

# Phạm Duy Khiêm, classical reception, and colonial subversion in early 20th century Vietnam and France

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*The tradition of the Vietnamese reception of classical literature has not yet been examined, and this article is the first to venture into this intersection between Classics and Vietnamese studies. In this article, I focus on Phạm Duy Khiêm (1908–74) and his use of Classics to translate and mediate his Vietnamese heritage to his French audience. Phạm lived during a particularly turbulent time in Vietnamese history: he experienced Vietnam as a French protectorate called Annam, he witnessed his compatriots defy French rule and win independence for Vietnam, and he saw the civil war that challenged that new independence. Throughout these changing political contexts, Phạm navigated the politics of polarity that separated the colonizer from the colonized as he struggled to make sense of these supposedly irreconcilable differences between the two, which contested his own intercultural identity. In this article, I argue that Phạm used his classical education and its cultural capital not only to explain Vietnamese culture to his French audience, but also to elevate it as equal, and perhaps even superior, to that of the French and their supposed classical inheritance.*

## Introduction

The field of classical<sup>1</sup> reception has experienced a boom in the last decade, especially with regard to postcolonial cultures.<sup>2</sup> Classical reception in and beyond Vietnam

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<sup>1</sup> In using the terms ‘Classics’ and ‘classical’, I refer to Greco-Roman antiquity. “Classics” in a Vietnamese context refers to *Kinh*, a term that renders Sutra (Sanskrit) or Sutta (Pāli) into logographic script (i.e. classical or literary Chinese) when discussing Buddhism. *Kinh* may refer more generally to any canonical text or more specifically to the set of ‘classics’ associated with Confucian philosophy as codified during the Han empire (3rd Century BCE). I thank my reviewer for pointing out the Eurocentric view of Classics (with a capital C) and highlighting the various meanings of classics within Vietnamese culture.

<sup>2</sup> For recent studies of classical (i.e. Greco-Roman antiquity) reception, see for example: Goff (2005); Goff and Simpson (2007); Greenwood (2010); Hardwick and Gillespie (2007); O’Meally (2007); Orrells et al. (2011); Roynon (2013); Rankine (2006); Ronnick

though has not yet been explored, and this article aims to add Vietnamese voices to this ongoing discourse on the accessibility of classics. The usual reaction to such an endeavor is surprise and ignorance that there exists a tradition of Vietnamese reception of the classical canon. And yet, one need only look to the written language to observe the complicated relationship between Vietnam and Classics: Vietnamese is written with the Latin alphabet. European missionaries in the 17th century introduced the language of the Church, Latin, to Vietnam as a tool of communication, while they themselves learned the Vietnamese language. This two-pronged approach eventually led to the development of a writing system that transcribed Vietnamese into the Latin alphabet, thus creating an entirely new written national script, *quốc ngữ*.<sup>3</sup> Over the course of French colonization (1864–1954), *quốc ngữ* officially supplanted the old script that was based on Chinese characters, and the French education system, along with its supposed inheritance of the language, literature, and culture of Greco-Roman antiquity, replaced the imperial Chinese one. The purpose of *quốc ngữ* was not only to make the Vietnamese language more accessible for Europeans, but also to separate, and to ultimately remove, the Chinese sphere of influence.<sup>4</sup>

(2005); Walters (2007); Wetmore (2003); Vasunia (2013); Rizo and Henry (2016). For a survey of the development of black classicism, see Greenwood (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Prior to the development of a Romanized script for Vietnamese, Vietnamese writing was rendered either through *hán* (Chinese) or *chữ nôm*, a Vietnamese transcription of spoken Vietnamese with logographic (literary Chinese) writing. The former was used primarily for administrative purposes, the latter in domestic and literary settings. Chinese culture and language were deeply entrenched in the elite culture of Vietnam. For example, the Vietnamese ruling class adopted the Confucian bureaucracy and examination system introduced by the Chinese, which required the knowledge of Chinese classics and the ability to write poetry in Chinese. Yeager (1987: 23–25) gives a brief overview of the influence of Chinese culture and language on Vietnam. For a study that examines this process from the Vietnamese perspective and analyzes the pushback by the mandarin class, see Wilcox (2014).

<sup>4</sup> Due to limited space, I provide only a brief overview of the complicated relationship between Vietnam and the changing colonial powers (e.g. China and France) that affected its linguistic development. I am exploring this avenue in another paper that is a part of my overall research project on the influence of the Roman Empire on colonial Vietnam. For an account of Vietnam's multilayered linguistic history and how it was shaped by European imperialism, see DeFrancis (1977) and Osborne (1969). Woodside (2006) is another important work that investigates how local Vietnamese elites, under the pressure of French imperialism, started to challenge the mandarin examination system, which they viewed as a tool of despotism and backwardness. In addition, anticolonial activists, such as the Tonkin Free School, played major roles in promoting *quốc ngữ*. For works that explore the agency of the generation of Vietnamese intellectuals after the end of the mandarin class, and how they adopted European ideologies and print media in addition to the new Romanized alphabet, see Marr (1971) and Trần (2017).

The struggle of these imperial powers to erase their predecessor's influence manifested itself within the education system.<sup>5</sup> As Vietnamese colonials became educated in the French system and became not only exposed to, but also well-read in, this canon, we begin to see the first instances of what we can call the Vietnamese reception of Classics. A prominent figure to emerge from this new educational system was Phạm Duy Khiêm (1908–74). Phạm was the first Vietnamese person to pass the baccalauréat in Classics at the Lycée Albert Sarraut in Hanoi, a prestigious French school that was popular among Vietnamese elites. He then received a scholarship to continue his studies in France at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand where his classmates included prominent figures such as George Pompidou and Léopold Senghor. He went on to be the first Vietnamese student to attend the École Normale Supérieure in Paris in 1931 and over the next twenty years, he taught Latin, Greek, and French in both Vietnam and France. Phạm wrote and published a number of essays and literary texts, of which the autobiographical novel *Nam et Sylvie* won the Louis Barthou prize from the Académie Française and his collection of Vietnamese folktales *Légendes des Terres Sereines* won the literary prize of Indochina.<sup>6</sup>

This article focuses specifically on Phạm Duy Khiêm not only because he provides a natural starting point as the first Vietnamese classicist, but also because he serves as a useful case study as to why writers on the margin would choose to engage with classical references. Why incorporate a canon that has been used as a tool for empire and exclusion? What does it mean for marginalized groups to link their stories with those of ancient Greece and Rome? It is too simplistic to reduce the reasons behind classical reception, especially among historically marginalized groups, to prestige and the supposed universalism of Classics. To be sure, as European colonizers of the 18th and 19th century appropriated the authority of Greece and Rome and aligned these ancient civilizations with modern European colonialism, educated colonials did seek to justify their own native culture by their attainment and deployment of classical literature.<sup>7</sup> But this kind of reception does not necessarily preclude other motives nor does it prevent later developments in their dialogue.<sup>8</sup>

To explore the questions above, I examine how Phạm used his classical education to navigate his oscillation between inclusion and exclusion within both French and

<sup>5</sup> I am currently conducting research on the historical development of classical education in Vietnam as part of my overall project noted above in footnote 4. For now, see Kelly (2000), Bezancon (2002), Trần (2013), Goscha (2016), Nguyễn (201), and Thao (1993; 2000) on colonial education in Indochina.

<sup>6</sup> Ton That (2015).

<sup>7</sup> For example, see Greenwood (2011) on negritude and its engagement with the classical tradition, or Greenwood (2010) on educated Caribbean colonials' relationships with classical literature.

<sup>8</sup> Goff (2013), for instance, discusses how the classical education imposed by Britain's 'civilizing mission' led to the 'educated native' developing an oppositional voice — so much so that the authorities questioned the value of a classical education in Africa and instead promoted agricultural and vocational education.

Vietnamese cultures. Despite his academic and literary accomplishments, Phạm was nevertheless barred from pursuing a higher degree and from teaching at institutions of higher education due to his status as a colonial subject. Meanwhile, as a product of the French education system, Phạm grew more and more distant from his compatriots. Living during a time when Vietnam was progressively gaining more and more independence, Phạm experienced Vietnam as three separate regions carved by the French,<sup>9</sup> then as two warring nations struggling to keep their independence,<sup>10</sup> and eventually as a fledgling communist country expelling its people into the diaspora.<sup>11</sup> He had to describe himself with the colonial term ‘Annamite’ and then later with the national one, ‘Vietnamese’—but intriguingly, never as ‘French’ since he refused to apply for citizenship.<sup>12</sup> In 1939, he volunteered to serve in the French Army and yet later in 1954, he also joined the government of Ngô Đình Diệm and became the ambassador of the Republic of Vietnam in Paris. Phạm’s struggle with his intercultural identity comes across in how he wields his classical education. Throughout his career as a writer and teacher of Classics, Phạm deployed Greco-Roman allusions to promote the Vietnamese people and culture to his French audience, as well as to challenge and debunk French stereotypes of their former colony. Ultimately, this article aims to demonstrate how Phạm was not just passively receiving the classical tradition, but was also actively engaging with it and asserting his role within it.

### Whose ancestors, *les gaulois*?

From an early age, Phạm was taught to internalize the separation between the colonizer and the colonized—a separation that ultimately coloured how he interpreted his inheritance (or lack thereof) of classical antiquity and of French culture in general. In a speech given at the ceremony for the distribution of prizes at the École Alsacienne in 1964, Phạm shares an experience from his colonial education to demonstrate the crude supplanting of French culture over Vietnamese culture and the resulting disconnect. He recalls how he, along with other students in the École franco-annamite,

<sup>9</sup> In 1862, the southern part of Vietnam became a French colony of Cochinchina. In 1883, Annam (center) and Tonkin (northern) became separate protectorates, a status confirmed only in 1885 through the Tianjin Treaty.

<sup>10</sup> The two nations here refer to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and the Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam). The war is, of course, the Vietnam (or American) War (1955–75).

<sup>11</sup> The end of the Vietnam War in April 1975 precipitated a two-decade-long refugee crisis due to a combination of factors, including political, social, and economic persecution under the communist regime. The Vietnamese refugee crisis was a part of the larger Indo-Chinese refugee crisis, which saw more than two million refugees fleeing from the Democratic Kampuchea, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. For a comprehensive study of this refugee crisis, see Robinson (1998). See also UNHCR 2000 report.

<sup>12</sup> Emerson (2014: fn 38).

had to memorize and recite the phrase ‘nos ancêtres les gaulois’.<sup>13</sup> He concedes that this phrase made sense in schools that were meant for French children, but it was out of place in a school for native children, with native teachers trained directly or indirectly by French people. In the eyes of the French, he states, such a phrase ‘in the mouth of a little black or yellow child’ appears ‘absurd’ and ‘scandalous’.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, for him, it was just a ‘false scandal’ because he had already become accustomed to separating the two races—‘if only by their physical traits’—even before he could really understand his French textbooks.<sup>15</sup> At this early stage in life, he was comparing his French education and the images associated with it with his local surroundings. For example, he describes his comparison of Vercingetorix and Julius Caesar to his own ancestors,

50 years ago, class books were already illustrated—less richly than now, but they were—and I can still see, from a distance of half a century, the engraving representing Vercingetorix before Julius Caesar: after having thrown down his arms, the Gallic leader was standing upright, his arms folded over his robust chest. However, the child that I was had always imagined his own ancestors in the appearance of men like his adult compatriots, all of whom had little stubble, with only the most venerable endowed with a thin goatee. Thus, it was barely possible for me to believe, to imagine that they were trying to teach me that our ancestors could ever possess the beautiful mustache of Vercingetorix and his wavy mane. . .<sup>16</sup>

Phạm uses this anecdote of a naïve boy making sense of his world in order to illustrate the uneven relationship between the French and the Vietnamese. Perhaps most revealing of this tension is how he describes Vietnam as ‘in the French colony that was my country’, placing not only ‘colony’ and ‘country’ in opposition to each other, but also ‘French’ and ‘my.’ He goes on to explicitly explain the purpose behind his story, stating that he has never witnessed the French treating the Vietnamese as equals, as those who belong to the same race or even to a race of the same level as theirs. How could he then imagine sharing the same ancestors?

And yet later in the same speech, as he is lecturing the students about the events in Vietnam (namely, the self-immolation of the Vietnamese Buddhist monks, including, famously, Thích Quảng Đức<sup>17</sup>), he calls upon classical antiquity to help him bridge

<sup>13</sup> Gross (2005: 950–1) discusses the manipulation of Vercingetorix and his ‘gaulois’ to forge a cultural heritage of a united French empire across its colonies. In the same article, she also discusses the reception of the concept of ‘gaulois’ ancestors by colonial subjects and the subsequent appropriation and subversion of it by postcolonial artists.

<sup>14</sup> Phạm (1964), my translation. All translations going forward are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> On 11 June 1963, Thích Quảng Đức, a Buddhist monk, doused himself with gasoline and set himself on fire in the middle of a street in Saigon in protest of the discrimination of Buddhism under Ngô Đình Diệm’s regime. The practice of self-immolation as a form of peaceful protest has a long and complex history within Buddhism. See Benn (2007)

cultural gaps. He encourages the students to avoid getting lost in sensationalized news and to remember instead the sacrifices that dot the pages of the history of France and of Greco-Roman antiquity.<sup>18</sup> Specifically, he conjures up Socrates emptying the cup of hemlock and Joan of Arc fastened to the pyre, and compares them to the monk doused with oil, exclaiming, ‘How can you not see that they shared the same certainty and the same serenity!’<sup>19</sup> When observed in isolation, the self-immolation of Thích Quang Đức seems outrageous and inexplicable. Indeed, it was one of the most famous scenes from the first televised war due to its sheer shock value and gruesomeness.<sup>20</sup> But when juxtaposed with Socrates and Joan of Arc, these three figures from three different cultures and three different time periods seem to share in the same human condition. They share the same resolve to uphold their beliefs, a resolve that is so strong that it inspires ‘serenity’ in the face of death. The comparison that Phạm makes thus cuts across time and space, and perhaps most importantly, across cultures.

Throughout this speech, we can glean the cognitive dissonance of Phạm Duy Khiêm as a (former) colonial subject who simultaneously feels excluded from the inheritance of classical antiquity and skillfully utilizes it to translate and mediate between the two cultures. The question arises as to how he developed from a boy skeptical of his Gallic heritage to a man using classical antiquity as, to quote Emily Greenwood, a ‘vehicle for intercivilizational dialogue’?<sup>21</sup> Phạm sheds light on this development in an article about his time at the ENS.<sup>22</sup> Phạm recalls an encounter with a French *normalien*<sup>23</sup> who expresses his surprise not only at Phạm’s good French, but also at his field of study, literature:

for an in-depth study of the theory and practice of self-immolation as a form of abandoning one’s body in Chinese Buddhism. For a study of the Vietnamese Buddhist peace activists during the Vietnam War, see Topmiller (2006). Also, see Thích Nhất Hạnh’s 1965 letter to Martin Luther King Jr in which he explains the significance behind self-immolation within a Buddhist context. According to Thích Nhất Hạnh, ‘The Vietnamese monk, by burning himself, says with all his strength and determination that he can endure the greatest of sufferings to protect his people. . . What he really aims at is the expression of his will and determination, not death. In the Buddhist belief, life is not confined to a period of 60 or 80 or 100 years: life is eternal. Life is not confined to this body: life is universal. To express will by burning oneself, therefore, is not to commit an act of destruction but to perform an act of construction, i.e., to suffer and to die for the sake of one’s people. This is not suicide. Suicide is an act of self-destruction. . .’ (Thích Nhất Hạnh 1965).

<sup>18</sup> Phạm (1964).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> See Mendelbaum (1982) for a discussion of the Vietnam War as the first truly televised war.

<sup>21</sup> Greenwood (2011: 368).

<sup>22</sup> Phạm (1943).

<sup>23</sup> *Normalien* refers to a student or graduate of the École normale supérieure, a prestigious and extremely selective institution of higher education in France.

‘What? Literature? You upset all my ideas!!!’ He didn’t say anything else to me, gulps his chicory coffee and departs, not happy at all. I should also add that this peer was a ‘scientist.’ But the literary ones, even if they did not express themselves so naively, were not above asking the very French question: ‘How can one be yellow and a *normalien*?’<sup>24</sup>

In the same article, Phạm goes on to reflect upon this episode and concludes,

It’s among my peers that little by little, I have revealed myself as different from them all—or at least pointed this out to myself. Through contact with them, by comparison, I became aware of what I am, what I have less than them, what I have more. I heard, during those years, directly or not, definitions and judgements about myself of a sharpness and depth that have not been exceeded. I add that these judgements are not to the dishonor of Vietnam and of our race, far from it. Did they only help to define me? They allowed me to respond in a certain way, to feel, to be like I never could have been without them. It is necessary for each plant to have a special place to flourish, and one of my elders has written this sentence about the École, ‘It is one of the rare places in France where one has the opportunity to show one’s true intelligence’.<sup>25</sup>

Even after his acceptance into one of the most prestigious schools in France, he still is not accepted as a scholar, let alone as a classicist, due to racial prejudices and restrictive stereotypes. For not only is he a colonial subject, but he is also labeled as ‘yellow’, and thus as a subjugated Asian who should not be performing at the level of his French masters, let alone exceed them. As Britto articulates the issue, ‘Diverse and fluid sites of identification currently associated with interculturality were mapped far less clearly for those individuals who found themselves [...] caught between the opposing poles of the colonial system, which sought to maintain rigid distinctions between colonizer and colonized’.<sup>26</sup> Caught in the politics of polarity, Phạm has to navigate the pervasive racism embedded within the colonial society that he is climbing. His years at the ENS proved to be crucial as he began to discover more about himself in contrast to and in tension with his French peers. The important key here is that he does not only find out what, as he puts it, he has *less* than his French counterparts, but also what he has *more*. Realizing that the narrative of the colonizer as a source of civilization is false, Phạm discovers that his differences did not inherently equate to his inferiority. Instead of allowing such prejudiced judgements to define him, to pigeonhole him and his country into certain categories and certain expectations, Phạm took them as opportunities to respond and to grow beyond labels. It is indeed through this mentality that he interprets and uses his classical education to relate, translate, and negotiate between his different cultures.

<sup>24</sup> Phạm (1943: 15).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Britto (2004: 5).

### A Vietnamese tale

However, Phạm's use of Classics is not merely for the purpose of better communicating and relating with his French audience. While Phạm did strive to educate the French public about the rich culture of Vietnam by rendering it more translatable via European cultural references, including those of ancient Greece and Rome, he did not stop there. In the previous instance, he explicitly named classical allusions to make his French audience more sympathetic to his Vietnamese compatriots, but in other examples, he uses these references to elevate Vietnamese culture. Such is the case in Phạm's retelling of one of his favourite Vietnamese folktales, which was first broadcasted on a radio program and then later published in 1937 in his collection of short stories and articles, *Mélanges*.<sup>27</sup> As narrated by Phạm, a mandarin's daughter falls in love with a poor fisherman based on his striking singing voice. She has never met him, and has only seen him from the window of her tower as he paddles by on his boat and sings a beautiful melody. When the fisherman stops passing by and his music ceases, the daughter falls extremely ill from the loss of her lover. The connection is eventually made between her illness and the missing fisherman, and he is brought before her. Yet, once she is reunited with the fisherman and finally sees his presumably unattractive face, she immediately falls out of love with him. The fisherman, on the other hand, falls in love with her at first sight. He in turn falls ill from the unrequited love and ultimately dies, transforming into a crystal that then gets carved into a teacup. The teacup mysteriously reveals an image of the fisherman paddling his boat when tea is poured into it. Upon hearing of this apparition, the mandarin's daughter gets hold of this teacup to see if her former love truly does appear. After pouring tea into the cup and seeing the fisherman at the bottom of the cup, the mandarin's daughter realizes what she has done and weeps. Her tears drop into the teacup, which then suddenly dissolves. Thus, the story ends.

This story unfolds alongside Phạm's commentary as he relays his motives for telling the tale and his interpretation of the tale. However, the effect of his commentary goes beyond his stated motive as he depicts Vietnamese culture in a way that renders it more complex than that of the French, and in effect, he also portrays the Vietnamese people as more capable than the French. But of course, he does so in a very subtle way, since he still must navigate his liminal identity in a post-colonial world. For example, he opens his tale by establishing his credentials in terms of western standards:

I have become an old teacher who teaches Greek, Latin, and French to young French students like you and to Annamites of your age; I must, to that end, read many books, but of all the beautiful stories gathered along the banks of the Seine or the Red River, the one I most prefer is the one you are about to hear.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.



Juxtaposing French and Annamite students, the Seine and the Red River, Phạm situates himself within both educational spheres and contextualizes the prominence of the story within both cultural traditions. By mastering French, Greek, and Latin over his European students, he takes on an authoritative position that then permits him to elevate Vietnamese colonial subjects to the same level as their colonial peers. What is more, his declaration that this is his favorite story ‘of all the beautiful stories gathered along the banks of either the Seine or the Red River’ effectively raises Vietnamese culture above French culture. He confesses that he does not know when he first read it, or even if he read it or heard it—this story is so well known among all Annamites that it has become a part of his and their very identity.<sup>29</sup>

As Phạm recounts the tale, he pauses intermittently to explain complex concepts that he fears his French audience will not be able to grasp on their own. For example, he describes the fisherman’s illness as *ốm tu’o’ng tu*, a phrase that is ‘untranslatable in Vietnamese’. He compares it to French phrases, ‘love-sickness, the love that kills, a fatal passion, a tragic love’, but concludes that none of them adequately translates the Vietnamese. He thinks of Racine’s heroines, specifically of Phèdre, but even her situation does not fully encapsulate the Buddhist underpinnings of the meaning of *ốm tu’o’ng tu*, for after all ‘she must . . . poison herself to die, while our poor fisherman loves without hope, cannot live, falls sick and slowly dies, without wanting to kill himself, without having killed anyone’.<sup>30</sup> Here, Phạm calls upon a French reception of a Latin play, which is itself a reception of the Greek myth, to provide a close analogy but ultimately dismisses it as ‘almost, but not quite’ in a sort of reversal of Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry.<sup>31</sup> Although Phaedra dies as a consequence of her unrequited love, Phạm points out that she had to be the driver of her death, and indeed the driver of the events leading to her death. The details of these events change over time, from culture to culture, but the overarching conclusion is still the same: she becomes overwhelmed with the consequences of her lies and poisons herself. On the other hand, the fisherman dies through no devices of his own, but simply because it is his fate. As Phạm explains it,

The debt of love is not a debt that the man must pay to the woman, nor a debt that the woman incurs by inspiring a fatal love in the man. Their love is only a form of their common debt, of the human debt towards life: each pays it by following the difficult road that one must tackle on earth. Moreover, the man does not live a single existence but undergoes a circle of successive transformations, and the union of the two beings is only a moment on the chain, a point on the circumference, as incomprehensible for them as the rest of their ephemeral existence, and as inevitable as the rest.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Bhabha (1994: 85–92).

<sup>32</sup> Phạm (1937).

The fisherman's death, therefore, reflects a deeper Buddhist belief: one's life is not one's own, it is not a singular event, but rather it is intertwined with other beings and with the greater cycle of life. Therefore, the comparison with Racine's *Phèdre* reveals that even layers of classical reception, dissected and reproduced over millennia, still fail to grasp the subtlety of this ancient Vietnamese folktale.

At the conclusion of the tale, Phạm discloses his supposed motive behind sharing this story with the French public:

I am sure you can feel how poetic this folktale is. But let me add a few words to make you better understand it. You will know why the Vietnamese love it and you will recognize at the same time a little of the profound soul of that race, who live far from you and who now read the same books as you do.<sup>33</sup>

Phạm's aim is not just to relay a beautiful story, but to expose the French public to the rich culture of Vietnam. But once again, he elevates the Vietnamese subject beyond his French colonizer because the Vietnamese is able to both read the same books as the French and to understand the seemingly elusive meaning of this tale. According to Phạm, Vietnamese people actively engage with the folktale by responding to it with poetry—and not just any poetry—with verses from Vietnam's most famous epic poem, the *Tale of Kieu*.<sup>34</sup> It is curious that Phạm does not name the source of these two lines, though this omission may be due to his experience with French prejudice against Vietnamese language and literature. Acutely aware of the colonial dynamics of intertextuality, Phạm asks his listener not to laugh if the lines 'sound strange' but instead to wait for its translation and explanation.<sup>35</sup> He first provides a direct, word-for-word translation and then further translates the verses into cultural terms with classical references:

'The debt of love has not been repaid; the stone of love, descended to the land of the nine springs, has not melted.' The land of the nine springs is the other side, they are the oriental Elysian Fields, the plain of asphodels, the shadow of the immortal myrtles.<sup>36</sup>

The choice to refer to these Greco-Roman conceptions of the afterlife serves two purposes: to connect the Vietnamese epic, the *Tale of Kieu*, with Greco-Roman epic poetry, and to provide a neutral space for Phạm's translation. Greco-Roman epic poetry often depicts asphodels and myrtles in scenes of the afterlife,<sup>37</sup> as well as the

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> *Tale of Kieu* was written by Nguyễn Du in the early 19th century and is widely regarded as one of the greatest masterpieces of Vietnamese literature. For a Vietnamese-English bilingual edition, see Huỳnh Sanh Thông's 1987 translation.

<sup>35</sup> Phạm (1937).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> For example, Homer, *Od.* 11.539, 11.573, 24.13–14, Virgil, *Aeneid* 3.23. See also Reece (2007) for a discussion on Homer's depictions of asphodels in the afterlife.

Elysian fields,<sup>38</sup> where only the souls of heroes may go after death. The choice to explain the ‘nine springs’ as the ‘oriental’ versions of these Greco-Roman concepts thus also associate the *Tale of Kieu* with famous and fundamental works such as Homer’s *Odyssey* and Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Moreover, it transports these nameless Vietnamese characters, the fisherman and the mandarin’s daughter, to a mythical realm that is not restricted by colonial limits and contemporary prejudices. These references therefore do not serve as mere bridges for Phạm’s French audience to better understand Vietnamese concepts, but also for Vietnamese values to transcend French biases.

While these comparisons happen on a subconscious level, Phạm is explicitly stating that he ‘only wanted to tell a beautiful tale’.<sup>39</sup> He even declares that if he were wise, he would explain the Buddhist inspiration behind the story and what it means to the people of Vietnam. However, as discussed above, he has already explained the Buddhist interpretation of the tale and its reception among Vietnamese people. After discussing different interpretations and dismissing them ultimately for the Buddhist one, Phạm wonders whether ‘these distinctions and nuances are useless’ and whether ‘in seeking out these different meanings, [he] has submitted to the oriental taste for subtlety. . . [or] the occidental desire for precision’.<sup>40</sup> This question reflects Phạm’s struggle to reconcile the sort of dichotomous thinking that is at the root of colonial mindsets. As Phạm wrestles between subtlety and precision, he is also wrestling between his Vietnamese heritage and his French education, and ultimately between two cultures that have been ingrained in him as irreconcilable.

After his Ciceronian *praeteritio* statement and his reflection on his own intercultural identity, Phạm returns to his purpose at hand and exhorts his French audience,

Remember at least the poetic beauty, love it for all that you can sense of its delicacy: the voice rising from the river, the sincere and silent passion that survives the dissolution of the body, the tear that delivers. Think of the harmonious fisherman when you see a cup of fine porcelain with blue drawings.<sup>41</sup>

Phạm thus connects these supposedly incompatible cultures through beauty and in a mythical world that transcends their colonial reality. He mentions the ‘fine porcelain with blue drawings’, a popular fineware that has not only been imported from the East for centuries, but one that was also imbued with luxury and sophistication. Phạm then links this tangible object from the East with the intangible principles he just described. In this way, Phạm is himself importing the intangible part of culture, such as oral history and folk tales, to the West and transporting them into French households.

<sup>38</sup> For example, Homer, *Od.* 4.560–4.565; Virgil, *Aeneid* 6.539, 6.641.

<sup>39</sup> Phạm (1937).

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

Yet, at the end of the broadcast, Phạm closes his explanation by once again separating the two cultures and by placing limits on French sensibilities and the ability to comprehend the subtlety of Vietnamese folktales:

You can say that, for an Annamite, this story is not a folktale, but a historical tale. You can say that this happened in China, a long time ago, but no one will be able to tell you under which emperor, from such and such a dynasty, in this particular place. He believes this more than you believe in Sleeping Beauty. It is not a beautiful folktale to him, it is a true story. For me, even at the age when I scanned the verses of the 'Aeneid' in a French high school, I would never have been astonished if I had learned that on the bank of the Great Lake, very near my school, someone had discovered the crystal of love. I would have wondered: 'Who will drop the tear which will dissolve this cup?'<sup>42</sup>

Once again, Phạm asserts the Vietnamese people's ability to traverse and master both cultural educations. While Phạm was reading the *Aeneid* in a French high school, he had already possessed the ability to understand both a famous Latin epic and a Vietnamese folk tale, one detailing the predestined foundation story of the Roman Empire, and the other symbolizing the Buddhist beliefs behind pre-destiny and the cyclical spiritual condition. On the other hand, his French counterparts required a cultural ambassador, a role that he filled in order to claim equality and then push for the superiority of what the French considered an inferior culture. Moreover, he ends the tale in the same way he begins it, by justifying his qualifications to his French audience with a reference to his mastery of Classics. Throughout Phạm's recounting of the tale, we see his internal debate on his own intercultural identity as he struggles to cross the gap between French and Vietnamese cultures by using Classics as a bridge. Ultimately though, his use of Classics functions more as a social ladder, serving as both cultural capital for him to speak to his French audience with a sense of authority and as cultural arms for him to fight for the equality and even superiority of his Vietnamese heritage.

Still, this bridge or ladder only served in one direction, mainly for the Vietnamese within the domain of the French. What makes Phạm an even more complicated figure is that he was not only torn between his French and Vietnamese identities, but also between his colonial and post-colonial one. We can observe this tension in Phạm's changing identity in his collection of Vietnamese folktales, *Légendes des terres sereines* (1951). The mere fact that he wrote a collection of folktales is already telling since it was one of the most popular genres as Vietnamese national literature emerged in the late 19th century and early 20th century.<sup>43</sup> Following in this tradition, Phạm

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Phạm (2013: 99). Such examples include Tru'ông Vĩnh Ký's *Contes amusants choisis parmi les contes les plus intéressants*, Đỗ Thận's *Contes et moralités annamites* (1906), Lê Văn Phát's *Contes et légendes du pays d'Annam* (1913) and *Légende du ver à soie* (1924), and Nguyễn Phan Long's *Cannibales par persuasion* (1932). From 1940, the genre became even more regular: Trịnh Thúc Oanh's *La tortue d'or: contes du pays d'Annam*

published two collections of folktales, *La jeune femme de Nam Xuong* in 1944 and the first version of *Légendes des terres sereines* in 1942, which were then combined into a new collection in 1951, also entitled *Légendes des terres sereines*. In this 1951 version (as well as in the 1942 version, in fact), Phạm once again narrates the tale of the mandarin's daughter and the fisherman, but this time in a simpler, more direct style with far less accompanying commentary.<sup>44</sup> Phạm still references the *Tale of Kieu* by quoting the famous two lines, but once again, he does not name the work. He also goes on to explain the quote in a similar way, by comparing the 'Nine Springs' to 'our plain of asphodels, the shadow of immortal myrtles'. The 'our', in contrast to 'the oriental' in the other version, thus associates him with his Vietnamese compatriots and distinguishes him from his French readers, while also connecting the two cultures in a mythical context. The reference to the 'Elysian fields' is curiously missing from this version, perhaps because Phạm does not view his characters as heroes whose linear journeys end in a designated afterlife, but rather as interconnected spirits within a cyclical journey. Like Phaedra, a classical reference did not quite capture the elusive meaning of Vietnamese ideology.

Phạm similarly entertains a simple explanation for the death of the fisherman, suggesting that the 'debt of love' was one that the girl owed the fisherman, which she repaid with her realization and regret at causing his death. However, this is the same explanation that he associated with the 'occidental desire for precision' in the first version, and he quickly dismisses it and declares that 'to the Vietnamese, the folktale can signify more than that'.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, he begins the complicated explanation of the Buddhist principles behind this tale with the preface 'to the Vietnamese', as if it were natural and intuitive for Vietnamese people but beyond reach for his French audience.

And yet, he renames the tale from 'Une Légende Annamite' to 'Le Cristal d'Amour,' thus removing the colonial name given to the Vietnamese people of central Vietnam by the French. He likewise entitles his work *Légendes des terres sereines*, using the descriptor 'serene lands' instead of the colonial names, Annam, Tonkin, or Cochinchina to refer to Vietnam like his predecessors had done.<sup>46</sup> This deliberate description reflects the changing geopolitical name of the land since he had published both versions of this collection during the height of the First Indochina War when the Vietnamese fought to push out the French and regain control of their country.

(1940), Trần Văn Tùng's *Le cœur de diamant: contes d'Annam* (1944) and *La colline des fantômes* (1960), and Phạm Văn Ký's *L'homme de nulle part: légende* (1946).

<sup>44</sup> Aveling (2018) provides a side-by-side comparison of the two versions.

<sup>45</sup> Phạm (1951).

<sup>46</sup> See note 41 above. Another interpretation would suggest that Phạm literally translated An Nam into French: the term itself, An Nam 安南, dates from the Tang empire and could be understood as 'peaceful' or 'pacified South', with 安 being read as either 'an' or 'yên' in spoken Vietnamese. Either way, Phạm is making a subversive point with this title. I thank my reviewer for sharing this interpretation with me.

After all, by the end of the war, Annam ceased to exist, and with it, his Annamite identity.

This tale is the only one in the collection with an accompanying explanation, and the only one with any classical references. However, Thanh-Vân Ton-That has suggested that some of the other tales follow classical tropes in their structure. According to Ton-That, the fisherman in love with the daughter of the mandarin in 'Le cristal d'amour' and the humble farmer who resurrects his beloved wife in 'Les moustiques' parallel the myth of Orpheus searching for Eurydice, the crab sentenced to move grains of sand along the shore only to have them be washed away in 'Le crab Da Trang' evokes the myth of Sisyphus, while the brother unable to escape the prophecy of committing incest in 'La montagne de l'attente' brings to mind Oedipus.<sup>47</sup> These similarities thus result in 'recognition for the French reader, a possible connivance through the identification of echoes and parallels between the two cultural universes'.<sup>48</sup> Unlike the earlier examples in Phạm's speech and radio broadcast, these are implicit without overt references. They constitute 'frail' or 'fuzzy connections', a concept that has been treated by Emily Greenwood and Lorna Hardwick.<sup>49</sup> Frail connections are correspondences between two works that can be overt, covert, or mere 'chance convergence of resonances with an ancient text'.<sup>50</sup> The importance lies in the creation of a meaningful connection in the mind of the reader.

The question then is why did Phạm take the implicit approach for the collection as a whole? Is this Phạm's attempt to keep the tale unadulterated, free from that 'occidental precision' he lamented? Is Phạm striving to allow the tales to stand on their own, to showcase the complexity and richness of Vietnamese culture on its own terms, without his or anyone else's intervention? These questions are not easy to answer, but it is curious that Phạm does not exert his cultural clout by declaring his mastery of Classics as he did in the first version. Instead of starting and ending with his own personal qualifications, he cedes the space to the mandarin's daughter. I believe the absence of classical allusions within the collection is the point. There are inherent risks in appropriating classical texts and myths since they have been imbued with civilizing authority within European traditions. Marginalized groups must carefully control the use of classical allusions in order to avoid having the perceived authority of classical texts overshadow their lived experiences. Such an eclipse would render their works dispossessed of their inheritance, and as Greenwood has described such a situation, 'akin to double displacement' for 'characters who have already been displaced from ancestral traditions within their new nascent tradition'.<sup>51</sup> The absence of classical allusions in the remaining tales encapsulates Phạm's desire

<sup>47</sup> Ton That (2015).

<sup>48</sup> Ton That (2015), my translation.

<sup>49</sup> Greenwood (2010: 1); Hardwick (2011: 39–60).

<sup>50</sup> Hardwick (2011: 41).

<sup>51</sup> Greenwood (2011): 377. She discusses this concept by way of Toni Morrison's warning for authors in the African-American tradition to be wary of appropriating classics in a way that overshadows the reality of the black historical experience.

to carve out a space for his hybrid identity, one that can best be understood through experience and not through explanations. Through the interplay between absence and presence, Phạm performed his multi-faceted identity and demonstrated his ability—and indeed his agency—to choose when, where, and what parts of his intercultural heritage to engage.

Writing during a time when Vietnam was gradually gaining its independence and redefining its national identity, Phạm Duy Khiêm used Greek and Roman literature in order to mediate between Vietnamese and French cultures and to ultimately challenge the inferiority of one to the other. Phạm aimed to educate his former colonizers on the value of Vietnamese culture and he did so by connecting it with classical allusions. But Phạm did not only seek to justify his Vietnamese heritage. While Phạm's exceptionalism in classical literature did grant him some cultural capital, and while he did reference his mastery for a sense of authority, he did not only use classical allusions to explain Vietnamese culture—he used them to render Vietnamese culture even more elusive, even more intricate and refined than that of his French audience. The presence of classical allusions, as well as their absence, reflect Phạm's struggle to define himself beyond the supposed binary poles of the colonizer and the colonized (French: Vietnamese) and of the colonial and the post-colonial (Annamite: Vietnamese). In so doing, he carved out a third space for himself, one that challenges conventional ideas and transcends categories.

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