

**Biography of Hàn Mặc Tử (1912 – 1940)**

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hanmactu.jpg>

(Francisco) Nguyễn Trọng Trí was born in 1912 in the village of Lê Mỹ north of the imperial city of Huế. Between 1920 and 1924, the family relocated frequently due to the father's employment. In 1926, his father passed away, and he pursued his studies at the Pellerin High School in the city of Huế, near the district of **Vỹ Dạ**. At 15 years of age, Nguyễn composed poetry under the pseudonym of Minh Huệ.

In 1934, Nguyễn worked in journalism in Sài Gòn. Under the alias Hàn Mặc Tử, he corresponded with a the poet Mộng Cầm from Phan Thiết. Their poems were published in the news and became the gossip of its time. In 1936, Nguyễn returned to Quy Nhơn, showing signs of leprosy. In September of 1940, Nguyễn was admitted to the city hospital, where was transferred to a nearby leper colony in Quy Hòa. There, he languished under the care of the nuns of Saint Francis of Assisi. On November 11, 1940, Nguyễn died at the age of twenty eight, becoming the mad poet of Quy Nhơn (Charles Kieth 2012, pp. 135-6; Péras and Vu 2001, pp. 177-83).

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**Orange County Department of Education**

**2022**

**Đây Thôn Vĩ Dạ (Vỹ Dạ)**

Written by Hàn Mặc Tử between 1937-8

Translation by: Minh X. Nguyen, Ph.D. (2022)

Sao anh không về chơi thôn Vĩ  
 Nhìn nắng hàng cau, nắng mới lên  
 Vườn ai mướt quá xanh như ngọc  
 Lá trúc che ngang mặt chữ điền

Gió theo lối gió, mây đường mây  
 Dòng nước buồn thiu, hoa bắp lay  
 Thuyền ai đậu bến sông trăng đó  
 Có chở trăng về kịp tối nay?

Mơ khách đường xa, khách đường xa...  
 Áo em trắng quá nhìn không ra  
 Ở đây sương khói mờ nhân ảnh  
 Ai biết tình ai có đậm đà?

*Translated Lines:*

*What keeps me from Vỹ Dạ?  
 From seeing the rows of betel covet the sun's dew?  
 The groves are green—too green like jade;  
 their sheen shrouds the sides of her face.*

*Winds meander, clouds with clouds,  
 rivers flow in sadness, corn blossoms stir in madness.  
 Whose boat docks there beside the moonlight?  
 Please ferry that moon across to me tonight.*

*Journeying from the imperial road afar,  
 her white dress is too pure for these sights.*

*Here, such colors will exhaust in the fog,  
consigning those who love to sway facelessly by the bog.*

*Translator's Note:*

For the purpose of classroom instruction, the stream of consciousness has been simplified to a singular point-of-view. The Vietnamese version does not have end rhymes; however, various elements have been amended with the intention of making the poem more accessible for the general audience of the English language.

Hàn, Mạc Tử (1937). “Đây Thôn Vĩ Dạ” [poem].

Kieth, Charles (2012). *Catholic Vietnam*. Los Angeles: UC Press.

Péras, Hélène and Vu Thi Bich (2001). *Le Hameau de Rousesaux*. Orbey: Arfuyen.

### **Hữu Loan (1914 to 2010)**

Nguyễn Hữu Loan was born in the province of Thanh Hòa. According to VTC News in Vietnam, Nguyễn stated that he was born in 1914, despite records showing 1916 (Lê Thọ Bình 2010). In 1936, Nguyễn joined the local resistance group which segued into the provincial Việt Minh group of Thanh Hòa. Eventually, he would become a French language instructor at a private school in the province.

Nguyễn was well acquainted with the family of Lê Đỗ Thị Ninh. The relationship was reported to be platonic initially, due to their significant age difference. Through an arrangement, Nguyễn and Lê's relationship matured into marriage on February 6, 1948 (based on the Lunar Calendar). A few months later, Lê Đỗ Thị Ninh drowned in the Chuông river, engulfed by the the rapids of the flood season on May 29, 1948. News about her death would reach her older brothers at the war front before news about her marriage.

While in the province of Nghệ An, Nguyễn wrote the poem "*Màu Tím Hoa Sim*" (The Purple Myrtle) in 2 hours. While minor revisions ensued, the majority of the content remained unchanged. The poem has been lauded for its accessible language, dubbed as Hữu Loan's autobiography.

Showing obeisance for the poet in 2004, the Vitek VTB Electronics Company in Sài Gòn acquired the rights to the poem from Nguyễn for \$200 million VND (\$8,000 USD approx.).

### Poetry, Music, and Adaptation

Until the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, inhabitants of Vietnam were mostly illiterate. In the 1950s, the United Nations estimated that approximately 15% of the population from the age of 15 and older were able to read proficiently (UNESCO 1957, p.39). Despite the widespread illiteracy, many inhabitants in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century would have been familiar with the tales derived from China, India, and the Middle-East, such as the tales of *Liu Chen and Ruan Zhao*, *A Thousand and One Nights*, and *Ramayana*. While they would not have been able to read these stories necessarily, many Vietnamese would have heard of these tales through modes of oral transmission, including theater and music. Thus, the adaptation of literary works has played a crucial role in shaping the cultural history of Vietnamese literature in Vietnam and the diaspora.

According to Phạm Duy, a well-known musician and ethnomusicologist, musical adaptations of stories can be found throughout Vietnam since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, such as with *hát á đèo* singing in the northern regions and *ca Huế* in the central, and *nhạc tài tử* in the southern provinces. Phong T. Nguyễn elaborates: many guilds used song sheets that had two parts. The upper part of the page would have the lyrics to a poem to convey the story, and the bottom of the page would have numeric cues for rhythm (Nguyễn 2008, p. 289). Figure 1. shows the first four verses of a song sheet to “Tiên Nữ Tống Lư Nguyễn” (Female Spirits See Lư & Nguyễn Off). The song is an adaptation of a poem which was inspired by the legend of *Liu and Ruan* in China, who ascended the mountain of Tian Tai.

Prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the most dominant written language in Vietnam was classical Chinese. While the *nôm* and modern Vietnamese script (*quốc ngữ*) were widely used to a degree, classical Chinese had more clout due to its history of political precedence over the other writing systems. Starting from the top right, the vocalist would recite words vertically, moving left column by column. Prior to mass printing, access to renowned literary works in written form would have been scarce. Furthermore, major works were written oftentimes in classical Chinese, which is another systematic obstacle. While there may not have been a physical gatekeeper stopping peasants from reading or owning codex of poems, stories, or prayers, written literature was highly regulated by the elite class of educated men, composed of court officials, scholars, clergyman, monks, and master musicians. Hence, festivals such as the week long Tết Lunar New Year would have been crucial to the mass circulation of songs and poems.

By the 1930s, classical Chinese was no longer the most coveted writing script in Vietnam due to French colonialism as well as many nationalist/intellectuals responding to those conditions. The modern script, known as *quốc ngữ*, was being printed throughout the country. While literacy was still far from being universal, the shift in written language was a move towards the democratization of literature. Various social and cultural movements emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, including the new poetry movement (*thơ mới*). Musicians would draw on the poems they read or wrote and adapted them to music. The rise of new music (*tân nhạc*) ensued from the

shifts in language and literature. Known as *phổ thơ*, the process of adapting poems and stories to songs from generations prior continued to be practiced throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and even today.

As Vietnamese communism solidified politically and militarily in northern Vietnam, territories in the south became a refuge for many artists, albeit that the southern Republic of Vietnam (*Việt Nam Cộng Hòa*) was not free from political censorship nor communism either. However, sorrowful and love themed poems and songs were more tolerated in the south. In the northern Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Resolution 49-NQTVQH of 1961 criminalized musicians and poets who engaged with cultural aspects associated with sentimentality, which was perceived as a political act of favoring the cosmopolitanism of the southern republic; the penalty was 10 years of re-education (Pham 2010).

Fleeing from the communist in the mass exodus of 1954 and after 1975, many musicians continue the tradition of drawing on poetry, adapting poems to song ballads. In 1954, the exodus of Vietnamese fleeing southwards enabled the music and literary culture in the southern Republic of Vietnam to flourish with greater diversity. Poets from different regions of Vietnam like the purple rose myrtle from Thanh Hoá, Hữu Loan, or the mad poet of Quy Nhơn, Hàn Mặc Tử, became legends through songs in the south as well as the diaspora after 1975.

In 1949, the poet Hữu Loan revealed his most well-known piece “The Purple Myrtle” (*Màu Tím Hoa Sim*), conveying the emotional perturbation of war and the irrational violence of collateral damage during the Vietnamese’s war with the French. The vast collaboration of nationalist, communist, and other freedom fighters is known broadly as the Việt Minh. While the poet remained in northern Vietnam, his “purple rose” did not. Since 1960, the repertoire of songs drawing on Hữu Loan’s purple flower bloomed in the southern Republic of Vietnam and the diaspora, including: “*Những Đồi Hoa Sim*” composed by Dzũng Chinh, “*Chuyện Hoa Sim*” by Anh Bằng, “*Chuyện Tình Mộng Thường*” by Trần Thiện Thanh, and “*Màu Tím Hoa Sim*” by Duy Khánh and Trọng Khương. Thus, every time the purple rose myrtle (*hoa sim*) is mentioned to discourse about the themes of war, death, and love, Hữu Loan is being referenced.

From 1937 to 1939 approximately, a collection titled *Poems of Madness (Thơ Điên)* emerged from Quy Nhơn. The poetic image of the moon afloat weightlessly, yet heavy with sorrow, has been a poetic icon that has inspired generations. More than a discourse of literary techniques, Hàn Mặc Tử has been transcended into the consciousness of narrators, such as in the 1964 eponymous song by Trần Thiện Thanh, who also composed another song about the poet in the following year, “*Tâm Sự Mộng Cầm*.” Though his death is recorded in Quy Nhơn in 1940, Hàn Mặc Tử appears as a character in *cải lương* musicals or *vọng cổ* songs throughout the diaspora after 1975. Similar to the mythical Liu Chen and Ruan Zhao who appear in Vietnamese lore as Luu and Nguyễn, Hàn Mặc Tử has crossed the seas of war with many of the refugees to Little Saigon.

During the postwar decade after 1975, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam censored themes of sentimentality heavily. Pre-1975 songs from the fallen Republic of Vietnam were targeted especially. Nevertheless, the songs conveying the poetry of Hữu Loan and Hàn Mặc Tử continued to be produced in the diaspora, where they were smuggled back to the old country. The irony is: the ghosts of the purple flower and Hàn Mặc Tử were exiled from Vietnam after the war, where they would return eventually as illegal immigrants hiding behind close doors. Ultimately, they are at home wherever there is Vietnamese cultural life.

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