so inferior to my dreams ...
 With those ten thousand signs of love
 Which in them we exchange;
 Yet I regret them ceaselessly when they have vanished! 320

Only my heart cannot be soothed, but follows you always,
 Minute and hour without repose.
 My heart follows, but my eyes see no one.
 Many times I have climbed the hills
 Hoping to see your carriage in the distance; 325
 I look to the South, to the sea and its sheltering beaches;
 I see only the pale green of thick new grasses,
 The watered-silk sheen, the lustrous green of the mulberry;
 With here and there the village houses scattered,
 And a flock of egrets perched by the falls at twilight. 330

36. Giang-tan – probably “Chiang-kuan,” a narrow point in the Yang-tse in Hupei, a place which played a role in a war around 200 A. D.

37. Duong-dai Mountain – This is “Yang-t’ai” or Terrace of the Male Principle, in Hupei. Here King Huai of Ch’u, a feudal kingdom in Hupei in pre-Christian times, dreamed of meeting and lying with a goddess who appears in the morning as clouds and in the night as rain. An allusion to sexual intercourse.

38. River Lung – The river at the foot of the Lung Shan Range in Shensi and Kansu provinces.

39. Tuong-pho River – The River Hsiang in Hunan province.

40. Thanh-quan – The fortress of T’ung-kuan in the east of Shensi province.

I look to the North ; I see only a cluster of inns for travellers,
 The swaying trees upon the blue-green hills,
 And near the ancient wall,
 The languid undulations of the rice-plants.

I hear from a neighboring courtyard, a jade flute murmuring. 335

Upon the Eastern mountains I see only
 The shades and blendings of the leafy greens ;
 The taking flight and soaring of a pheasant ;
 The soft and gentle stirring of the plum trees,
 And the curling wisps of mist which hide the distant forests. 340

The only sound ... weak calling of a bird
 Carried by the force of wind away from his companions.

In the valley to the West, I see
 Swallows hovering in the clear air.

Below, upon the river's sinuous meander 345

The sampan of a fisherman moves slowly with the current ;
 And on its banks the clumps of reeds
 Press close upon the forest of pines.

Higher, upon the pathway leading by the cliff,
 I indistinctly glimpse some people passing. 350

In the four directions, only earth and sky.

Frequently I mount the tower to look into the distance ;
 But piled-up clouds stop short my watching eyes.

Oh, where is the field of war, the Ngoc-quan Pass ?⁴¹

It may be that my heart will turn to stone ! 355

No longer with jade tears that I shall mount the tower !⁴²

41. Ngoc-quan Pass – The famous “Yü Men-kuan” or Jade Gate Pass on the N.W. border of Kansu province where for centuries the Chinese were forced to defend themselves against the barbarian tribes on China's periphery.

42. There are many legends about women waiting on mountaintops for the return of their husbands until they have become petrified. Such tales are connected in China with many mountains ; in such a case the mountain is usually called “Wang-fu” (To Look Forth for the Husband) Mountain.

If I but knew the art of magic-making,
 With an enchanted wand I would shrink the earth.⁴³
 Oh, why can I not meet with an Immortal,
 And learn the art of casting an enchantment
 To form a bridge by magic from my turban?⁴⁴
 When I descend I watch the lovely willows,
 And wish that I had given you advice
 To not accept a military grade.

360

I wonder if ten thousand leagues away
 You travel with the same thought in your heart!
 If your heart were as mine,
 It would not dare to even think of roaming.

365

My heart, like the heliotrope, stretches always to the sun;
 But your heart wanders, like the sun
 Upon its dread descent over the horizon.

370

The yellowing flowers, the setting sun
 Does not deign to look upon with pity;
 The flowers yellow as the sun declines.

The flowers yellow; the flowers fall; around the wall lie scattered. 375
 Many times in the night-dew have I seen the flowers fall.

I pick a few iris buds from the courtyard;
 I arrange my skirt and stroll before the house.

By the stream the Tan flowers are sending up their perfume.⁴⁵

With sad and pensive heart I raise my eyes

380

To the ancient starlit beauties of the skies;
 I watch the Silver River, now clear, now nebulous;
 The constellation Khue, as it fades and reappears;⁴⁶

43. I. e. so that her husband could join her. An allusion to an Immortal of the Han dynasty who could shrink the earth with a magic wand.

44. Allusion to the story of a fairy who threw her turban across a river and magically formed a bridge so that her husband could join her and escape his pursuers on the other side.

45. Tan flowers — The name of a fragrant vegetable.

46. Khue — This is "k'uei," the fifteenth of the twenty-eight Chinese constellations.

I watch the stars, waking for a moment, then fading in sleep
 And losing their beauty in the clouds,
 Which make the North Star flash its rays
 One moment toward the East, one moment toward the West.
 The bright moon often lights my pillow, and opening my eyes,
 I see the fog, wet upon the withered branches.
 How cold these nights in Autumn, when the West wind
 Creeps softly through the thinness of the walls !
 More pale my blushing cheek with every year ;
 While you, my love, still wander in the distance.
 Long ago, we two were as one body with its shadow ;
 Why must we now be distant from each other,
 As distant as the Morning from the Evening Star ?
 While you are riding on the roads
 So high that they are veiled in clouds,
 My sandals are treading the moss
 Which creeps along the old familiar lane.
 The breeze of Spring arrived today
 But it brought no message ;
 How pitifully the useless moments pass,
 The moments you could blissfully redeem !
 I see a yellow-madder branch,
 And a branch of purple hanging near it ;
 Side by side they are swaying in the wind.
 Even the Herdboy and the Spinning Maid,
 Separated by the Silver River,
 Are once again united during Autumn.
 Pitiful the woman who must rest alone within her chamber ;
 And watch the useless moments slowly pass.
 The shuttle of the days and months moves swiftly ;
 Life's Spring-green fades quickly as a dream.
 My heart is sick ; my mind is in a tumult ;

385

390

395

400

405

410

415

Spring is no longer joyful as a union;
 Autumn no longer cold as separation;
 The moments pass; each season is the same;
 In Spring I guard my heartache, and in Autumn.
 Fragile is the body; frail is Life;
 As fragile as the willows and the rushes
 Which bend themselves to hastening of the wind.
 So I must bend to Time,
 For he insists, and will not spare my spring.

420

Van-quan in ancient days was famous for her beauty;⁴⁷
 Did she become pitiful when her hair turned white?
 Phan-lang in ancient days was known as being handsome;⁴⁸
 Did he lament, feel saddened,
 When silver mists had settled on his temples?
 When I think of my beauty, yesterday so tender,
 Today fading as a flower fades,
 Tomorrow old and withered,
 I hate the changing radiance and obscurity
 Of days' and nights' perpetual succession.

425

430

In the house I dream, imagining I see your face
 In moonlight on my floor.
 In the flower pavillion I dream, imagining I sense
 The subtle fragrance of your presence.
 Oh sky above us, how can you allow this separation!
 Sadly, I think of my fate;
 Then more sadly still I think of yours.
 Do you not see, my love, the mandarin ducks,

435

440

47. Van-quan – Cho Wen-chün, a young widow who was seduced by the singing of the famous poet Ssu-ma Hsiang-ju and ran away with him. The poet died about 130 B.C.

48. Phan-lang – P'an Lang or P'an Yüeh, a tenth century drug-seller poet of Loyang famous for his beauty.

In pairs, together always, in the fields ?
 Do you not see the swallows on the house beams,
 Mated forever, never separated ? 445

Do you not see how couplets in a poem
 Nestle their heads in rhyming, side by side,
 And pairs of birds in flying, cross their wings ?
 The willow and the lotus are but plants ;
 Yet two young willows grew with their branches mingled ;⁴⁹ 450
 Two lotus plants with but a single root and stem.⁵⁰
 All living things, it seems, can tell their love ;
 Why is it then man's destiny to know this separation ?
 I hope in future lives we are not human ;
 But two birds, soaring wing to wing ; 455
 Or two trees, side by side,
 Which interlace their branches.
 For ten thousand future lives, perhaps,
 Already the character "Love" is clearly written ;
 But I will exchange our love in this existence 460
 For all the love in many future lives.
 Oh ! When you return may your hair not be whitened ;
 Till then may I guard the color of my youth !

HOPE

Oh, if I could only be the shadow which follows you always ;
 No matter where you go, always at your side. 465
 If I but knew that you had the protection of the moon,
 My heart would be satisfied.
 While faithfully you serve our Emperor,
 I serve with filial piety our parents.

49. On the tombs of a couple death had reunited.

50. In the pool where a young couple drowned.

Ah, my love, you serve your country bravely;
 The color of your heart is bright vermillion.
 With force indomitable and strength of iron,
 Bravely you fight for the people and defend them.
 You will drink the blood of the Hun chieftan!

470

You will cut off and eat the heads of the Nhuc-chi barbarians! ⁵¹
 Courageously you fight; you brave the sword and lance,
 And being faithful, you will have protection from the skies;
 And they will aid you in one hundred triumphs
 For which you will receive glory and great honor.

475

The war is ending;
 At the northern fortresses they are dropping their arrows;
 At the western mountains they are hanging up their bows.
 The silhouettes of the battle flags
 Are waving farewell to the frontiers;
 Chanting of victory, the troops are marching back to the capital.

480

485

Your name will be inscribed upon a stele
 And placed upon the summit of a mountain
 To immortalize your valor.

In the palace you will be received in audience;
 Before the Imperial court you will present
 The trophies of your victories.

490

Your sacred, but now useless armor
 Will be washed in the Silver River, reverently;
 Solemn chants will glorify your exploits.
 Like the famous ancient general Tan,
 Your name will be inscribed on the Cloud Terrace;⁵²

495

51. Nhuc-chi – The “Yüeh-chih,” who attacked the northwest frontiers of Kansu province.

52. General Tan – Wang Shih-ch’ung, a favorite of the last ruler of the Sui dynasty in 617 A.D. When he heard that the emperor had been murdered, he installed a new emperor in 618 in Lo-yang. His name was engraved on the Cloud Terrace, a place reserved for the names of

Like the famous ancient general Hoac,
 Your portrait will be hung in the Unicorn Palace.⁵³
 You will receive the turban and the belt,
 Insignia of meritorious officers.

500

The people's joy will be inscribed on stone;
 Inscriptions which will last a thousand Winters.
 The gracious Imperial favor will bestow
 Honorific titles on your children;
 And dignities and honor on your wife.

505

I shall share with you the great rewards
 Which we will have from the Celestial Presence.⁵⁴

I am not like the wife of General To-tan,⁵⁵
 And surely, you, my dear, need never blush
 To compare your deeds to his!

510

But if, when you return,
 You do not then receive the golden signet,
 I will not dare, seated at my weaving,
 To pretend to be indifferent to you.

Oh no, my love, instead, I will take your armor,
 And clean the stains of elements and battles;
 Lovingly, I will fold you in your robes.

515

the twenty-four most meritorious mandarins of the realm. In 619 he declared himself emperor in Lo-yang. In 621 he was defeated and killed by Li Yüan, the first emperor of the T'ang dynasty (618-906 A.D.).

53. General Hoac — This is "Huo Kuang," a famous Han dynasty general and regent for the child-emperor Chao-ti (86-73 B.C.). He first enthroned a prince who had the title of "Ch'ang-i-wang," but later deposed him to enthrone the emperor Hsüan-ti (73-48 B.C.). After Huo Kuang's death, his family was so powerful that Hsüan-ti had them massacred and their property confiscated. Later, remembering the debt he owed to his general, the emperor had his portrait hung in the Unicorn Palace, a building housing the portraits of the ten greatest mandarins of the realm.

54. The Emperor.

55. General To-tan — This is "Su Ch'in," a famous general during the period of the Contending States (481-221 B.C.). When he was poor, his wife worked at her loom and ignored him, but when he became famous she became an obedient wife.

For you, I will delicately pour wine into a golden bowl;
 For you, I will powder my cheeks and wear seductive perfumes.

I will give you my handkerchief,

520

And you will dry my teardrops one by one;

I will read the verses of my longing,

And you will know each sorrow of my heart.

Then we will cap them all with happy verses;

Topsy with love and wine, we will tell each other

525

The many sadnesses of separation;

The many greater joys of our reunion.

One by one, for you, my dear,

I will pour the golden bowls of wine;

Slowly, softly, I will sing the lovers' poems,

530

The couplets to which, my love, you will respond.

Side by side we will cap each other's verses;

Cheek against cheek we will drink the bowls of wine;

And joy will banish from our memories

Each minute we know now of separation.

535

Happily then we will live, serene and tranquil,

And love each other long, in times of peace.

You typify, my dear, the ancient saying:

“Thus, must carry himself, a man of greatness!”⁵⁶

I sing these verses hoping you will know

540

That one word says them all, the word “Love”.

56. Said of Shih Huang-ti, the founder of the Ch'in dynasty and builder of the Great Wall.