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Lê Vân and Notions of Vietnamese Womanhood

When *Lê Vân: Loving and Living* [*Lê Vân: Yêu và Sống*], an autobiography by a well-known dancer and singer named Lê Vân, appeared in 2006, it became an immediate best-seller, disappearing from bookstore shelves like “fresh shrimp” [*tôm tươi*], the Vietnamese equivalent of hot cakes.¹ After a first printing of ten thousand hard-bound copies sold out, the publisher quickly printed a cheaper paperback version to prevent pirated versions, which rapidly appeared in book stalls, from stealing profits.

What made this book sell so well? One reason is that it revealed the private lives of a well-known family of performing artists. Lê Vân’s father, Trần Tiến, was an admired actor, and her mother, Lê Mai, and two sisters were well-known actresses.² Lê Vân played Duyên in *When the Tenth Month Comes* [*Bao giờ cho đến tháng mười*], a highly praised film released in 1984, and her sad face as Duyên symbolized for many the sadness caused by Vietnam’s many years of war.³ Vietnamese are accustomed to hearing rumors about artists and their family lives, but having such a famous artist air her and her family’s troubles in public was new and shocking. “Turning up your shirt to let people see your back” [*Vạch áo cho người xem lưng*], as the Vietnamese say, is something one is not supposed to do.⁴

And Lê Vân, as we will see, exposes not only her own back but the backs of her parents as well. She says her parents treated her badly, and her harsh criticism shocked readers. Some of the actions she complains about were caused by harsh economic conditions in North Vietnam during the war and



FIGURE 1: Lê Vân as Duyên feeds her frail and failing father-in-law in the film *When the Tenth Month Comes*. SOURCE: Phạm Vũ Dũng, chief advisor, *Vietnamese Cinematography: A Research Journey* (Hà Nội: Thế Giới, 2007), appendix VI.

in the postwar period, and so readers also criticize Lê Vân for violating the Vietnamese proverb: “Children don’t scorn their parents’ difficulties; dogs don’t scorn a poor master” [*Con không chê cha mẹ khó; chó không chê chủ nghèo*].⁵ Then there is the matter of Lê Vân being a serial homebreaker: she describes three love affairs, all with older men who had wives and children. All three affairs resulted in the men separating from their wives and families. As journalist Hồng Ny writes, open-minded people could understand if Lê Vân were “struck by the thunder of love [*bị tiếng sét ái tình*] once. But three times?”⁶ Her autobiography became for some people a story of how she stole the husbands of three women. The fact that all her lovers were married men increased the story’s shock value.

Loving and Living, however, was published by the prestigious Writers’ Association [Hội Nhà Văn] and has provoked serious debate by prominent writers in newspapers and online forums.⁷ By daring to be brutally honest,

some writers have suggested, Lê Vân provides a lesson in courage that writers and government officials should emulate. Although its tabloid quality—its sensational revelations about a prominent family of artists—may have been what first attracted readers, *Loving and Living* has other qualities: it describes a remarkable emotional and intellectual journey. It is the story of a woman who grows up in wartime Hà Nội and matures in the harsh economic environment of postwar Vietnam. As an artist—first a dancer and then a film actress—she struggles in her career with the dislocations caused by Vietnam’s shift from a subsidy system to a market economy. Her parents wed young and were soon trapped in a failed marriage, so home was not a comforting refuge for her. She seeks love, knowledge, and advice from three different men, all already married, and along the way struggles to answer the question that is the title of her first chapter: “Vân, oh Vân, who are you?”

Lê Vân’s answer to that question, the last line in her book, is “I am I, a woman,” and in the preceding pages she explains how she arrived at that conclusion and what, in her view, being a woman involves. In every country notions of manhood and womanhood—ideas about what it means to be a man or woman—are shaped by images, proverbs, stories, myths, songs, and beliefs. These things, which I will call “texts,” spell out what is proper behavior for men and women.⁸ When people tell their life stories they inevitably evoke these texts to explain—and sometimes to glorify or justify—their actions.⁹ Therefore, I believe that life stories, including more carefully structured literary autobiographies or memoirs, are useful places to look if one is interested in exploring notions of manhood or womanhood in a culture. In this article I explore notions of Vietnamese womanhood by examining Lê Vân’s autobiography and the cultural texts embedded within it.

There are dangers in using a person’s life story to investigate a culture. In one’s urge to find information about a culture one may “speak past,” rather than speak to, the narrative itself and so overlook “the subjective mapping of experience” that telling a life story involves.¹⁰ In other words, one may end up paying insufficient attention to how the life story is constructed. A related danger is one of ignoring agency, defined by William H. Sewell as a capacity “for desiring, for forming intentions, and for acting creatively.”¹¹ Poststructuralist literary critics and researchers influenced by them sometimes give the impression that life stories write themselves, that in these stories it is not

the author who speaks but the author's language and culture.¹² I agree with George Rosenwald and Richard Ochberg, who accept that life stories are "shaped by the forms each culture provides" but who also warn against assuming that only culture "speaks" in life stories. Such an assumption leads one to overlook places in them where "desire strains against these forms."¹³ In discussing Lê Vân's *Loving and Living* I try to avoid these dangers.

I refer to "Vietnamese women" in this article, but Lê Vân is from the north, a region with a different history from the south of Vietnam. Socialist ideology and practices were introduced in the north earlier than they were in the south, a region noted for its individualism and passion for commodity relations.¹⁴ In terms of kinship relations, some scholars believe the north is more East Asian and patriarchal, and the south more Southeast Asian and more open to gender equality.¹⁵ Although regional differences are fascinating, they are not the focus of this paper. Women in both regions have been influenced by the same or similar texts, and these shared texts are the focus of my analysis.

Why have I made the autobiography of a performer—a dancer/actress—my primary source? Aren't public performers by definition atypical? It is true that Vietnamese have traditionally considered them to be lowly members of society, almost akin to social outcasts. "Singers and actors are worthless" [*Xướng ca vô loại*] is a well-known saying.¹⁶ Civil service examinations in Vietnam, which persisted until 1919, were open to everyone except women and actors.¹⁷ In modern Vietnam, however, performers who serve their country are respected and, in any event, I am not arguing that Lê Vân metonymically represents all Vietnamese women. I am simply suggesting that her life story reveals the texts that Vietnamese draw on in constructing their notions of womanhood. I have another reason for choosing this autobiography. In films written and directed by men, Lê Vân frequently plays the role of women who embody the traditional feminine virtues of faithfulness, endurance, and self-sacrifice. Her life therefore nicely illustrates how we all, with varying degrees of agency and influence, "write" as well as "read" the texts that shape our notions of manhood and womanhood.

I will first give an overview of Lê Vân's autobiography and then identify the texts relating to womanhood that she evokes in telling her life story. I say "evoke" rather than "cite" because I discuss not only texts that Lê Vân cites

explicitly—lines from the classic poem *The Tale of Kiều* [*Truyện Kiều*], for example—but also texts that Roland Barthes calls “quotations without inverted commas”: allusions to proverbs and sayings and to anonymous and untraceable cultural codes.¹⁸ I categorize the texts evoked in *Loving and Living* under five headings: (1) Myths of Matriarchy and Ministers of the Interior, (2) Chastity, (3) The Four Virtues, (4) Sacrifice, and (5) Romance and Fate. My argument has two parts. First, I argue that taken collectively, the texts I categorize form an interlocking system of mutually reinforcing constraints that preserve options for men and limit options for women. In other words, they support a patriarchal system. But I also argue that Lê Văn’s autobiography reveals that despite these constraints, individual agency is still possible. The dismantling of the “subsidy” [*bao cấp*] or social welfare system that followed the move to a market economy created hardships for women, but it also brought opportunities. Lê Văn’s life story suggests that a Vietnamese woman in northern Vietnam has powers to shape her life that were not available to Vietnamese women of previous generations.

Overview

Lê Văn had an unhappy childhood. Her parents were around 20 when they married, and soon they had three young children whom they had to raise during the American War. Both her parents were performers, so Lê Văn sometimes stayed at a home for children, returning to her own home only on weekends. When American bombing attacks began and old people and children were evacuated from Hà Nội, Lê Văn and her sister Lê Khanh lived in a camp run by her parents’ drama group, twenty kilometers from the city. When she was nine or ten her parents enrolled her in a Soviet-style dancing school and she lived in this school’s dorm. She suffered from hunger and from the militaristic atmosphere. Lê Văn speaks of “punishing her body” [*hành xác*] for seven years trying to learn how to perform classical ballet, including *Swan Lake*, *Giselle*, and *Spartacus*.¹⁹

Lê Văn suggests, however, that what really saddened her were not the hardships of dancing school but her parents’ fighting and eventual divorce. Her parents, she suggests, were so busy fighting each other and trying to survive economically that they had no time to be kind to her. Their cramped living quarters—the family lived in one room in a villa that housed sixty



FIGURE 2: Left: Trần Tiến, Lê Vân's father. Right: Lê Mai, Lê Vân's mother.

SOURCE: Trần Tiến: *Mốt* [Style], "NSND Trần Tiến đón đau vì tự truyện Lê Vân" [People's Artist Trần Tiến Pained by Lê Vân's Autobiography], <http://vnexpress.net/GL/Van-hoa/2006/11/3B9F0310/?q=1> (accessed September 9, 2008). Lê Mai: Photo by Nguyễn Đình Toán for *Tiến Phong Online* [Avantgarde Online], Ngọc Trang, "Thương thì thương, mà giận vẫn giận . . ." [I'm Sympathetic but Also Angry . . .], www.tienphongonline.com.vn/Tianyon/Index.aspx?ArticleID=65468&ChannelID=7 (accessed September 15, 2007).

people and had only one toilet—aggravated the situation. Though she blames her mother for being cold toward her, she reserves her harshest criticism for her father. Lê Vân objects to his girlfriends. "He was especially appealing to the fair sex," she says, "to those mayflies who would without thinking throw themselves at him, present themselves to him. After one woman was gone, another would come."²⁰ She also objects to his hypocrisy, his way of being cold and distant with her and her sisters in the home but generous and sweet when other people were around.²¹

When she grew up Lê Vân realized that her father suffered from being "a talented artist who couldn't support himself to say nothing of his wife and children."²² She swore that she would never love and marry a poor artist like her father. Ironically, her first lover turns out to be an artist who resembles her father in some ways. Like her father, he struggles to live on the starvation wages the government pays him, and though much younger than her father, he is also unable to hustle and make a decent living in the new market economy.

She meets this first lover, a man she refers to as "Người ấy" [This Person], in 1979, two years after she had become a dancer with the Music, Dance, and

Drama Theater [Nhà hát Nhạc-Vũ kịch].²³ He is a government official, a supervisor of cultural activities. She notices him one day when he visits her ballet group. He stands out from the others, a man “of middle age, with hair speckled with gray and the look of a studious artist.”²⁴ Lê Văn has just turned 20 at the time. He is twice her age. He comes up to her and introduces himself, saying he knew her father. Later, he asks her to meet him in a remote part of the city and they talk—or rather, he talks and she listens as he pours out his hopes for art and for his family. “I was like a blank piece of paper,” she says, “waiting for him, the artist twice my age, to write on it my first lessons.”²⁵

These meetings at dark secluded places in the city continue, and she learns more about him. Lê Văn is impressed by the way he organizes his family life, by his attractive wife and two children, and by his nicely designed and well-furnished apartment with its separate bedroom, small bathroom, refrigerator, piano, and full bookcases—an “intellectual paradise,” she calls it.²⁶ She knows about his home life because he takes her to his home and introduces her to his wife and children. As what turns out to be a ten-year relationship with Người ấy drags on, Lê Văn realizes that, in part *because* he is an intellectual, his home life is no intellectual paradise after all. Intellectuals cannot survive on the meager wages paid them by the state. Except for writing an occasional article, he isn’t good at moonlighting and hustling to produce additional income. Lê Văn realizes that economic problems are hurting his marriage.²⁷ “The wife was struggling to make ends meet,” she says, “and the husband was just being an academic artist, going with the clouds and returning with the wind.”²⁸ Meanwhile, thanks to her income from acting, Lê Văn has succeeded in “‘untying’ herself” [*‘cởi trói’ cho tôi*]: she achieves both financial security and artistic freedom—freedom to work only on films she likes, with directors she respects.²⁹

Lê Văn meets her next lover in 1988 while she is in Sài Gòn waiting for a visa to go to Paris to work on a film, and Người ấy is in Hà Nội working on divorce papers so that he can marry her. This second lover is an overseas Vietnamese [Việt kiều] who lives in Canada. Actually, he is part French, part Vietnamese, and when Lê Văn first meets him, she thinks he is a Westerner and is surprised to learn that he speaks Vietnamese fluently. He arranges tours for other Việt kiều who wish to visit their homeland. This Việt kiều, whom Lê Văn calls “Chàng lãng tử” [the Wanderer], arranges their first

meeting. He wants to meet the star who played Duyên in the film *When the Tenth Month Comes* and asks a friend and his wife to invite both he and Lê Vân to their home for dinner.

In Lê Vân's description of their first weeks together it is difficult to separate her specific attraction to him from a more generalized appreciation for the freedom of Sài Gòn and the southern region, which the Wanderer, whose family was originally from Quảng Nam, comes to represent. She contrasts her "Northern Scholar" [Kê sĩ Bắc Hà] and their meetings in dark corners of Hà Nội with her "Sài Gòn Wanderer" [Lãng tử Sài Gòn], who escorts her around in the light of day in the freer atmosphere of the south. "Loving him," she says, "I was like *a person shocked [bị sốc] by the light*, like a person long imprisoned in a dark and stagnant place . . . who escapes from a cage and spreads her wings and flies in a world of freedom and openness" (italics in original; my ellipsis).³⁰ Before Lê Vân left Hà Nội, her northern lover had warned her that she should be careful: "Sài Gòn has a lot of temptations—many things that make people fall into debauchery [*sa ngã*]."³¹ She—naively, she admits—even asks the Wanderer to help her not fall into debauchery with him. In the end, however, she cannot resist Sài Gòn's temptations and, as she puts it, she "officially fell into debauchery."³²

When she falls for the Wanderer she is eager to throw off restraints and gain more independence. After having been married to him for a few years, however, she again feels constrained—not because the Wanderer keeps reminding her to be more feminine and act more like a proper woman from a cultured family, as her first lover had, but because he wants her to act like a man!³³ As Lê Vân tells it, the romance disappears from their relationship when the Wanderer starts hanging out in cafes, leaving her to do all the chores that she believes are a man's work—tasks such as handling relations with the police, borrowing money, paying taxes, arranging for house repairs—even getting *his* residence permit extended. The Wanderer clearly is not the man who would enable her be the woman she wants to be.

She finds that man, but he is not Vietnamese, not even a Việt kiều. Her next lover is a Dutch Indonesian who works for an international food organization.³⁴ Abraham, or "Bram," as she calls him, notices her when she is dancing on the cement floor of the Army Museum at an exhibition and cocktail party organized by a Dutch organization to promote flood-resistant homes.



FIGURE 3: Lê Vân. SOURCE: Photo by Nguyễn Đình Toán for *Tiền Phong Online* [Avantgarde Online], Ngọc Trang, “Thương thì thương, mà giận vẫn giận . . .” [‘I’m Sympathetic but Also Angry . . .’], www.tienphongonline.com.vn/Tianyon/Index.aspx?ArticleID=65468&ChannelID=7 (accessed September 15, 2007).

Later he invites her to participate in a show to raise money for a children’s charity and they become acquainted. Abraham is seven years older than Lê Vân and has a wife and two children in Holland, and she is separated from but still married to the Wanderer; thus she again becomes involved with another woman’s husband and betrays a man who loves her. The third time is a charm for her, however, and though she and Abraham never marry, they have two children together, both born in Hà Nội—Avi in 1997 and Adam in 2001.

In paragraphs leading up to the concluding sentence of her book, “I am I, a woman,” Lê Vân explains the kind of woman that she now is—or at least the woman she wants to be. Although she uses the word “ordinary” [*bình thường*] rather than the word “traditional” [*truyền thống*], she clearly sees herself as returning to a notion of womanhood that is very old and very Asian. “I desire to be a very ordinary woman,” she says. “In my heart I have always wanted to be a proper wife: gentle and kind and devoted to her family, her husband, and her children. Those are the qualities of an Asian woman that I’ve been ‘soaked’ in since I don’t know when.”³⁵

Lê Vân says she wants to be an “ordinary,” rather than a “traditional,” woman probably because she knows that criticizing her parents, having affairs with other women’s husbands, and having children out of wedlock with a foreigner are not exactly traditional behavior. The fact that someone as unconventional as Lê Vân still aspires to some of the traditional female virtues attests to their continuing power to influence lives in contemporary Vietnam. We now turn to some of the cultural texts that underlie these traditional notions.

Myths of Matriarchy and Ministers of the Interior

Historians have argued that women in Southeast Asia have played important roles in society—that, for example, they have shared important agricultural chores with men; that female as well as male children have been able to inherit property; and that after marriage the bride and groom have not been required to live near or with the groom’s parents. Scholars who argue for the high status of women in Southeast Asia are said to support the “autonomy thesis.”³⁶ Applying this thesis to Vietnam is problematic because Vietnam has been influenced by Confucianism, a very patriarchal system. But some scholars, both Vietnamese and Western, have argued that ancient Vietnam was a matrilineal and matriarchal society and that the higher status enjoyed by women in Vietnam in comparison with their Chinese counterparts represents the persistence of “Southeast Asian” qualities that centuries of Sinicization have not been able to eradicate. Claiming that they treat women better has been a way for Vietnamese to emphasize their Vietnamese-ness and establish their cultural independence from China.

One Southeast Asian quality said to exist in Vietnam is “complementarity,” which refers to the custom of husband and wife sharing labor more or less equally.³⁷ Vietnamese folk sayings like the following are often offered as evidence for this custom in Vietnam: “The husband plows, the wife plants, and the buffalo harrows” [*Chồng cày vợ cấy con trâu đi bừa*], and “When wife and husband are in harmony they can empty the Eastern Sea” [*Thuận vợ thuận chồng tát bể đông cũng cạn*]. Another oft-cited example of complementarity in Vietnam is the tradition whereby the wife acts as minister of the interior [*nội tướng*] while the husband is in charge of foreign relations. According to this tradition, as minister of the interior, the wife holds the key

to the money box [*tay hòm chìa khóa*] and makes decisions regarding the management of the home. The husband's responsibility is to work outside the home and tend to matters not related to housekeeping.³⁸

When I lived in Vietnam I was struck by how many times men would use this “minister” metaphor to describe women's power in the home, usually to suggest that gender inequality was not a problem in Vietnam. Many scholars mention this metaphor, adding evidence of its pervasiveness.³⁹ To the extent that these titles, which suggest a division of household duties, describe a true state of affairs, they can be seen as more evidence of Southeast Asian “complementarity”—more evidence of labor being shared equitably between husband and wife.⁴⁰ They can also be seen as reflecting Confucian concepts. In the Confucian family women were taught domestic skills—cooking, sewing, and weaving, for example—so they could run the house; men were trained in intellectual pursuits so that they could take care of external affairs in the community and state.⁴¹

While no doubt many Vietnamese husbands let their wives handle the family finances and make some decisions regarding home management, it is important to point out the advantages accruing to men from this arrangement. By conceding a little bit of power, men reap a great many benefits. When one considers the work involved in managing a family, it might be more apt to say men “happily surrender” this responsibility, rather than to say they “concede” it. Having women do all the boring, repetitive housework while men pursue their careers may be complementarity of a sort, but it is hardly equality. Acting as “minister of interior,” Wendy Duong points out, “involves managing all aspects of family affairs so that her husband can be free to pursue other ‘noble’ things, such as poetry or other cultural pursuits.”⁴² Stephen O’Harrow writes that in Vietnam, “the height of *machismo* is not some Mediterranean predilection to physical abuse of women, but rather a gentlemanly idleness at their expense.”⁴³

Both Lê Văn's father and Lê Văn's husband, the Wanderer, exhibit this Vietnamese *machismo*. According to Lê Văn, her father enjoyed idleness without surrendering the purse strings. She reports that her mother did not control the family finances. Her mother had to tell Lê Văn and her sisters to remind their father to give her some money to buy food.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, Lê Văn says, when he was at the drinking table [*bên bàn nhậu*] with his friends,

her father was the life of the party.⁴⁵ As for the Wanderer, Lê Văn explains that early in their relationship she admired him for giving his wife in Canada all his money because it proved he had “unconditional confidence” in her. “Regarding economics,” she says, “when he accumulated a little money he would give it all to his wife. When he wanted to return to Vietnam, he would just leave and arrive [in Vietnam] barehanded.”⁴⁶ She calls this confidence that she would take care of him “his most admirable trait.”

After Lê Văn marries the Wanderer, however, she grows tired of his idleness, of his habit of hanging out in cafes, leaving her to handle not only internal household matters, which she enjoys tending to, but external affairs as well. She dislikes having to be both minister of the interior *and* minister of external affairs. Her familiarity with this political metaphor for describing a division of labor between wife and husband no doubt increases the resentment she feels over having to take on “manly” tasks like dealing with government officials. “*Why do I have to act like a man when I have a husband?*” she asks. “*When am I going to be able to be a woman who is really a woman?*” (italics for emphasis in original).⁴⁷ If she had a husband willing and able to be the “chief” [*thủ lĩnh*] of the family, she explains, then she would gladly give up her career and become a housewife: “If I should have a man like that, then I would be ready to let go completely, say good by to everything, in order to be a Vietnamese woman with the correct domestic functions in the home.”⁴⁸ Abraham, her Dutch Indonesian lover, becomes the “chief” that allows her to be a Vietnamese housewife.

This minister metaphor also helps to explain why Lê Văn ascribes her success outside the home, as a film actress, to her “male-like” [*duy tính nữ*] nature, to her “having male characteristics” [*mang tính khí đàn ông*].⁴⁹ In the Confucian family it was the men who ventured out into the world to achieve fame and the means to support their families. Lê Văn achieves this fame but then abruptly quits her film career at the height of her success. She offers several reasons—low pay, not enough good directors, doubts about her own ability—but one reason, it seems clear, was her feeling that to succeed in films she had to draw too much on her “male characteristics” and she wanted to be a woman, a traditional Vietnamese woman, who presided over the home.

When examined more closely, this minister of the interior metaphor appears to be more myth than reality. Research conducted in the 1990s suggests

that Vietnamese women do, as the metaphor suggests, handle most of the domestic chores, but it also indicates that wives have little decision-making power, even in the home. They can make routine decisions related to cooking and child-rearing, but their husbands make the big decisions—whether to buy an expensive item, for example.⁵⁰ Renovation [Đổi Mới] has created opportunities for women to work outside the home, but Magali Barbieri and Danièle Bélanger, editors of a collection of research reports on the Vietnamese family, suggest that while in China and other countries the market economy has strengthened women's role in society and in the family, this has not happened in Vietnam.⁵¹

Arguments for women's high status in Vietnam often include references to Vietnam's matriarchal heritage. The autonomy of Vietnamese women is seen as being manifested in either a matrilineal or, failing that, a bilateral kinship system. However, most scholars agree that in Vietnam matrilineality, if it existed, disappeared with the establishment of the Kingdom of Văn Lang in the seventh century BCE.⁵² That was a long time ago. Whether a patrilineal or bilateral inheritance system replaced it is disputed. Scholars agree that there was a turn toward patrilineality during the Lê period (1428–1788), when Confucianism became the ruling ideology, but they disagree on how much of a turn it was. Some scholars suggest patrilineality dominated during the Lê period; others argue that a bilateral kinship system prevailed.

Central to this debate has been the Lê Dynasty law, referred to as the Lê Code. Some scholars find evidence of autonomy in this legal system, arguing, for example, that it guaranteed that daughters and sons would inherit an equal share of household property.⁵³ In a recent article, however, Nhung Tuyet Tran analyzes statutes and legal cases compiled in the sixteenth century and she concludes that “state regulations and local practice restricted women's claims to property.” This legal code, she argues, may therefore not be a good text to cite—though many eager to find autonomy in Vietnam do cite it—in arguing for an “*essential* Vietnam, which was fundamentally non-Chinese.”⁵⁴ Nhung Tuyet Tran may be wrong about the Lê Code. Most scholars insist it codifies a bilateral system. One danger of such debates, which will no doubt continue, is that they divert attention from the current status of women in modern Vietnam; another danger is that they leave the impression that “better than China” is good enough as far as gender equality in Vietnam is concerned.

Vietnamese are proud of their female warriors such as the Trưng sisters (first century BCE) and Lady Triệu (third century BCE), who led revolts against Chinese rule. Some accounts describe Lady Triệu as riding into battle on an elephant, with her three-foot-long breasts strapped under her armor.⁵⁵ Vietnam's matriarchal heritage, at least as far as historical figures such as the Trưng sisters and Lady Triệu are concerned, is not all myth. It seems certain that these figures existed. It seems also true that the Lê Code did codify more rights for women than did the preceding Chinese T'ang, Ming, and Ch'ing codes.⁵⁶ But it also seems clear that a great deal of exaggerating and mythicizing has occurred. Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết tells us that "the Vietnamese mother has moved from reality into myth and from myth, from the spiritual realm, she shines again, and again she brings about large practical effects."⁵⁷ Some scholars are now questioning whether these effects are all positive as far as achieving gender equality is concerned. Wendy Duong, a legal scholar, argues that Vietnam's "matriarchal heritage" makes it difficult to establish a feminist consciousness in contemporary Vietnam. Feminist ideas can be easily "rejected or belittled," she says, based on the "disingenuous proposition" that Vietnam's "strong matriarchal heritage" makes a feminist movement unnecessary.⁵⁸

This heritage, however, is of little use to Lê Vân. The American War was over when she reached adulthood. She needs a feminist movement not to remind her of her patriotic duties but to help her smooth out some problems she encounters in trying to be a traditional Vietnamese housewife. Because she yearns to be a stay-at-home mom and because she wants the men in her life to act like traditional husbands—to be the primary providers and the ministers of the exterior—she clearly does not envisage a Western-style feminist movement. Liberation for Lê Vân involves the freedom to accept at least some—but not all—of the traditional feminine virtues (see the section "The Four Virtues"). But how can she desire to be a traditional Vietnamese housewife while seemingly violating the most important of all the feminine virtues—chastity? This is the topic of the next section.

Chastity

Lê Vân enters into love affairs with three married men, and her children are fathered by a man who was not her husband at the time she gave birth. In fact, the first child she has with Abraham is born when she is still married to

the Wanderer. This behavior is certainly not typical, nor is Lê Văn's willingness to go public about it, but it becomes somewhat more understandable when we understand Vietnamese texts related to chastity [*tiết nghĩa* or *tiết hạnh*].

In traditional Vietnam, Confucian morality legitimized a double-standard for judging the sexual behavior of men and women. It was not important whether men were or were not virgins before marriage. Married men's affairs were disapproved of but often forgiven, even by their wives. Many men took second wives if they could afford them, a practice that created what was essentially a polygynous system.⁵⁹ Men were certainly expected to be virtuous—to be loyal to their king and filially pious to their parents, for example—but these virtues did not preclude them from having lovers before or after marriage. Women were expected to be loyal and filially pious, too, but for them chastity was *the* virtue, as this folk song makes clear:

Having been born into this world,
Men should zealously observe Loyalty [*Trung*] and Filial Piety [*Hiếu*],
Women should always, with due attention,
Treasure Chastity [*Trinh*] and Purity [*Lòng son*].⁶⁰

By having love affairs with three married men, Lê Văn would appear to be disregarding the cardinal rule of chastity and adding to other women's woes in the process. How can we account for her behavior? In considering the degree to which Lê Văn rebels against traditional norms it is important not to confuse chastity [*tiết nghĩa*] with virginity. Both married and unmarried women were supposed to be chaste. Công Huyền Tôn Nữ Nha Trang (hereafter CHTN Nha Trang) explains that chastity generally meant faithfulness or constancy, which women exhibited by remaining virgins before marriage and sexually faithful to their husbands after marriage. But, as CHTN Nha Trang and others emphasize, chastity is defined differently in different Vietnamese texts, and in the most famous Vietnamese story in the culture, *The Tale of Kiều*, the heroine has sex with men to whom she is not betrothed, including customers at a brothel where she is a courtesan, but she is still considered chaste.⁶¹ Some people were shocked by the "revisionist" notion of chastity put forth in *The Tale of Kiều* and believed women should not read this verse narrative.⁶² Most Vietnamese, however, have appreciated this tale

for its moving treatment of how a passionate young woman who finds herself in terrible circumstances makes very difficult decisions based on the dictates of her heart as well as Confucian principles.

Kiều is certainly not a loose woman. However, she does act rashly—for example, by improperly committing herself to wed a young man, Kim Trọng, before securing her parent's permission. She then breaks her pledge to Kim Trọng and loses her virginity when she agrees to marry the evil Mã Giám Sinh to save her falsely accused father. She decides that filial piety is a “heavier” [*nặng hơn*] virtue than faithfulness. Mã Giám Sinh is the first of a series of liaisons, but Kiêu's entry into love relationships is based on a mutual commitment with only three men: the scholar Kim Trọng, the businessman Thúc Sinh, and the warrior chieftain Từ Hải. She preserves her chastity with these men, if chastity is defined as spiritual constancy. According to this definition, a woman may be forced by exceptional circumstances to surrender to other men but this does not mean she has lost her chastity. Kim Trọng makes the case for this revisionist concept of chastity when, finally united with Kiêu, he says to her:

Of all times, among the values observed by women
Chastity [*trinh*] by women must be understood in different ways
There are normal times and there are also exceptional circumstances
How could there be only one way of acting, how could there be only one rule?
In you, chastity [*trinh*] took the form of filial piety [*hiếu*],
No dust soiled you.⁶³

In these lines, CHTN Nha Trang says, “Kim Trọng moves chastity out of its conventionally physical context and places it in a purely moral context.”⁶⁴

Like Kiêu, Lê Vân acts rashly but not wantonly. For example, she knows her relationship with Người ấy is wrong, and it remains platonic. Kisses are mentioned, but nothing more. When Người ấy invites her to his house to meet his wife and children, he does so, she says, “because he wanted me to understand that he came to me with only my chastity [*trong trắng*], my extreme chastity at that time, in his mind.”⁶⁵ “I wonder,” Lê Vân muses in a letter to Người ấy, “why our feelings are so pure, not sullied by the slightest vulgarity.”⁶⁶ He is always worried, she says, that she would “lose my sense of self-worth” and become “a common, frivolous woman.”⁶⁷ And later, in Sài Gòn, she is shocked and repulsed when she realizes that directors are using

her to get invitations to dinner from wealthy men, some of whom are “hunting” for actresses to sleep with. One way the Wanderer endears himself to her is by saving her from having to ride to Vũng Tàu with a rich man from Hong Kong who has designs on her.

Lê Văn does betray Người ấy, a fact she freely admits, but one could make the case that in postponing any real commitment to her for ten long years he has no right to expect her faithfulness.⁶⁸ He tells her that her “fall into debauchery” with the Wanderer is only a temporary lapse. She says, however, that he does not understand that “at that time I was in the *tenth year* of a tortuous love relationship and was living a stagnant, quiet life” (her emphasis).⁶⁹ It is not clear whether during their relationship Lê Văn expected Người ấy to divorce his wife (as he eventually did) or whether she envisioned some sort of “second wife” or “unofficial wife” relationship with him. She describes her relationship with Người ấy as having been “heavy with wife-husband significance.” “She [Người ấy’s wife] was the wife during the day,” she says. “I was the wife at night. He was the husband of us both.”⁷⁰ Polygyny might be illegal in Vietnam, but the persistence of polygynous texts may have led Lê Văn to hope that she could be a “little wife” of Người ấy. Adding credence to this possibility is the fact that before he had said anything about divorcing his wife she told him she wanted to have a child with him. He refused and kept pushing her toward other men.⁷¹ These were, she admits, the only things about him that she resented.⁷²

Though she wishes to have children with Người ấy, Lê Văn deeply regrets the pain she causes his wife. In her next-to-last chapter, Lê Văn explains how her relationship with Người ấy, which has allowed her to become acquainted with his wife, enables her to understand what a wife suffers when she fears she will have to share or lose her husband. In this chapter Lê Văn moves from pity for herself, to pity for Người ấy’s wife, to pity for all those who share the unhappy fate of being women. This chapter begins and ends with this line from *The Tale of Kiều*: “What woman, though, would gladly share her man?”⁷³ The speaker of this line is Hoạn Thư, the wife of the businessman Thúc Sinh, who is overcome with jealousy when her husband takes Kiều as a second wife. How should we interpret Lê Văn’s choice of Hoạn Thư’s line as title/epigraph and coda for this chapter? Is she using it to express sympathetic understanding of her rival, to say, “I understand why Người ấy’s wife acted

the way she did. No woman likes to share her husband”? Or to defend herself, to say: “Don’t blame me. All’s fair in love and war. No woman likes to share the man she loves, even if he is married to someone else”? I believe she intends to express sympathy, to decry the fate of all women, which places her and her rival in an impossible situation. Other comments in this same chapter add support to this interpretation; she states that she and Người ấy’s wife are unfortunate women and that women need not to accept their fate, but to make fate follow them (see my section titled “Romance and Fate”). Her attempt at sisterly solidarity, however, like Hoạn Thư’s (who treats her rival, Kiều, terribly), has a hollow ring. It is undercut by the irony, insufficiently acknowledged, of Lê Vân’s situation: she rails against women’s fate, but by choosing to continue meeting with Người ấy she causes another woman to suffer.

There is also the fact that she becomes pregnant with Abraham’s child while married to the Wanderer. Probably no definition of chastity, even a much revised one, could be summoned to justify this behavior. She simply says she grew tired of the Wanderer leaving all the big jobs to her, of his refusing to do the things that she thinks men should do. “The Vietnamese woman was expected to serve the lives of the men who supposedly gave her security and support,” CHTN Nha Trang observes. “It was considered a fair exchange.”⁷⁴ There were mutual obligations in all three of the Confucian bonds: king-subject, parent-child, and husband-wife. Because Lê Vân feels her father failed to live up to his fatherly responsibilities, she feels less pressured to act like a filially pious daughter. Because she feels the Wanderer failed to act like a man and deal with “external affairs,” she feels less pressured to be a faithful wife. Her frustration with the Wanderer’s “unmanly” behavior increases the attractiveness of Abraham’s “broad and strong shoulders” [*bờ vai rộng rãi khỏe mạnh*]. Leaning her head on them, she feels that she can become the housewife and mother she yearns to be.⁷⁵

Lê Vân’s zeal to “be a Vietnamese woman and perform the correct domestic functions in the home” may have been strengthened by a movement to redomesticate women, which culture managers in post-Renovation Vietnam hoped would serve as an antidote to social evils brought on by the turn to a market economy.⁷⁶ I consider this possibility in the next section.

The Four Virtues

In traditional Vietnam the cardinal feminine virtue of chastity was bolstered by a system of concepts and virtues summed up in the four-syllable expression *Tam tòng tứ đức* [Three Submissions, Four Virtues]. The system evoked by this expression is spelled out in *Song on Family Education* [*Gia huấn ca*], a verse guide for feminine conduct usually attributed to Nguyễn Trãi (1380–1442). According to the Three Submissions, women must be submissive to their fathers before marriage, to their husbands when married, and to their oldest son if they outlive their husband. The Four Virtues were *công* [diligence], *dung* [physical grace], *ngôn* [deferential speech], and *hạnh* [faithfulness, proper conduct]. The shorthand expression *Tam tòng tứ đức*, which sums up proper behavior for women, is often discussed in conjunction with the expression *Tam cương ngũ thường* [Three Bonds, Five Principles], which is seen as summing up proper male behavior, though women were also supposed to observe the rules it indicates.⁷⁷ The three bonds or relationships were king-subject, parent-child, and husband-wife; the five principles were benevolent love [*nhân*], righteousness [*ngĩa*], propriety [*lễ*], wisdom [*trí*], and faithfulness [*tín*].⁷⁸ These principles were to be observed in fulfilling the bonds. In the Confucian system all the key virtues were interlocked to produce a tightly knit structure. Daughters, for example, were to learn how to be loyal [*trung*] to king and submissive [*tòng*] to their husbands by being filially pious [*hiếu*] to their parents. This interrelatedness is captured in this advice to wives from *Song on Family Education*: “Even though you sleep intimately on the same bed and use the same cover with him, / You must treat your husband as if he were your king or your father.”⁷⁹

In modern Vietnam many reject the Three Submissions as old-fashioned and oppressive of women—an outdated vestige of feudal times—but the Four Virtues have had remarkable staying power. In the 1960s communist leaders attempted to masculinize the feminine virtues a little by promoting other numbered collections of virtues and responsibilities that de-emphasized women’s gentleness and encouraged them to show qualities and tackle jobs traditionally associated with men. There were the eight “golden” words (in Vietnamese, four compound words, eight syllables) first used by Hồ Chí Minh to praise southern women: *anh hùng, bất khuất, trung hậu, đảm đang* [heroic, indomitable, loyal, and resourceful]; and the Three Responsibilities

[*Ba đảm đang*]: take charge of agricultural and industrial production, manage the family, support soldiers at the front, and take up arms if necessary.⁸⁰ In the early 1970s, before the American War ended, however, the Women's Union became upset at city girls who talked loudly, used bad language, did not help their mothers with the housework, and acted in other unfeminine ways. The fear, Ashley Pettus explains, was that city girls were beginning to view gender equality not simply as a "component of collective national service" but as an escape from the rigid demands of a "patriarchal family culture."⁸¹ Pettus summarizes articles in *Vietnamese Woman* [*Phụ nữ Việt Nam*], the Women's Union newspaper, which encouraged women to seek some balance between "revolutionary ideals and traditional feminine qualities."⁸²

Since Renovation and the adoption of a market economy, the Women's Union has pushed the Four Virtues even more strenuously than it did in the early 1970s. Culture managers in modern socialist Vietnam have sought to retain these virtues, Pettus argues, as "an ethical-moral counter to the unruly forces of Western capitalism."⁸³ According to Pettus, the move to a market economy led to an increase in social evils—prostitution, drugs, excessive greed and money-mindedness—that disturbed party officials. The Women's Union in response launched a program to foster "civilized and cultured families" [*gia đình văn minh, văn hóa*]. Strings on the press were loosened so it could discuss what Pettus calls "the disease of immoderate female desire," which, party leaders felt, was leading women to neglect their duties in the home.⁸⁴ Women were becoming too independent, too money-driven. Women, they concluded, needed to be "re-traditionalized," which meant they had to be "re-domesticated."⁸⁵

The Four Virtues have figured prominently in this redomestication process, though they have required some updating. The Women's Union's position is that the traditional feminine virtues need to be simultaneously "preserved" [*kế thừa*] and "developed" [*phát huy*]. According to the Women's Union, one feature of these virtues that required development was the almost exclusive focus of these virtues on activities in the home. "Diligence" [*công*], for example, has been understood to apply to cooking, sewing, and house-keeping. "Work means cooking rice and cakes— / How neatly the virtuous woman sews and mends!" is the way it is defined in *Song on Family Education*.⁸⁶ In an article published in the journal *Social Science* [*Khoa học Xã hội*] in

1992, Phạm Thị Hảo says that “diligence” cannot be understood simply as housework; it must also include labor [*lao động*] outside the home in a chosen profession and in social service to the community.⁸⁷ As more and more women found work outside the home, however, culture managers worried that women were losing their feminine virtues. When an interviewer asked Nguyễn Thị Lập, head of the Women’s Union, whether she worried about women eating and talking noisily, she replied: “It’s not just being noisy. There’s even some women, when men eat at a bar [*ăn nhậu*], women eat too! And then there’s the problem of casual sex.”⁸⁸

Culture managers found themselves in a dilemma. They did not want to sound as if they were advocating the feudalistic idea that “Women should never exit the gates of the women’s quarters” [*Khuê môn bất xuất*], but they were disturbed by what they perceived as immoral behavior by women. This perception led them to a position regarding the Four Virtues that stressed “preservation” more than “development.” Nguyễn Thị Lập ends her interview by insisting that “the Four Virtues are important in all contexts, and women still must keep them constantly in mind.”⁸⁹ Women were to be redomesticated, but there should also be some “development” of the virtue of diligence. The “civilized and cultured family” campaign encouraged women to master not simply cooking and sewing but also modern scientific knowledge related to “proper nutrition, hygiene, birth control, marital ‘democracy’ and good parenting.”⁹⁰ In post-Renovation Vietnam, party leaders saw well-run nuclear families as being crucial to national development.

A problem faced by promoters of “civilized and cultured families” is that their campaign discouraged women from being entrepreneurial and money-minded at a time when families were struggling to make ends meet. As the country moved haltingly from a subsidy system to a market economy, government subsidies were decreasing. The state was getting out of the social welfare business, and the family was becoming the “de facto locus of social security and welfare.”⁹¹ Although opportunities for private commercial activity were increasing, not everyone was able to take advantage of them. Lê Văn never mentions attending a Women’s Union meeting or reading its publications, but she was clearly receiving its lessons on proper feminine behavior from Người ấy.⁹² When she waved her arms around when she talked, he

would tell her: “Don’t act like that, it scares me. It makes you look shrewish, fierce.” She writes: “Sometimes when I was talking about something and would raise my voice a little, he would tell me right away not to do that. He was really afraid of women who waved their arms around and spoke loudly.”⁹³ “He wanted to make me a model of a beautiful woman who was humane and upright and from a good family,” Lê Vân says. “I really wanted to be like that, too, but who would take care of me when mister government [*ông nhà nước*] wouldn’t take care of me anymore? There was nothing left to do but compete and hustle for work.” Lê Vân felt she could do this only by using her “manly characteristics” [*tính khí đàn ông*].⁹⁴

But Lê Vân does not like hustling for work. She does not like having to draw on her masculine side to survive economically. She wants to be “a proper wife: gentle and kind and devoted to her family, her husband, and her children.” She wants “the qualities of an Asian woman that I’ve been ‘soaked’ in since I don’t know when.”⁹⁵ But she finds it hard to realize the traditional feminine ideal and advance herself economically in the half-subsidy-half-market economy period.⁹⁶ She has to find economic security, not just for herself, but also for her family. She clarifies, “When I say I have to do the work of a man I’m talking about family economics, which I’m responsible for.”⁹⁷ Lê Vân worries about defeminizing herself but finds it necessary, in part, because she is surrounded by emasculated men—her father, her first lover, and the Wanderer. Neither her father nor Người ấy can support their own families adequately. Người ấy, whom Lê Vân calls “an authentic artist, who didn’t have the slightest ability to survive in the market place,” admits to her that she is better at economics than he is.⁹⁸ Her husband, the Wanderer, has a tour business but cannot compete with better-run agencies, so he ends up hanging out in cafes, doing nothing. He suggests that Lê Vân augment their income by opening a restaurant.

Pettus suggests that the campaign to redomesticate women was fueled by men’s fears of emasculating, money-driven women. Articles in the government media about avaricious wives, she says, sent the following message to middle-class women: redomesticate your identity or your marriage will be in trouble.⁹⁹ Lê Vân’s husband, the Wanderer, however, wants her to be *more* avaricious. “When the whole country was going into private business,” she explains, “the movement among artists in the south to take advantage of

their fame to make money was developing in a frightening way,” and the Wanderer “joined the bandwagon.” But Lê Văn resists. Their disagreement over whether she should take advantage of her fame to make money was, she realizes, “a deep underlying cause of why I could not live with him.”¹⁰⁰

Her refusal to become more mercenary stems in part from her conception of what it means to be an artist. She finds it degrading to dance at feasts and banquets where people in the audience, busy eating and drinking, do not give the performers their full attention. “Many true artists would rather be poor than humiliated,” she comments.¹⁰¹ She rules out other commercial ventures as well: “I couldn’t make money by showing my face everywhere as I would have to if I opened a restaurant or a bar, or started a business like a clothing shop, or did anything that involved serving customers.”¹⁰² She has no objection to house-renting, however, which she feels is a more discrete way of making money. The Wanderer provides the money and they build a house for themselves and her family on Thụy Khuê Street; then, using this house as collateral, they borrow money to build a house in the West Lake area, which they rent. This rent money enables Lê Văn to “untie herself” [*tự “cởi trói” cho mình*]—to achieve financial independence, a matter of great pride to her.¹⁰³ She admits that “the amount he [the Wanderer] contributed at the start was large,” but strangely this fact does not stop her from boasting about how she “untied herself”—saved herself, all by herself, from financial distress.¹⁰⁴

Lê Văn’s refusal to take commercial advantage of her fame—her search for a more discrete way of making money—probably stems not just from her feelings about art but also from an older and more widespread resistance to private trading in Vietnamese culture. Both Confucianism and socialism encouraged people to believe that private selling was morally suspect.¹⁰⁵ In traditional Vietnam merchants were last—after scholars, farmers, and craftsmen—in the Confucian hierarchy of occupations. The belief that women were “ministers of the interior” made many wives reluctant to invade the masculine space of business outside the home. While it is true that Vietnamese women, like women all over Southeast Asia, have been market traders for centuries, such trading was considered to be an acceptable extension of their domestic duties. Vietnamese women, however, have always known that their trading [*buôn bán*] was not going to help them achieve gender equality.

“Even though you trade from east to west,” says a folk poem, “this is not equal to the breath your husband breathes out.”¹⁰⁶ In Vietnam before Renovation, men and women were to achieve gender equality by working together in state factories and cooperatives. Intellectuals and artists could not sell their talents to the highest bidder; they worked for a state agency and received a government salary. In socialist Vietnam private sellers of goods or services were, as Pettus says, “a morally suspect group.”¹⁰⁷ If they ventured to another town to buy and sell, they were called smugglers.¹⁰⁸ When Renovation was first launched it became more socially acceptable for women to enter business. But soon Hà Nội culture managers, who worried that women were neglecting their domestic duties, launched the campaign to redomesticate them. In launching this campaign they knew they could appeal to older beliefs, both Confucian and socialist, about the importance of limiting the economic ambitions of women.

Lê Vân probably embraces her domestic duties enthusiastically for a mix of political and personal reasons. No doubt the government’s healthy families campaign and its attacks on money-hungry women influenced her somewhat, but one senses that her feeling that her own parents had failed in their domestic duties played a larger role. When she becomes a mother she is determined to do better than they had. By attacking her father, however, she is hardly a model of *ngôn* [deferential speech], and by betraying two lovers she fails to demonstrate *hạnh* [faithfulness, proper conduct]. Lê Vân feels free to pick and choose among the traditional virtues.

Sacrifice

Hy sinh [sacrifice]! No word in Vietnamese is more closely associated with womanhood. According to both Confucian and socialist ideals, everyone—men and women—should subordinate their needs to the good of the community, but Vietnamese have always considered women to be better sacrificers than men. *Hy sinh*, like the English word “sacrifice,” suggests a forfeiture of something highly valued for something of an even higher value. The Vietnamese word also connotes endurance [*chịu đựng*] and faithfulness [*chung thủy*], and in descriptions of the traditional Vietnamese woman one frequently encounters some combination of these three compound words. Many things might require a woman to make sacrifices—poverty, wars, and

natural disasters, for example, or a cruel mother-in-law, or an unreasonable and/or philandering husband.

The sacrifice of women is glorified in stories, poems, and songs about women who stay home and take care of the children, cultivate the rice fields, and tend to their husbands' aging parents while the husband is off defending the nation from foreign invaders.¹⁰⁹ There are also stories and songs about women who waited so long for their husbands that they and the child they were holding turned into stone—an image referred to as “waiting-for-husband rock” [*hòn vọng phu*].¹¹⁰ The women in these “waiting-for-husband” stories make sacrifices and demonstrate faithfulness. Often these virtues are linked to war and patriotism because sacrificing and faithful wives allow husbands to go off to war confident that their wives will take care of the home front.

Even if their husbands are not away defending the country, Vietnamese women are still expected to make sacrifices. In her research in northern Vietnam in the 1990s Tine Gammeltoft found that women sacrificed their own health and happiness to keep their families happy. In explaining their reasons they quoted the proverb “The *chuoí* fish sacrifices itself for its children.”¹¹¹ (The *chuoí* fish, Gammeltoft explains, plays dead so that fisherman will take it and leave its children alone.) Traditional texts indicate that sacrifice is required of women even if their husbands are drinkers, gamblers, or philanderers. These texts advise women to tolerate their husband's vices in order to preserve family harmony. In a folk poem a wife says: “I advise you, my husband, to stay away from gambling / Though you can please yourself with wine and with women.”¹¹² Gambling, drinking, and chasing other women were all vices, CHTN Nha Trang explains, but wine and women hurt only a man's reputation; gambling, on the other hand, could ruin the family. For a traditional Vietnamese woman “the well being of her family was more important than her own personal feelings, which would certainly be hurt by her husband's indulgence with other women.”¹¹³ Duong suggests that the Vietnamese woman is a product of a culture that “prioritizes the good of the community before all other concerns, including gender issues,” and so she “ultimately seeks consensus building with her male counterpart, instead of adversarial competition for a place in society. . . . The tendency to belittle individual needs pre-conditions women to think of family needs as superior

to their own, and causes them to view the adoption of a gender-equality doctrine as a selfish act.”¹¹⁴

There are some signs, however, that Vietnamese women are growing tired of sacrificing. In *Images of Vietnamese Women on the Threshold of the Twenty-first Century* [*Hình ảnh người Phụ nữ Việt Nam trước thềm thế kỷ XXI*], Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết wonders why “Vietnamese men are so comfortable about being men while women are always the victims of all kinds of stereotypes, and, at the same time, are pampered and cherished in their role as the inspiration for literary and artistic creation.”¹¹⁵ Duong, who lives in the United States, is more blunt: “Must the Vietnamese female identity always be marked by self-sacrificing martyrdom or immortality?” she asks. Her conclusion: “The self-sacrifice that once helped attain national independence is counterproductive in today’s environment where political agendas do not always serve the public good. Self-sacrifice by women only perpetuates the ‘slave-master’ formula.”¹¹⁶

Lê Vân is not quite as straightforward as Duong, but in the chapter in which she criticizes her father—in a paragraph immediately following one in which she mentions her father’s adulteries (“After one woman was gone another would come . . .”)—she says this: “To get through life many women feign blindness, click their tongues, and with a fine spirit of sacrifice, but also with a little stupidity, accept a contract: If you provide enough for the children to eat and to go to school, I will accept your adulteries. I don’t understand how or when this capacity to ‘swallow a bitter pill’ [*ngậm bồ hòn làm ngọt*]¹¹⁷—to endure shame and accept sacrifice [*hy sinh*]¹¹⁸—became the quality in Vietnamese women that is always praised.”

Lê Vân reveals in this passage that she is aware that the praise bestowed on women for their sacrifices, and women’s uncritical acceptance of that praise—their enjoyment of this “pampering and cherishing,” to use Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết’s words—contributes to their subjugation.¹¹⁸ Only when women are old, Lê Vân says, do they question the value of sacrifice:

The fate of women in general truly does have a lot of bitter aspects. From the time women marry, their lives take on many heavy burdens. No one forces them. It seems that they volunteer. Volunteer to work hard and sacrifice so they can hear the pure laughter of their young children. Volunteer to endure silently when they know their husbands are ungrateful so that they

can see the family harmonious and united. Volunteer to exhaust themselves to raise a family, because when anyone in the family is ridiculed, the whole family suffers [*xấu chàng hổ ai*]. Volunteer to endure every loss in order to grasp the word “happiness.” But the irony is that after all this self-sacrifice [*sự hy sinh đức quên mình*], all they see is misfortune. It turns out the warm nest is not real and they discreetly hide their shattered hearts. Only when their hair is speckled with gray, when their husband has left them, when their children are also all gone (because children never cry for us as we cried for them)—only then do women wake up from their dream and say to themselves: So this is what self-sacrifice is all about?¹¹⁹

In these two passages on sacrifice Lê Văn does not criticize women for sacrificing. She herself says that after her children were born, she herself would “volunteer” and “sacrifice all the remaining days of [her] life for [her] two children.”¹²⁰ She faults women not for sacrificing but rather for being unaware of the texts—the cultural codes relating to sacrifice—that entrap them and force them to sacrifice much more than men. She faults them for lacking a feminist consciousness. “Many times,” she says right after the passage just quoted, “I just want to cry out, to scream: ‘Women, be brave, look directly at the truth.’”¹²¹ Lê Văn’s apparent inconsistency—her chiding of women for tolerating adultery when she herself has been involved in adulterous affairs—becomes more understandable and less inconsistent when we realize that Lê Văn wishes to inculcate a feminist consciousness within Vietnamese women. If you have an adulterous husband, a husband who is ungrateful for your sacrifices, she seems to be saying, then divorce him and find a better one. Unshackle yourself from all the texts that constrain women. Lê Văn pities herself and other women, but because she also believes women are a “little stupid” to keep sacrificing for husbands who aren’t worth the trouble, she is not going to shed any crocodile tears for them. Having jettisoned two men whom she found inadequate, Lê Văn has certainly practiced what she preaches.

One response to Lê Văn’s autobiography illustrates how praise for women’s capacity for sacrifice can be skillfully applied to block the rise of a feminist consciousness. Lê Văn, Phạm Ngọc Vân argues, “harshly and wrongly denounces those women who compromise, who allow their husbands to have ‘girlfriends’ [*bồ*] in order to preserve the family for their children. But when she is a mother, she becomes less heated, saying: “Truly I vow to do

everything I can to keep their father for them because I want my two children to live peacefully in the love of a family in which the father and mother get along and are happy.”¹²² This vow, he says, proves that Lê Vân is willing to make the same sacrifices all Vietnamese women make. “She deserves to feel happy,” he says, “about the very significant dedication [*dâng hiến*] that she is making.”¹²³ And so the cycle repeats: women sacrifice, they are praised for their sacrifice, and this praise leaves them uncertain about whether to question the value and fairness of their sacrifice. And so Vietnamese women continue to “volunteer” to sacrifice themselves.

Triangulation

In the passage Phạm Ngọc Vân quoted, where Lê Vân says women volunteer all their lives for the good of the family—there is no mention of sacrificing for the nation. This omission marks her as typical of a generation of women who entered adulthood in the late seventies and early eighties. Pettus found that this “transition generation”—postwar but pre-Renovation—was more concerned about the welfare of their families and less concerned about the welfare of the nation. For women of the older, revolutionary generation, domestic duty and heroic sacrifice for the nation were more closely related. These older women still clung to their revolutionary idealism.¹²⁴ In contrast, Lê Vân’s generation was more disillusioned. When they came of age, the American War was over, so they saw less need for heroic sacrifice. Before Renovation the economy was failing, and then, as reforms were implemented, many people lost their subsidies. Unless they had husbands who adapted well to a market economy, women—including Lê Vân—had to “untie” [*cởi trói*] themselves from government support and figure out some way to help themselves and their families. “Mister government,” as Lê Vân calls the state, wasn’t taking care of them anymore, so he was less important to their lives.

The market economy did create new opportunities for women. Fearing that women were becoming too enthusiastic about commercial activity outside the home, party leaders launched the “civilized and cultured family” campaign previously described. Party leaders promoted healthy and happy families as being crucial to the welfare of the country, and women were seen as crucial to the welfare of the family. Women were positioned, Gammeltoft

writes, as “a triangulating category which mediates between family and nation, bearing special responsibilities for both.”¹²⁵ Slogans such as “A happy family, a wealthy country” [*Gia đình hạnh phúc, đất nước phồn vinh*] and “Good at national tasks, good at household tasks” [*Giỏi việc nước đảm việc nhà*] placed women as the “mediator[s] and supporter[s]” between the two “analogically related categories” of family and nation.¹²⁶

Gammeltoft suggests that this image of women as a triangulating category began with socialism, but it has a longer history. It can be traced to those myths of matriarchy discussed above. In a chapter titled “Myths and Reality” in her book, Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết summarizes the myths that have developed surrounding the achievements of famous Vietnamese mothers. She begins with Âu Cơ, the fairy of the mountains, who married Lạc Long Quân, the dragon king of the sea, and gave birth to the first king of Văn Lang, the first kingdom of the Vietnamese. “The Vietnamese mother first appears,” Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết emphasizes, “in the historic action of creating the [Vietnamese] race-nation [*dân tộc*].”¹²⁷ The identification of womanhood with a nation and a people begins, in Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết’s view, with this founding myth. “No place else is the concept of ‘Mother Country’ as correct as it is in Vietnam,” she writes. “When people on this piece of land, young and old alike, from every historical era, speak of the origin of the race-nation [*dân tộc*], they refer to the creative role of the mother Âu Cơ.”¹²⁸ There is no greater example of female agency than this act of birthing the nation, Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết seems to be saying.

Confucianism also encouraged the triangulation of which Gammeltoft speaks. As Tương Lai points out, Confucianism emphasized interpersonal relationships in three communities: home, country, and world. “Of these three communities, he continues, “the home was the fundamental location because ‘The country originates in the home’ [*quốc chi bản tại gia*], but “in the view of Confucian scholars, home, country, and world—when considered in terms of structure—did not differ in essence; they differed only in scale, especially home and country. Therefore family morality was also the morality that controlled all relationships in society.”¹²⁹ Because women were ministers of the interior with primary responsibility for child rearing, they played an important mediating role between family and country.

The traditional female virtues, however, stressed loyalty to family over loyalty to country and highlighted women's domestic, not their national, responsibilities. The Four Virtues, for example, assumed that women were homebound. Therefore, communist revolutionaries, eager to involve women in the fight for national independence, had to get women to place national priorities over domestic ones. One can think of this challenge facing revolutionaries as a need to alter the triangle of family, women, and nation by replacing family with socialism. That women should leave the home and work with men was in line with Marxist-Leninism, which emphasized that both women and men were workers. In communist ideology class was more important than gender.¹³⁰

In the late sixties and early seventies, however, culture managers decided that this class-based approach to woman's liberation was defeminizing women, causing them to abandon the traditional feminine virtues (see section titled "The Four Virtues"). After Renovation they feared the market economy was having a similar effect. Because womanhood, traditionally defined, is considered a national essence, party leaders periodically find it necessary to redomesticate women in order to prevent this essence from evaporating. In this process, researchers such as Duong and Pettus argue, women's freedoms are curtailed, their agency stifled, and true gender equality is put beyond their reach.

Lê Vân says she does not understand "how or when women's capacity to endure shame and accept sacrifice became the quality in Vietnamese women that is always praised."¹³¹ It seems clear that placing women in a triangulating category mediating between nation and family is part of the reason. To stop sacrificing means to risk being labeled unpatriotic. "It is difficult to turn down the noble call of patriotism in time of national crisis," Duong points out, but in responding to this call women lose what she considers to be their womanhood. "Using nationalism to make women into self-sacrificing martyrs," Duong argues, "can be the ultimate destruction of womanhood, portraying women as slaves to their love for their country."¹³² Pettus makes a similar point: "The more the party praised the brave and selfless contributions of mothers and wives and daughters to the national cause, the more the Vietnamese woman's prescribed qualities took the form of a national obligation that would secure her subjugation in the new nation."¹³³

It is no doubt easier for Lê Văn to call women who keep sacrificing “a little stupid”; when she came to adulthood the country was poor but not threatened by domination by foreign powers. Thus she faced less risk of being labeled unpatriotic for questioning the value of sacrifice. And when she was still in her twenties she saw people in positions of power—film directors and party leaders, for example—cutting their own deals in the new market economy. Seeing one’s superiors hell-bent on personal aggrandizement lessens one’s enthusiasm for sacrifice. But even in the new social and economic environment of post-Renovation Vietnam, it still takes considerable courage to question a feminine virtue as sacred and time-honored as sacrifice. In post-Renovation Vietnam, cultural managers and artists—the majority of them men—have continued to focus on women to define, and, in some cases, implement, their political views. This makes it difficult for women to step out of their role as mediator between family and nation.¹³⁴ Turned into symbols of the nation’s victories or blamed for its problems, Vietnamese women have found it difficult to create space for a discussion of women’s issues.

Romance and Fate

Lê Văn frequently evokes texts related to romantic love and fate to explain and justify her actions. It is difficult to disentangle these two concepts. They are usually intertwined in Vietnamese texts, as they are in these well-known lines from *The Tale of Kiều*: “Fate has set this man on my path of life / Will any bond unite our destinies for a hundred years?”¹³⁵ Kiều utters these lines when her heart is aflutter after she and Kim Trọng meet for the first time. Despite the difficulty of separating romantic love and fate, I will discuss each separately but also point out how they are often brought together (often only to be opposed) in expressions such as *tình duyên* [predestined love], *tình nghĩa* [dutiful love], *tình yêu vợ chồng* [wife-husband love], and *tình nghĩa vợ chồng* [wife-husband duty].

ROMANTIC LOVE

Vietnamese ideas regarding romantic love are expressed in and shaped by folk poetry, or *ca dao*. They have also been influenced by French romanticism as expressed by Alphonse de Lamartine, Victor Hugo, Alfred Musset, Alfred De Vigny, Alexandre Dumas fils, and other French writers. The

so-called New Poetry [Thơ Mới] of the 1930s and 1940s produced by Xuân Diệu, Huy Cận, Lưu Trọng Lư, Thế Lữ, and others, was heavily influenced by French romantic poets. Early Vietnamese novels, including Hoàng Ngọc Phách's famous *Pure Heart* [*Tổ tâm*] (1925), were influenced by the European sentimental love novel—works such as Lamartine's *Graziella*, Rousseau's *Julie*, and Dumas fils's *Camille*.¹³⁶ These novels, both European and Vietnamese, typically feature hopeless and unfulfilled love relationships.

Sentimental tales of impossible love are still popular in Vietnam, and Lê Vân, who falls for a man already married to a woman she respects, sounds like a heroine from one of these tales when she describes her relationship with Người ấy. "I was always aware," she says, "that this love was wrong, and that I was the guilty one because I intentionally threw myself into a love affair with a man who had a family."¹³⁷ Lê Vân tries to create a romantic world consisting of just the two of them. She shuns her friends and meets Người ấy in the shadows. "*I loved truly and deified that love [with Người ấy];*" Lê Vân says. "*Not only for me but also for him our difficult and contrary love was a romanticization [một sự lãng mạn hóa], a way to escape from the stifling world we lived in. We were so romantic we thought our love for each other was enough*" (italics in original).¹³⁸

Loving and Living, however, is certainly not a traditional tale of unfulfilled love. Even before she escapes stifling Hà Nội and enters the freer atmosphere of Sài Gòn, Lê Vân expresses some impatience with the "purity" of their relationship. The question arises as to whether their relationship should be kept pure and unfulfilled, or be allowed to become less pure but more fulfilled. Người ấy prefers, at least at first, the unfulfilled option. He says he is concerned for Lê Vân's "purity" and declines to have a child with her.¹³⁹ Lê Vân sees the appeal of the "romantic" route, but doesn't think she can "stop there." Here is how she describes her dilemma in a letter to her older lover:

I wonder why our feelings are so pure, not sullied by the slightest vulgarity. I'm even a little too "romantic" [*lãng mạn*; quotation marks in original] in thinking that we will have a feeling like this forever, with no need to . . . without demanding that we must . . . and I also think of you in that way. You also like to keep things vague . . . with no need to arrive at anything. I didn't expect that you would make me unable to stop there. Each day I love you more, become closer to you [author's ellipses].¹⁴⁰

In Vietnamese texts both male and female characters have to make difficult choices between love [*tình yêu*] and duty [*tình nghĩa*], and in Vietnam's family-oriented, collectivist society, duty usually wins, hence the many sad stories of unfulfilled love. Unforeseen circumstances arise, and characters, like Kiều in *The Tale of Kiều*, must “bow” to them and marry for duty, not to fulfill their individual desires.¹⁴¹ Men trapped in dutiful but loveless marriages, however, have always had an escape, provided they had a kind wife willing to sacrifice in order to maintain family harmony: they have been able to have concubines, second wives, lovers. Women traditionally have had no such outlet, and so if they were trapped in a loveless marriage, the only kind of “romantic love” [*tình yêu*] available to them was the unfulfilled variety. If a secret love, even an unfulfilled one, were discovered, it would still bring disaster down on the woman's head.

In Vietnamese texts, *tình* [feeling or love] is often placed in opposition to *nghĩa* [duty].¹⁴² One speaks of a couple marrying for *tình* but staying together because of *nghĩa*. In a similar way the expression “*tình yêu vợ chồng*” [wife-husband love; literally, feeling love wife husband] may be placed in opposition to the expression “*tình nghĩa vợ chồng*” [wife-husband duty; literally, feeling duty wife husband]. In these four-syllable expressions “*tình yêu*” refers to love and “*tình nghĩa*” to duty. Lê Văn is a romantic because she refuses to accept a relationship from which all the love has evaporated, leaving only a dull and passionless duty behind. Speaking of her relationship with Abraham, Lê Văn says that she “doesn't worry about either of them becoming unfaithful”; she worries only that “life will become tedious and boring and will no longer have the warm feeling and passion of the early days.” She agrees that “a life of wife-husband duty [*tình nghĩa vợ chồng*] is right, is good,” but, she says, “Suppose you can keep alive the passion and sparkle of the time when you fell in love. Isn't that better?”¹⁴³ “Living with each other just to live, without the romantic highs of love—that is what frightens me!”¹⁴⁴ In one interview, Lê Văn reiterates this point: “It's great for a husband and wife to live with each other until the end of their lives,” she says, “but to live with each other so that it's not just a dutiful wife-husband relationship [*tình nghĩa vợ chồng*] but is a loving wife-husband relationship [*tình yêu vợ chồng*]*—that is what is truly worthy of respect.*”¹⁴⁵

What Lê Vân fears is that her relationship with Abraham will become loveless like the relationship between her mother and father. Lê Vân believes that too many women, including her own mother, have endured loveless relationships, accepting some version of that contract that Lê Vân despises: the husband gets his adulteries, the wife and children get financial support. Lê Mai, Lê Vân's mother, tells an interviewer that she and her husband once loved each other so much that they gave their daughters names incorporating both their family names (Trần and Lê).¹⁴⁶ "We loved each other that much," Lê Mai, says, "but when you don't love each other anymore that's just the way it is. You just have to accept your predestined partner and the tie/debt [*duyên nợ*]."¹⁴⁷ Lê Vân, however, decides that is not the way it will be for her. She refuses to accept the contract. She recognizes that when terms like "*tình nghĩa*" [dutiful love] or "*duyên nợ*" [predestined tie/debt] are used to describe a relationship they become just other names for self-sacrifice by the woman.¹⁴⁸

FATE

Both Vietnamese men and women believe in fate more strongly than do most Westerners, which is to say they believe their lives will evolve according to a predestined plan, which they can modify in only limited ways. This belief in fate stems partly from the Buddhist notion of present lives being influenced by previous ones, partly from the Sino-Vietnamese belief that the heavens determine one's character and abilities, and partly from ideas found in Sino-Vietnamese astrological texts.¹⁴⁹ Hue-Tam Ho Tai argues that fate in Vietnamese culture is a gendered concept: women and men have different attitudes regarding fate. Many Vietnamese share the popular belief that the opposing forces of destiny [*mệnh*] and talent [*tài*] shape people's lives, Hue-Tam Ho Tai writes, but a woman believes her life "depends on forces that are deemed to be beyond her powers to alter," whereas a man believes that he "can make the most of what assets destiny has handed out to him through the sheer exertion of his will, his intelligence, his efforts."¹⁵⁰

Texts like *The Tale of Kiều*, in which talented women are said to be doomed to misfortune, would appear to support Hue-Tam Ho Tai's distinction. "A hundred years—in this life span on earth / talent and destiny are apt to feud," the poem begins. So far no mention of women, but then comes the

third couplet: “Is it so strange that losses balance gains? / Blue Heaven’s wont to strike a rose from spite.”¹⁵¹ A rose, the flower and the color, refers to women, who are described as “rosy-faced” [*hồng nhan*], a phrase linked to “unlucky fate” [*bạc mệnh*] in the four-syllable expression “The rosy-faced will suffer an unlucky fate” [*hồng nhan bạc mệnh*]. After Kiều writes out a sad account of her life for him, Thúc sinh cites this expression, calling it a rule that “has held since ages out of mind.”¹⁵²

In Vietnamese texts, all people—male or female, talented or not—are subject to fate. And talent can bring on a certain amount of disaster for men as well as for women. But men, according to Hue-Tam Ho Tai, are more confident that they can achieve some control over fate to achieve their objectives; the link between talent and misfortune is stronger for women than it is for men. It is so strong, in fact, that the triangle “talent-women-misfortune” is as pervasive in the Vietnamese tradition as the triangle of “family-women-nation.”

Lê Văn is clearly influenced by texts related to fate, but her attitude toward fate is not easy to determine. There are places in *Loving and Living* where Lê Văn bemoans her own fate. I have noted how her own pain leads her to pity herself and to sympathize with Người ấy’s wife and “with the fate of those unfortunate [*số phận bất hạnh*] like me: women.”¹⁵³ In her autobiography, as in many Vietnamese texts, the words “fate” [*số phận*] and “misfortune” [*bất hạnh*] regularly collate with the words “woman” or “women” [*đàn bà*]. Lê Văn uses the word “misfortune” [*bất hạnh*] often in describing her mother, as in this sentence: “In the chain of misfortunes in my mother’s life, each misfortune was terrible, but regarding women’s fate [*phận đàn bà*] there is no misfortune greater than an unsuccessful marriage.”¹⁵⁴

Lê Văn and her mother, like many Vietnamese, believe that fate plays a major—if not a definitive—role in determining whom one marries, and so if the marriage fails, fate gets the blame. The phrase *duyên nợ* [predestined love tie, or debt], which Lê Văn’s mother uses to explain her failed marriage, links fate and marriage, as do the similar terms *tình duyên* or *nhân duyên* [predestined love], and *tình duyên trắc trở* [predestined love tie in trouble, i.e., a troubled marriage].¹⁵⁵ *Duyên* for some Vietnamese, particularly when used in the compound word *nhân duyên*, evokes the Buddhist notion of cause and effect.¹⁵⁶ *Duyên* for many Vietnamese evokes the story of the marriage god,

Ông Tô [Mr. Spinner of Silk Threads], who sits in the shadow of the moon and plays the role of cosmic matchmaker. When he rubs two threads together, the two people represented by those threads will marry. All these expressions with *duyên* link love and marriage to fate.

Astrological texts help Lê Vân understand and explain the role that she believes fate has played in her mother's life and in her own. After cataloguing all her mother's woes, Lê Vân says, "Now maybe my mother understands why she was born under the heavenly stem *mậu*. It was my mother's fate [*số kiếp mẹ*] to be sad and lonely [*cô quả*].¹⁵⁷ Lonely at a young age, married to a young husband who didn't know how to take care of the family, which was like not being married at all, and lonely up until old age. . . ."¹⁵⁸ *Mậu* is one of the ten heavenly stems [*thiên can*], which in the lunar calendar are matched with twelve animals to create a sixty-year cycle, a unit of time that can be compared to the century in the solar calendar. In Lê Vân's interpretation, being born under the *mậu* stem predestines one to a sad and lonely life.

Lê Vân was born under the same heavenly stem as her mother. In her book she says this explains why she became a dancer, but one with those "male characteristics" that she feels helped her achieve financial independence: "My horoscope dictated that I'd be a dancer, that I'd be involved completely in artistic work, though I didn't want to, didn't love it. A woman but a manly woman, one with male characteristics, I myself supported myself [*thân lập thân*]; I didn't depend on anyone."¹⁵⁹ Lê Vân also says her horoscope explains why she has had trouble in her emotional life [*trắc trở trong đường tình cảm*].¹⁶⁰ In one interview she suggests that her horoscope predestined her, as it has her mother, to lead a sad and lonely life: "Being born under the [heavenly stem] *Mậu* means you will be sad and lonely [*cô quả*]. If you marry, you have to marry late before it will be tranquil [*yên bề*], and wife and husband will have to live far away from each other in terms of geography . . ."¹⁶¹ [ellipsis in original]. Now, sitting here and remembering, I think that's true. I believe that 'Parents give birth to their children, but the heavens give birth to their character' [*Cha mẹ sinh con, trời sinh tính*]."¹⁶²

In parts of *Loving and Living*, however, Lê Vân makes clear that she believes women should not blame fate for all the calamities they face. She finds other causes for her mother's "chain of misfortunes," including some bad decisions. Her parents married young, possibly because they had to.

She says that her father once used the folk expression “to eat before the gong sounds” [*Ăn cơm trước kêng*] to refer to the time her mother was pregnant with her. “Mistakes they made in their married life led to a series of disturbances and disagreements,” Lê Văn says, “that brought about a whole chain of misfortunes.”¹⁶³ Poverty and war also contributed to the misfortunes—as did politics: Lê Văn’s mother lost her job during a crackdown on artists associated with the Humanities and Masterpieces [*Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm*] movement.¹⁶⁴ Lê Mai’s father, Lê Văn’s grandfather, participated in this movement.

When Lê Văn brings up her horoscope toward the end of the book, when she is living happily with Abraham, she considers it to be not a sentence but a challenge, particularly when she discusses being predestined to have trouble in her emotional life. She decides that she has to work hard to nourish their love and thereby avoid the fate indicated in her horoscope. This involves cleaning the house before Abraham returns as an act not of duty but of love. It involves worrying not about getting rich but about making their relationship rich in love. (“Many families break up because everyone is busy trying to get rich,” she says.) It means watering and pruning the tree of love so it doesn’t die.¹⁶⁵ In other words, it involves doing all those things that she believes her parents failed to do.

Interestingly, as a result of Lê Văn’s less passive and—if we accept Hue-Tam Ho Tai’s distinction—more masculine approach to fate, she extols the kind of femininity advocated by the Women’s Union cadre. She warns against greed and extols domesticity as if she were an advocate for the “civilized and cultured family” campaign. Lê Văn makes clear, however, that she had other options, that she could have been a business woman but has freely chosen to become domesticated. She insists at the end of her autobiography that she has always desired to be gentle and kind, to have those “qualities of an Asian woman” that she has been “soaked” in all her life.¹⁶⁶ Only a few pages previous to this comment, however, she tries to get women to question the value of self-sacrifice, traditionally one of the key feminine virtues.¹⁶⁷ Immediately after that passage about self-sacrifice comes this one in which she urges women not simply to make the most of their fate but to make fate follow them: “Often I just want to scream: Women, be brave. Look directly at the truth. Don’t accept that which is called fate [*số phận*]. We must have sufficient strength so that fate has to follow us. We must have enough intelligence

so we aren't lulled to sleep by fate and led into a valley of tears and suffering [bể đời trâm luân khổ ái]. We must have a kind-enough heart [thiện tâm] to soften even the cruelest and worst of people . . . Oh Women, Oh . . ." [ellipses in original].¹⁶⁸

In its tone and in its demand that women show agency in their struggle, this passage resembles a manifesto by a modern Western feminist. Its emphasis on fate, however, marks it as very Vietnamese. As CHTN Nha Trang explains, in traditional Vietnamese texts a woman's unfortunate lot "was commonly explained not in terms of some defects on the part of the social or ethical system resulting from men's prejudice, but in terms of a philosophy of fatalism."¹⁶⁹ "Her resignation to her lot," CHTN Nha Trang continues, "was considered inevitable and somewhat commendable." Men, who in a patriarchal system profit greatly from the status quo, found this philosophy to be "the most comfortable justification for the unfair treatment of the woman. The supposed inevitability of fate served to ease their conscience and to spare them from facing any challenge to question or change established customs, if it ever entered their mind."¹⁷⁰

In Lê Vân's passage about fate quoted above, however, she does not blame male prejudice or identify gender inequality as the major problem, at least not explicitly.¹⁷¹ She simply blames women for accepting their fate too readily and passively. She wants women to regard their fate as Hue-Tam Ho Tai suggests men typically regard it, namely, as something that can be conquered through sheer exertion of will and intelligence—and by having something not mentioned by Hue-Tam Ho Tai: a kind heart [thiện tâm]. This passage echoes *The Tale of Kiều*, a story whose main theme is that a kind heart trumps talent. It is a tale that suggests that by being humane and performing good deeds one can minimize the effects of a cruel fate that afflicts all of us, but especially the beautiful and the talented. "Let's stop decrying Heaven's whims and quirks," Nguyễn Du says at the end of his tale. "Inside ourselves there lies the root of good."¹⁷²

In some passages of *Loving and Living*, however, Lê Vân does not sound like someone ready to compel fate to follow her. A note of self-pity creeps in when she speaks of "the fate of those unfortunate like me: women."¹⁷³ When she describes how content she is to lean on Abraham's broad shoulders and portrays him as a tall pine tree and herself as a fragile clinging vine, she

comes across as meek and excessively dependent on men.¹⁷⁴ In Vietnamese texts women often employ this clinging vine image or compare themselves to some other small and weak thing (a raindrop, a willow branch, duck weed) to express their vulnerability in a world dominated by men. “I’m just a humble clinging vine,” Kiều tells her warrior chieftain and savior, Tù Hải, “that by good luck may flourish in your shade.”¹⁷⁵ Abraham becomes Lê Văn’s Tù Hải. But, one might ask, who can blame Lê Văn for basking in the protection of a strong and seemingly kind man who supports her financially and emotionally?

Abraham’s wife in the Netherlands, for one. Fate, romanticism, and the frailty of women can all be cited to justify a host of sins, including that of stealing other women’s husbands, and Lê Văn employs them to this purpose. Lê Văn admits she betrays two men, and in one passage she calls on the heavens, Buddha, the ancestors, the souls of dead people—all the supernatural powers—to punish her. In her defense she talks about fate and the innocence of love: “I am willing to accept the bitterness I’ve caused. But it’s because the heavens [*trời*] created a situation in which I must die from love and there was no way I could resist. I am guilty but the essence of love is not guilty. If I threw myself into this love then I was wrong, I didn’t know right from wrong, but love is innocent.”¹⁷⁶

In one interview journalist Anh Dương asks Lê Văn this question: “In your autobiography you accuse your father of betraying your mother. You yourself saw how your mother suffered. But you still worshipped your love even though that love could destroy someone else’s family. What do you think of the two words *thủy chung* [faithfulness]?”¹⁷⁷ Lê Văn replies that she was “tortured” by the fact that she was “stealing the happiness of other women,” but she quickly shifts the blame, first to fate, then to romance, and then she ends with a plea for special treatment on the grounds that she is “just a woman”: “But I didn’t know what to do. It was as if fate made me do it. I used all my reason, but love has a way of leading one along a different road, one that’s sometimes right, sometimes wrong. . . . As for the two words *thủy chung*, I can only say: to love is to love with all one’s heart, and to never regret that love. . . . I hope everyone understands that I’m just a woman. I feel pain for myself and for other people too” [ellipses added].¹⁷⁸

Reading Lê Văn’s answer, one wonders what happened to that person who boldly called on women not to accept fate, but to make fate follow them. The

problem with Lê Vân's "Fate made me do it" defense is that although she can be said to be victimized, like Kiều, by some men, she appears in her autobiography to be more a victimizer of other women than a victim of men. Kiều is exonerated by Kim Trọng and gets her name stricken from the Book of the Damned because she chose filial piety over love. A problem for many readers is that they believe Lê Vân in *Loving and Living* refuses to demonstrate the virtue that saves Kiều: filial piety. Her severe criticism of her parents is what made the book controversial. However, in pursuing other women's husbands and in criticizing her parents, Lê Vân does demonstrate that she is not a captive of her culture's texts. In this sense Lê Vân could be said to be "making fate follow [her]," but can she at the same time then blame fate for making her commit acts that she admits she knew were wrong?

Agency

Two things seem clear. First, the texts related to womanhood that Lê Vân evokes in her autobiography limit options for women; and second, Lê Vân is not a captive of these texts. She accepts some traditional notions regarding womanhood but modifies or rejects others. In other words, Lê Vân demonstrates agency, which is no mean accomplishment because, as we have seen, the texts related to womanhood form a system of mutually reinforcing constraints. The assumption that a woman's role in life is not to realize dreams but to make sacrifices, for example, is reinforced by myths of matriarchy that suggest that Vietnamese women are already empowered; by double-standards regarding faithfulness, which require them to tolerate philandering husbands; by the Four Virtues, which emphasize domestic chores; by triangulation, which ties their sacrifice to nationhood and patriotism; and by notions of fate and romantic love, which encourage women trapped in loveless marriages to believe they were predestined for such a marriage and so resistance is futile.

Lê Vân, however, rebels against the requirement that women must fore-stall their own desires and make endless sacrifices for their husbands even if these husbands do not keep their end of the bargain. Though she does not do so lightly, she abandons *Người ấy* and the Wanderer, proving that she is not all talk and no action. Even though for her being a woman, in the end, means embracing the values of an ordinary [*binh thường*] Vietnamese housewife,

this is a choice she has made, not one that was forced on her.¹⁷⁹ Her belief that she could succeed in her acting career and achieve financial independence only by drawing on her “manly characteristics” suggests that she still is constrained by traditional notions of womanhood. But these statements also indicate that she recognizes that women as well as men can alter their fate through hard work and determination. Lê Văn *is* a woman and she did achieve financial independence, primarily through her own efforts.

It is this financial independence that emboldens Lê Văn to chide women for making endless sacrifices for no-good husbands. Her own feminist consciousness, her determination to resist the constraints of the five categories of texts described here—her agency—cannot be understood apart from Renovation and the opportunity it provided her to free herself from financial pressures. Lê Văn would doubtless be upset at the suggestion that Renovation saved her—she insists she saved herself—but Renovation created the intellectual and economic climate that allowed her to succeed. Freedom from economic burdens led to artistic freedoms and the freedom to be the kind of person she wanted to be. It also gave her the courage to publish an autobiography that is, as she says, the whole truth, not half a truth.¹⁸⁰

The arrival of market capitalism and the end of the subsidy system, artistic freedom, personal empowerment, and the freedom to speak one’s mind—Lê Văn relates all these things in *Loving and Living* by using the phrase *cởi trói* [untie], a phrase that resonates deeply among Vietnamese of her generation: “With a life that I built with my own labor I was able to free myself from most basic but also extremely important desires: to support myself, to escape the vicious circle of the system. This means that I ‘untied myself’ [*cởi trói*]. I ‘saved myself before the heavens saved me’ [*tự cứu mình trước khi trời cứu*], acting according to this rallying cry of the politician who twenty years ago helped open things up so the winds of renovation [*đổi mới*] could pour in.”¹⁸¹

That politician was Party Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh, who spoke of “untying the strings” at a historic two-day meeting with writers and artists at the dawn of Renovation—on October 6 and 7, 1987. Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh asked those present whether literature and art had deteriorated since liberation, and if so, what were the causes.¹⁸² The majority of those attending said there had been deterioration, that the cause was censorship, and that the

solution was for the government to “untie” the strings that were stifling creativity. Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh responded by agreeing that the party should untie some strings, but he also told them, “Save yourselves before the heavens save you” [*Hãy cứu lấy mình trước khi trời cứu*]. Then, he specifically linked current economic problems to the deterioration of the arts, arguing that more democracy and personal initiative were crucial to success in both areas: “If in the economic area we now need to develop democracy so people can produce, then in your area [literature and art] you, comrades, must be your own masters.”¹⁸³

In the passage from *Loving and Living* just quoted, Lê Vân uses the phrase “untie oneself” [*tự ‘cởi trói’ cho tôi*] to express her relief at no longer having to worry about where the next meal would come from, but like Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh, she is well aware that “untying” is crucial in art as well as economics. Financial independence leads to artistic independence. After expressing the relief she feels at not having to perform in bars and restaurants like poorer artists, and after describing the joy of being able to choose the films she acts in, she exclaims: “Oh, freedom. Freedom. I understand clearly the value of that word in the life of an artist.”¹⁸⁴ Most important of all, however, financial independence leads to personal emancipation: it enables Lê Vân to be the person that she feels she was born to be. It enables her to be a woman, as she herself defines “woman.” “I know that I have been luckier than many other people who still have to live in poverty under the ‘metal yoke’ [*kim cò*] of the system, who still have to pretend, and please others, and cringe timidly, and flatter,” Lê Vân says. “But I—I liberated myself, brought back for myself the freedom to be a person with the nature I was born with, that I possess. Everything has come from my own striving. Everything is a result of my own effort.”¹⁸⁵

Lê Vân is not shy about touting her accomplishments, or about exaggerating them (by minimizing the financial support she receives from the Wanderer and Abraham). When one writes an autobiography it is difficult to avoid making the story a song of the self. Singing about the self is especially difficult in a Confucian and collectivist society like Vietnam, a society in which the individual “has been submerged in family and country like a drop of water in the sea.”¹⁸⁶ Linguistic and cultural barriers have slowed the development of autobiography in Vietnam. One problem has been finding a suitable first-person pronoun. The pronoun *tôi* that writers now use has

conveyed—until relatively recently—a sense of inferiority, in part because it was used to refer to oneself as subject of the king and appeared in phrases such as *bê tôi* [subject] and *vua-tôi* [king-subject], the most important of the five Confucian bonds. Greg Lockhart describes how *tôi* lost its connotations of inferiority and subservience in his introduction to three works of nonfiction written in the 1930s: two pieces of reportage [*phóng sự*] and a work generally considered to be Vietnam's first autobiography, Nguyễn Hồng's *Days of Childhood* [*Những ngày thơ ấu*] (1938).¹⁸⁷

Days of Childhood should be seen, I believe, as an important prior text for *Loving and Living*. Nguyễn Hồng writes in the first person about his family and dares to describe his parents' unhappy marriage, his father's opium addiction, and his mother having a child by another man. If, however, this work proves that autobiography has been around since the 1930s, how can we view Lê Văn's writing of a "tell-all" autobiography as an act of agency? We can do this because since 1938 very few autobiographies have been written, and so writing one, especially one that reveals personal family information, is a daring act. Đoàn Cẩm Thi argues that a true autobiography has not yet emerged in Vietnam, though she has some exacting criteria. She refuses to call *Days of Childhood* an autobiography because, she argues, Nguyễn Hồng ends his story too quickly, neglecting to tell how he developed into a writer. However, she also credits Nguyễn Hồng, saying, "Seven decades later, one can say he is still the person who traveled the farthest along the road in search of 'I' [*tôi*]." Other possible candidates for autobiography—works such as Tô Hoài's *Every Afternoon* [*Chiều chiều*], for example—are really memoirs [*hồi ký*] because there is too much attention to other people and to world affairs, according to Đoàn Cẩm Thi. The life of the writer is not the central focus.¹⁸⁸

Why didn't others follow Nguyễn Hồng's lead and write autobiographies? This was because in socialist Vietnam the individual, the "I," was buried by the collective. In the north from 1954 to 1986, *tôi*, Đoàn Cẩm Thi says, "rarely appeared, becoming mixed in with the '*chúng tôi*' [we (exclusive)] and '*chúng ta*' [we (inclusive)] of socialist realism."¹⁸⁹ Until very recently writing an autobiography would open one up to the charge of being a reactionary and a petty bourgeoisie. But now the situation is different. Though Đoàn Cẩm Thi argues that a true autobiography has not yet emerged in Vietnam, she allows

that “recently there has been an explosion of books real close to being autobiographies,”—works like Lê Vân’s *Loving and Living*, which, because it is ghostwritten, she calls a “secondhand autobiography.” If we consider also the profusion of diaries, memoirs, and blogs, it adds up to a phenomenon, one that is not, in Đoàn Cẩm Thi’s opinion, a result of commercialization but that “reflects a new need of Vietnamese society in which the ‘I’ is ascending the throne: a need to talk about oneself.”¹⁹⁰ Lê Vân’s *Loving and Living* is a result of, and a contributor to, that phenomenon. According to Hoàng Lan Anh, Lê Vân’s autobiography has encouraged many other performers to write personal accounts of their lives.¹⁹¹

What explains the sudden ascendance of the “I”? Lockhart points out that first-person reportage, which emerged in Vietnam in the 1930s, did not re-emerge until the 1980s, and he sees similarities between the two periods. Urbanization, migration of people to cities to look for jobs, a weakening of ties to home villages and kinship groups—these developments occurred in both decades and continue today. Lockhart says the “active ‘I’” emerged in the 1930s as a result of the destruction of the monarchy and a weakening of Confucian hierarchies; in the 1980s its ascendance appears to have been a result of people becoming tired of having their individual lives stifled by the collective.¹⁹² Renovation has brought opportunities to speak out because the government finds it difficult to curb artistic freedom as it promotes free enterprise. Publishers cut loose from government subsidies have had to find books that people will buy, and they have found that autobiographies sell.¹⁹³ The move to a market economy is clearly a factor in the publication of *Loving and Living*. Ghostwriter Bùi Mai Hạnh says it was “intuition” that led her to “choose” Lê Vân.¹⁹⁴ She does not say what she means by “intuition,” but clearly Bùi Mai Hạnh and her publisher guessed—correctly, as it turned out—that a book about the film star would sell.

However, you can write an autobiography without exposing unflattering information about your parents. Lê Vân demonstrates agency by daring to tell the truth about her family even though she knew doing so would bring charges of being *bất hiếu*, lacking in filial piety, down on her head. It is this act of agency that links her autobiography to Nguyễn Hồng’s, and I argue, it has made her work political in a way she probably did not intend. But how can I credit Lê Vân with agency if her book was ghostwritten by someone

else? The fact that *Loving and Living* was ghostwritten is not a problem when one is investigating Lê Văn's notions of womanhood. As Graham Allen explains, for those favoring intertextual approaches, the "origin of the text is not a unified authorial consciousness but a plurality of voices, of other words, other utterances and other texts."¹⁹⁵ Bùi Mai Hạnh says she "exhumed" the texts that Lê Văn brought her, but clearly she exhumed many other texts as well, texts belonging not to Lê Văn or herself alone but to the entire culture, and these are the texts I have examined here.¹⁹⁶

But narratives do not narrate themselves.¹⁹⁷ Even Roland Barthes, who talks about the death of the author, grants authors the power to mix texts, to oppose texts with other texts.¹⁹⁸ Who, for example, decided to frame the chapter on Lê Văn's feelings for Người ấy's wife (chapter 14) with the quotation from *The Tale of Kiều* about wives not wanting to share a husband? Was it Lê Văn? Bùi Mai Hạnh? Or an editor? It would be nice to know the answers to these questions. What we do know is that Lê Văn agreed to reveal embarrassing and unpleasant facts about her family. She defies the Vietnamese proverb about only displaying what is fine and concealing what is ugly, and does not try to protect herself by calling her story a work of fiction.¹⁹⁹ The fact that readers were shocked by *Loving and Living*, especially by Lê Văn's harsh criticism of her parents, confirms that Lê Văn's truth-telling is unusual. Some readers also suggest that her book is political, although probably unintentionally so. Because she criticizes her parents, some readers accuse her of violating the virtue of filial piety [*hiếu*]. And in Confucian and revolutionary texts filial piety is linked to loyalty to the state—to the king in feudal times, to the country and communist party in modern Vietnam. In 1946 Hồ Chí Minh told soldiers to "be loyal [*trung*] to the country and pious [*hiếu*] to the people."²⁰⁰

The writer Bảo Ninh, author of the highly acclaimed novel *The Sorrow of War* [*Nỗi buồn chiến tranh*], the critic Trịnh Thanh Sơn, and the writer Dương Cường recently participated in an exchange about Lê Văn's book in which these links between piety to parents and loyalty to state were brought to the surface. The exchange began with a complimentary review by Bảo Ninh of Lê Văn's *Loving and Living*.²⁰¹ Trịnh Thanh Sơn responded by saying he could not understand how a respected writer like Bảo Ninh could praise Lê Văn's book, a work that he felt "brings shame down on writers." "Eastern

doctrine,” he said, “does not give any child, whether an artist or the most important person in the world, permission to speak rudely to one’s father. That behavior, that response, can only be called impious [*bất hiếu*].”²⁰²

Dương Cường picked up this theme of *bất hiếu*, or filial impiety, arguing that this Confucian notion has “tied up people for ages.”²⁰³ Should we be guided, he asked, by outdated and bizarre injunctions such as the following: “If the king orders the subject [*tôi*] to kill himself and he doesn’t, then he is disloyal [*bất trung*]” or “If a father orders his child to commit suicide and the child doesn’t, the child is impious [*bất hiếu*]?”

Loving and Living, Dương Cường continued, is a “wake-up bell” not only for families with fathers who “do not act in the way a father should” but also for the “Fathers and Mothers of the People’ in the Great Family of Vietnam. Be careful how you treat the nation’s children [*con dân*].” These parents of the country, he continued, “need to have a generous heart, love their children, and honestly repent [*sám hối*] their obvious mistakes.”

Though not involved in this give-and-take begun by Bảo Ninh, the well-known writer Nguyễn Quang Thiều was also struck by Lê Văn’s outspokenness. Like Dương Cường he approved of it, relating it to a more general need in the society for honest discourse, especially from writers and government officials.²⁰⁴ These reactions by writers support my contention that Lê Văn’s decision to speak truthfully and risk charges of being *bất hiếu* represents a significant demonstration of agency. In Vietnamese culture, filial piety is perhaps the most sacred of all virtues, one that lies at the heart of the Vietnamese moral and political system. Most Vietnamese would not dare to say or do anything that would lead others to accuse them of being impious toward their parents.

An Argument for Re-reading

The Vietnamese socialist government has passed laws to promote gender equality. There are laws abolishing child marriage, arranged marriages, and polygamy; and laws that support divorce, allow single motherhood, and preserve a woman’s right to have an abortion. Lê Văn, who divorces two husbands, has an abortion, and is an unwed mother, benefits from these laws.²⁰⁵ Researchers agree, however, that gender equality remains an unfulfilled promise. As Wendy Duong points out, this is partly because in “non-legalistic” cultures

such as Vietnam, “where the rule of law yields to custom, formulating written laws that do not first develop from custom may not necessarily lead to progress.” The current Civil Code, Duong says, “represents inspirational goals.” It provides “a general statement of aspiration.”²⁰⁶ Some women benefit from it but others do not, because the culture, as we have seen, remains patriarchal. The five categories of texts that constrain Lê Văn and other Vietnamese women make up a formidable barrier. Women not as bold as Lê Văn will hesitate to pick and choose among them as she does. Ideas about women being ministers of the interior (but with limited decision-making power), double-standards regarding faithfulness in marriage, the persistence of traditional virtues focused on domestic tasks, the emphasis on sacrifice and endurance, the identification of women with the nation, and a belief that women are fated to live the lives they lead—all of these notions make it difficult for women to achieve gender equality.

At first glance, the solution proposed by senior researcher Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết might seem a good one for Vietnam. Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết, who is greatly respected in government circles, suggests that what is needed is “a new dialogue regarding tradition” [*một cuộc đối thoại mới về văn hóa truyền thống*], a dialogue that will (1) combat social evils—excessive consumerism, materialism, and an undervaluing of moral conduct, for example; and (2) preserve women’s “traditional morality, dignity, and advantages.”²⁰⁷ However, the dialogue she has in mind would hardly suffice. She wishes to return to the traditional texts of womanhood—to the myths of matriarchy, the legends of sacrifice, and so forth—not to question these texts, or to find contradictions in them, or to discover a plurality of meanings in them, but to inspire young Vietnamese women to lead lives of sacrifice and patriotism like the heroines of old. She does not really want modern women to “dialogue” with these texts; she wants women to listen to them, despite the fact that these are the very texts that scholars argue are responsible for women’s subjugation.

To facilitate true dialogue I recommend re-reading. When we read a text for the first time, what we see in that text is what is already in us. “We can see in it,” Barbara Johnson says, only what we have already learned to see before.”²⁰⁸ An advantage of re-reading is that it allows individuals to gain control of interpretation and discover meanings other than the one that culture managers would have us see. By re-reading we discover that the texts

that we were led to believe were univocal and monologic are much more multivocal and dialogic than we at first supposed.

Duong suggests some canonical texts that could be fruitfully re-read, including *Song of a Warrior's Wife* [*Chinh phụ ngâm*], an eighteenth-century poem composed in Chinese at the end of the Lê Dynasty by a Vietnamese scholar named Đặng Trần Côn. Most Vietnamese know this poem through an artful translation into Vietnamese by Phan Huy Ích. Though both the composer and the translator were men, it is a woman who speaks in this poem. The warrior's wife describes how her husband, obeying the emperor's call, put on his battle dress and went off to war, leaving her all alone. Although the warrior's wife is proud of her husband and tells him to "Serve well your country with a true-red heart," the poem's main theme, as many critics have pointed out, is the sadness, worry, and longing that war brings to wives who stay behind. The poem is often seen as another tribute to the sacrificing and "waiting woman."

What might a re-reading of this poem reveal? It could reveal places where desire strains against the dominant cultural codes. "Receiving little attention from contemporary literary critics," Duong says, "is the fact that the *Song of the Warrior's Wife* subtly questioned the legitimacy of sacrifice and expressed the woman's desire for personal happiness."²⁰⁹ Indeed this questioning is very pronounced, and it begins in the very first stanza:

When all through earth and heaven dust storms rise,
How hard and rough, the road a woman walks!
O those who rule in yonder blue above,
Who is the cause and maker of this woe?²¹⁰

And the questioning continues throughout the poem. "Who has the heart to break young lovers up / And build a mountain wall between the two?" the warrior's wife asks in lines 119–120. She regrets that she had urged her husband to seek "a noble's rank" (line 298). She feels her youth is passing and blames fate for keeping her from her husband, a separation that she finds unnatural. Mandarin ducks go in pairs, the willow and the lotus intertwine their leaves, she says. "That's how in nature ties of love will bind— / Why keep two humans severed, here and there?" (lines 357–358). She desires personal happiness, as Duong suggests, and that happiness—the poem

delicately makes clear—includes sexual as well as spiritual union with her husband.

Modern women like Lê Văn who wish to speak the truth can find a model in the warrior's wife. In parts of the poem the warrior's wife blames fate and the heavens [*trách trời*], but there are also thinly veiled critiques of the emperor: Is he who sits “inside brocaded curtains” aware, she asks, of a soldier's suffering (line 81)? Early in the poem she contrasts “the law” [*phép công*] with “what a person may feel inside” [*niềm tây*]: “At daybreak, heralds speed them through the mists—the law outweighs what they may feel inside” (lines 11–12). *Phép công*, the critic Thanh Lăng points out, represents the Confucian system presided over by the king. By placing *niềm tây* above *phép công*, the warrior's wife reveals that “she dares to directly criticize the king, who she feels is the cause of the disaster.”²¹¹

The texts Duong mentions are old and classic literary texts that not everyone will be motivated to re-read. What I have tried to demonstrate by analyzing *Loving and Living* is that recently published nonfiction is also worth re-reading. Pressures in a consumer society work to discourage re-reading, particularly the re-reading of sensational bestsellers like *Loving and Living*. “Re-reading,” Barthes says, “is an operation contrary to the commercial and ideological habits of our society, which would have us ‘throw away’ the story once it has been consumed (‘devoured’), so that we can then move on to another story, buy another book.”²¹² Barthes suggests re-reading “at the outset,” because “it alone saves the text from repetition (those who fail to reread are obliged to read the same story everywhere).”²¹³ In Vietnam the story one finds everywhere is about the sacrificing woman, but within and around that story are other stories waiting to be heard. ■

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ABSTRACT

In this article I investigate notions of womanhood in Vietnam by examining an autobiography by Lê Vân, a well-known actress. My approach, taken from literary studies, is intertextual: it assumes that in telling their life stories authors will inevitably evoke “texts,” or cultural codes, relating to manhood and womanhood. I identify, categorize, and discuss some texts related to womanhood that Lê Vân evokes in her autobiography. I conclude that these texts favor men, making gender equality difficult to achieve. Culture influences do not determine behavior, however, and thus agency—acting creatively—is possible, and I find evidence of it in Lê Vân’s Loving and Living.

KEYWORDS: *Lê Vân, womanhood, autobiography, gender equality, intertextuality, agency*

Notes

1. Lê Vân’s autobiography was ghostwritten by Bùi Mai Hạnh and published in Hà Nội by the Hội Nhà Văn [Writers’ Association]. Lê Vân and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Vân: Yêu và Sống* [Lê Vân: Loving and Living] (Hà Nội: Hội Nhà Văn, 2006).
2. The government has honored this family by granting Trần Tiến and his daughter Lê Khanh the highest title, “People’s Artist” [Nghệ sĩ Nhân dân], and his wife, Lê Mai, and their daughter Lê Vân the second highest title, “Outstanding Artist” [Nghệ sĩ Ưu tú].
3. This film has won awards at the Hawai’i International Film Festival in 1985, at the International Film Festival in Moscow in 1985, and at the Asia Pacific Film Festival in 1989. It has also recently been listed by CNN as one of the eighteen best Asian films ever made. See Mairi Mackay, “Pick the Best Asian Films of All Time,” <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/SHOWBIZ/Movies/08/12/asiapacific.top10/index.html> (accessed November 5, 2008).
4. Lê Vân herself worries that she is doing what this proverb warns against. See Lê Vân and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Vân: Yêu và Sống*, 25. Many reviewers of her book cite it and/or the following proverb: “Display what is fine, conceal what is ugly” [Tốt đẹp phô ra, xấu xa đậy lại]. See, for example, Hoàng Lan Anh, “Nghệ sĩ và cơn sốt viết tự truyện” [Artists and the Fever to Write Autobiographies], www.tintuonline.vietnamnet.vn/vn/vanhua/115893 (accessed September 15,

- 2007); Anh Vân and Đỗ Duy, “Lê Văn: ‘Tôi không có ý vạch áo cho người xem lưng’” [Lê Văn: “I Don’t Mean to Turn Up My Shirt to Let People See My Back”], www.vnexpress.net/GL/Van-hoa/2006/10/3B9EFC56/?q=1 (accessed November 22, 2008); Hồng Ny, “Về tự truyện ‘Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống’” [On the Autobiography *Lê Văn: Loving and Living*], www.chungta.com/Desktop.aspx/Chung-Ta-Suy-Ngam/My-hoc/Ve_tu_truyen_Le_Van (accessed September 15, 2007).
5. See Hồng Ny, “Về tự truyện ‘Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống’”; and Trịnh Thanh Sơn, “Chân-thiện-mỹ ở đâu?” [Where Is the Truth-Goodness-Beauty?], <http://vietbao.vn/The-gioi-giai-tri/Chan-thien-my-o-dau/50765910/399> (accessed July 8, 2009).
 6. See Hồng Ny, “Về tự truyện ‘Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống.’” Ngọc Trang makes a similar point in “Thương thì thương, mà giận vẫn giận . . .” [I’m Sympathetic but Also Angry . . .], www.tienphongonline.com.vn/Tianyon/Index.aspx?ArticleID=65468&ChannelID=7 (accessed September 15, 2007).
 7. I discuss this debate in my section titled “Agency.”
 8. I call them “texts” because my analytical approach has been influenced by poststructuralist critics who use the term “intertextuality” in arguing that the meaning of any text derives from its relation to prior texts. For an overview of intertextuality see Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000).
 9. “When people tell life stories,” George Rosenwald observes, “they do so in accordance with models of intelligibility specific to the culture.” See George C. Rosenwald, “Conclusion: Reflections on Narrative Self-understanding,” in *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self-understanding*, ed. George C. Rosenwald and Richard L. Ochberg (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 265.
 10. Ruth Behar, “Rage and Redemption: Reading the Life Story of a Mexican Marketing Woman,” *Feminist Studies* 16, no. 2 (Summer 1990), <http://web.ebsco-host.com.ezproxy.humboldt.edu> (accessed November 29, 2008).
 11. William H. Sewell, “A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation,” *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 1 (July 1992): 1–29 (20).
 12. See Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image - Music—Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142–148.
 13. George C. Rosenwald and Richard L. Ochberg, *Storied Lives*, 7.
 14. See Philip Taylor, *Fragments of the Present: Searching for Modernity in Vietnam’s South* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001).
 15. See Rukmalie Jayakody and Vu Tuan Huy, “Family Change in Vietnam’s Red River Delta,” in *Reconfiguring Families in Contemporary Vietnam*, ed. Magali Barbieri and Danièle Bélanger (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 204.
 16. See Công Huyền Tôn Nữ Nha Trang (hereafter CHTN Nha Trang), “The Traditional Roles of Women as Reflected in Oral and Written Vietnamese Literature” (PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1973), 90.

17. Ibid., 173.
18. Roland Barthes, *Image—Music—Text*, 160.
19. See Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 89.
20. Ibid., 52.
21. Ibid., 53–54.
22. Ibid., 53.
23. A literal translation of “Người ấy” would be “That Person,” but “This Person” sounds more appropriate in English. To avoid this difficulty, henceforth I will refer to Lê Văn’s first lover as “Người ấy.”
24. Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 153.
25. Ibid., 158–159.
26. Ibid., 162.
27. In other words, he was breaking the contract Lê Văn mentions in discussing her father’s infidelities. He had a girlfriend (her) but in return wasn’t, according to Lê Văn, providing adequate financial support for his wife and children. See Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 52.
28. Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 140.
29. Ibid., 357. Whenever Lê Văn uses this term—*cởi trói*—she puts it in parentheses (see pages 109, 140, and 357) because she means to cite its use by former General Secretary of the Communist Party Nguyễn Văn Linh, who, in a meeting convened soon after the official beginning of Renovation, suggested that the party would loosen strings [*cởi trói*] on writers and artists. The phrase has acquired various associations since Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh first used it. See my section titled “Agency.”
30. Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 229.
31. Ibid., 220.
32. Ibid., 229.
33. The Wanderer on his own initiative divorced his wife in Canada.
34. The mother of Lê Văn’s third lover was Dutch and his father was Indonesian. He is a citizen of Holland. He probably worked for the World Food Program of the United Nations, but Lê Văn does not give the exact name of the organization.
35. Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 359.
36. George Coedès introduced this concept and it has been discussed by contemporary scholars of Southeast Asia. See Georges Coedès, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*, ed. Walter F. Vella, trans. Susan Brown Cowing (Honolulu: East-West Center, University of Hawai‘i Press, 1968), 9; and Nhung Tuyet Tran, “Gender, Property, and the ‘Autonomy Thesis’ in Southeast Asia: The Endowment of Local Succession in Early Modern Vietnam,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 67, no. 1 (February 2008): 43–72.

37. Judy L. Ledgerwood, "Khmer Kinship: The Matriline/Matriarchy Myth," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 51, no. 3 (Autumn 1995): 247–261 (256). See also Jane Monnig Atkinson and Shelly Errington, eds., *Power and Difference: Gender in Island Southeast Asia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 1–2.
38. Nguyễn Từ Chi, "Nhận xét bước đầu về gia đình của người Việt" [Preliminary Observations Concerning the Vietnamese Family], in *Những nghiên cứu xã hội học về gia đình Việt Nam* [Social Science Research on the Vietnamese Family], ed. Rita Liljestrom and Tương Lai (Hà Nội: Khoa học Xã hội, 1991), 67. See also Wendy Duong, "Gender Equality and Women's Issues in Vietnam: The Vietnamese Woman—Warrior and Poet," *Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal* 10 (March 2001): 1–108 (14). Accessed online at: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=964659 (accessed October 9, 2008); Neil Jamieson, "The Traditional Family in Vietnam," *Vietnam Forum* 8 (Summer-Fall 1986): 113; and CHTN Nha Trang, "The Traditional Roles of Women," 139.
39. See preceding note.
40. Judy Ledgerwood says that Southeast Asian women "usually control the monies within the household and make decisions on family purchases." See Ledgerwood, "Khmer Kinship," 256.
41. CHTN Nha Trang, "Traditional Roles of Woman," 131.
42. Duong, "Gender Equality and Women's Issues," 14.
43. Stephen O'Harrow, "Vietnamese Women and Confucianism: Creating Spaces from Patriarchy," in "*Male*" and "*Female*" in *Developing Southeast Asia*, ed. Wazar Jahan Karim (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1995), 165.
44. See Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 52.
45. *Ibid.*, 53.
46. *Ibid.*, 238.
47. *Ibid.*, 241 and 242.
48. *Ibid.*, 242.
49. See Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 70 and 151.
50. Đặng Nguyên Anh, "Vai trò và vị trí của phụ nữ nông thôn trong gia đình: Một nghiên cứu cộng đồng" [The Role and Position of Rural Women in the Family: A Community Research Project], in *Những nghiên cứu xã hội học* (see note 38), 159. Khuất Thu Hồng, "Nghiên cứu xã hội học gia đình ở Việt Nam" [Social Science Research on the Vietnamese Family], in *Những nghiên cứu xã hội học*, 165–180.
51. Barbieri and Bélanger, eds., *Reconfiguring Families*, 31–32.
52. See Insun Yu, "Bilateral Social Pattern and the Status of Women in Traditional Vietnam," *South East Asia Research* 7, no. 2 (July 1999), 216.
53. See, for example, Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết, *Phụ nữ Việt Nam qua các thời đại* [Vietnamese Women across the Ages] (Hà Nội: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1975); Ta Van Tai,

- “The Status of Women in Traditional Vietnam: A Comparison of the Code of the Lê Dynasty (1428–1788) with the Chinese Codes,” *Journal of Asian History* 15, no. 2 (1981): 45–97; and Insun Yu, “Bilateral Social Pattern and the Status of Women,” 215–231.
54. Nhung Tuyet Tran, “Gender, Property, and the ‘Autonomy Thesis,’” 46, 68.
 55. See Keith Weller Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 90.
 56. The Lê Code also codified more rights for women than did the Nguyễn Code, which followed the Lê Code. The Nguyễn Code, Ta Van Tai explains, “was a faithful copy of almost all the statutes and substatutes of the Ch’ing Code.” See Ta Van Tai, “The Status of Women in Traditional Vietnam,” 99.
 57. Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết, *Hình ảnh người Phụ nữ Việt Nam trước thềm thế kỷ XXI* [Images of Vietnamese Women on the Threshold of the Twenty-first Century] (Hà Nội: Thế Giới, 2000), 32.
 58. Duong, “Gender Equality and Women’s Issues,” 26.
 59. For an account of a “classic polygynous, patrilineally extended family” see Hy V. Luong, *Revolution in the Village: Tradition and Transformation in North Vietnam, 1925–1988* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1992), 71 and passim.
 60. This folk poem is cited and translated by CHTN Nha Trang in “Traditional Roles of Women,” 20.
 61. This verse narrative was written around 1800 by Nguyễn Du. All line references (in parentheses) are to the following bilingual edition: Nguyễn Du, *The Tale of Kiều* [*Truyện Kiều*], trans. Huỳnh Sanh Thông (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983). If not otherwise indicated, the translations here are by Huỳnh Sanh Thông from this edition.
 62. There is a well-known saying: “Men should not be told the story *Phan Trần* / Women should not read *Thúy Vân, Thúy Kiều*” [*Đàn ông chớ kể Phan Trần / Đàn bà chớ đọc Thúy Vân Thúy Kiều*]. Thúy Vân was Thúy Kiều’s sister, but here the two names indicate the entire work. *Phan Trần* is another verse narrative, written around the same time as the *Tale of Kiều*. In this work of unknown authorship, the hero and heroine do not follow the traditional rules of courtship.
 63. *Truyện Kiều*, lines 3115–3120, translated by CHTN Nha Trang in “The Traditional Roles of Women, 154–155.
 64. *Ibid.*, 155.
 65. Lê Vân and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Vân: Yêu và Sống*, 163.
 66. *Ibid.*, 199.
 67. *Ibid.*, 203.
 68. On this admission, see Lê Vân and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Vân: Yêu và Sống*, 214.

69. Ibid., 217.
70. Ibid., 214 and 347.
71. Người ấy suggested that she meet men “with soul” [*có tâm hồn*], like Đặng Thái Sơn, an internationally known pianist who lives in Montreal. See Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 206.
72. See Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 218. It seems clear that in his relationship with Lê Văn, Người ấy saw himself as a father figure, a teacher, and a lover all mixed into one. Lê Văn makes clear that for her he was both teacher and lover and suggests he was a substitute father as well (164).
73. “Chồng chung chưa dễ ai chiều cho ai.” See Nguyễn Du, *The Tale of Kiều*, trans. Huyền Sanh Thông, line 2370.
74. CHTN Nha Trang, “Traditional Roles of Women,” 46.
75. See Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 313.
76. Ibid., 242.
77. “Feudal society emphasized standards for feminine morality which were summed up in four words: ‘three submissions four virtues’ [*tam tòng tứ đức*], parallel to the ‘three bonds five principles’ [*tam cương ngũ thường*] for men.” See Phạm Thị Hào, “Từ quan niệm tứ đức của phong kiến bàn thêm về người phụ nữ với hạnh phúc gia đình” [From the Confucian Concept of the Four Virtues Comes Further Discussion of Women and Family Happiness], *Tạp Chí Khoa Học Xã Hội* [Journal of Social Science] 13, no. 3 (13-III/92) (1992): 125.
78. In Sino-Vietnamese this third bond is the “husband-wife” [*phu phụ*] bond; in Vietnamese it is called the “wife-husband” [*vợ chồng*] bond. Scholars eager to assert Vietnam’s greater gender equality vis-à-vis China make much of the fact that Vietnamese put the wife first when they refer to a married couple. See, for example, Ngô Vĩnh Long, *Vietnamese Women in Society and Revolution*, vol. 1, *The French Colonial Period* (Cambridge, MA: Vietnam Resource Center, 1974), 31; and Nguyen Van Ky, “Rethinking the Status of Vietnamese Women in Folklore and Oral History,” in *Viet-Nam Exposé: French Scholarship on Twentieth-Century Vietnamese Society*, ed. Gisele L. Bousquet and Pierre Brocheux (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 94–95.
79. See Nguyễn Trãi, *Gia huấn ca* [Song on Family Education], 3rd ed. (Sài Gòn: Tân Việt, 1953), 27. Translated by CHTN Nha Trang in “Traditional Roles of Women,” 36.
80. Ngô Thi Ngan Binh, “The Confucian Four Feminine Virtues (*tứ đức*): The Old Versus the New—*kế thừa* Versus *phát huy*,” in *Gender Practices in Contemporary Vietnam*, ed. Lisa Drummond and Helle Rydstrom (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004), 52; Ashley Pettus, *Between Sacrifice and Desire: National Identity and the Governing of Femininity in Vietnam* (New York: Routledge, 2003). 43.

81. Pettus, *Between Sacrifice and Desire*, 60.
82. *Ibid.*, 60–63.
83. *Ibid.*, 81.
84. *Ibid.* 112.
85. *Ibid.*, 124.
86. Nguyễn Trãi, *Gia huấn ca*, 26.
87. Phạm Thị Hào, “Từ quan niệm tứ đức của phong kiến,” 127.
88. This interview is included in Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết, *Hình ảnh người phụ nữ Việt Nam*, 15.
89. *Ibid.*, 15–16.
90. Pettus, *Between Sacrifice and Desire*, 12.
91. Barbieri and Bélanger, eds., *Reconfiguring Families*, 23.
92. She also would have learned about the dangers of abandoning traditional virtues and becoming too money hungry from books and films, including *When the Tenth Month Comes* [*Bao giờ cho đến tháng mười*] (1984), in which she starred, and other films appearing at about the same time, films such as *A Quiet Little Town* [*Thị trấn yên tĩnh*] (1986), *Brothers and Relations* [*Anh và em*] (1987), and *The General Retires* [*Tướng về hưu*] (1989). These films contrast greedy women with virtuous war veterans, presenting, as Mark Bradley points out, a gendered critique of the human costs of the market economy. See Mark Philip Bradley, “Contests of Memory: Remembering and Forgetting War in the Contemporary Vietnamese Cinema,” in *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 196–226.
93. Lê Vân and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Vân: Yêu và Sống*, 140 and 160.
94. *Ibid.*, 140 and 151.
95. *Ibid.*, 359.
96. Vietnamese use “subsidy” [*bao cấp*] to describe the pre-Renovation economy in which the government was the major employer and provider of social services.
97. Lê Vân and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Vân: Yêu và Sống*, 140.
98. *Ibid.*
99. Pettus, *Between Sacrifice and Desire*, 127.
100. Lê Vân and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Vân: Yêu và Sống*, 107.
101. *Ibid.*, 108.
102. *Ibid.*, 109.
103. *Ibid.*, 357. In my section titled “Agency” I explain why Lê Vân encloses *cởi trói* in quotation marks. This term is rich in associations in post-Renovation Vietnam. She says, “In this way [by renting a house] I had sufficient monthly income to bring back freedom for myself” (109).

104. *Ibid.*, 248. She boasts about saving herself on pages 109, 151, and 357. She also reports that Người ấy praised her for “untying herself” (140).
105. See Pettus, *Between Sacrifice and Desire*, 175. Private trading was less suspect in the south than it was in the north. See Philip Taylor, *Searching for Modernity in Vietnam's South*.
106. *Dù em buôn tây bán đông / không bằng hơi thở của chồng em ra*. A 60-year-old dried goods seller at Đông Xuân market in Hà Nội quoted this folk verse in an interview in the mid 1990s. See Pettus, *Between Sacrifice and Desire*, 183.
107. *Ibid.*, 129.
108. Truong Huyen Chi, “A Home Divided: Work, Body, and Emotions in the Post-Doi Moi Family,” in Barbieri and Bélanger, eds., *Reconfiguring Families*, 315.
109. See, for example, the “Song of a Warrior’s Wife” [*Chinh phụ ngâm*], trans. Huỳnh Sanh Thông, *An Anthology of Vietnamese Poems* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 401–418. See also the story “The Woman of Nam Xương” [Thiếu Phụ Nam Xương], which Maurice M. Durand and Nguyen Tran Huan describe in *An Introduction to Vietnamese Literature*, trans. D.M. Hawke (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 65–69.
110. See, for example, “The Story of Waiting-for-Husband Rock” [Sự tích đá vọng phu] and “The Story of Sorrowful Woman Rock” [Sự tích đá bà rầu] in Nguyễn Đồng Chi, *Kho tàng truyện cổ tích Việt Nam* [Treasury of Vietnamese Folktales], vol. 1 (HCMC: Văn Nghệ, 1999), 181–188. For songs, see Lê Thương’s song series “Hòn vọng phu” [Waiting-Husband Rock] 1, 2, and 3.
111. *Cá chuối đằm đuối vì con*. See Tine Gammeltoft, “‘Faithful, Heroic, Resourceful’: Changing Images of Women in Vietnam,” in *Vietnamese Society in Transition*, ed. John Kleinen (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 2001), 274.
112. Quoted and translated by CHTN Nha Trang in “Traditional Roles of Women,” 184.
113. *Ibid.*
114. Duong, “Gender Equality and Women’s Issues,” 25.
115. Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết, *Hình ảnh người phụ nữ Việt Nam*, 11–12.
116. Duong, “Gender Equality and Women’s Issues,” 56.
117. Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 52–53.
118. Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết, *Hình ảnh người phụ nữ Việt Nam*, 12.
119. Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 344–345.
120. *Ibid.*, 299 and 322.
121. *Ibid.*, 345.
122. Phạm Ngọc Vân, “Lê Văn tìm thấy hạnh phúc trong sự dâng hiến” [Lê Văn Searches for Happiness in Dedication], www.talawas.org/talaDB/suche.php?res=8728&rb=0508 (accessed July 26, 2008). He quotes from page 322 of the autobiography.

123. Ibid.
124. Pettus, *Between Sacrifice and Desire*, 14.
125. Gammeltoft, “Faithful, Heroic, Resourceful,” 267.
126. Ibid., 273. Catherine Scornet provides a good example of triangulation at work in the field of reproductive practices and policies. Vietnam’s “family planning programs,” she writes, “seek to convince by connecting the family’s happiness with that of the nation.” This key feature, in Scornet’s view, distinguishes Vietnamese policy from the programs of the United Nations Cairo conference (1994) on population and development, which “focused on the individual’s reproductive rights, regardless of collective or national considerations.” See Catherine Scornet, “State and the Family: Reproductive Policies and Practices,” in Barbieri and Bélanger, eds., *Reconfiguring Families*, 69.
127. Lê Thị Nhân Tuyết, *Hình ảnh người phụ nữ Việt Nam*, 17.
128. Ibid.
129. Tương Lai, “Lời giới thiệu” [Introduction], in Liljestrom and Tương Lai, eds., *Những nghiên cứu xã hội học*, 5.
130. To solve the question of women, Nguyễn Thị Minh Khai, the Indochinese Communist Party’s highest-ranking woman, wrote in 1938, “We cannot stand on one side and consider only the question of inequality between men and women. On the contrary, the fundamental issue is the common dimension, the class dimension which we must solve together.” Quoted by Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 245.
131. Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 53.
132. Duong, “Gender Equality and Women’s Issues,” 38.
133. Pettus, *Between Sacrifice and Desire*, 9.
134. *When the Tenth Month Comes*, a film in which Lê Văn starred, is a good example. Đặng Nhật Minh, the director and script writer, explains that in his film “the fate of the young woman symbolizes the fate of the country. . . . I see my country, in fact, as a young woman. In our society, it is the women who bear the burden, they hold our destiny in their hands and that’s why I feel that through them one can understand the problems of life of our country.” See Đặng Nhật Minh, “In the Realm of Darkness and Light,” *Cinemaya* 7 (Spring 1990): 11–13 (11). For more information on this film see Gina Marchetti, “Excess and Understatement: War, Romance, and Melodrama in Contemporary Vietnamese Cinema,” *Genders* 10 (Spring 1991): 47–74; and Bradley, “Contests of Memory.”
135. Nguyễn Du, *Truyện Kiều*, lines 181–182, trans. CHTN Nha Trang, “Traditional Roles of Women,” 96.
136. See Cao Thị Như-Quỳnh and John C. Schaffer, “From Verse Narrative to Novel: The Development of Prose Fiction in Vietnam,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 47, no. 4 (November 1988): 756–777.

137. Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 167.
138. *Ibid.*, 166.
139. *Ibid.*, 163, 206–207, 218.
140. *Ibid.*, 199.
141. Kiều bows to circumstance and chooses duty over love when she marries the evil Mã Giám Sinh to save her father. See Nguyễn Du, *The Tale of Kiều*, trans. Huỳnh Sanh Thông, lines 599–606.
142. “One of the broadest and most fundamental oppositions in Vietnamese culture—indeed in Vietnamese life,” writes Neil Jamieson, “has long been that between *nghĩa* and *tinh*.” See Neil Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 20.
143. Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 304.
144. *Ibid.*, 300.
145. Anh Dương, “Tôi đã đau đớn mười mấy năm trời” [I Was in Anguish for Ten Long Years], www.tintuonline.vietnamnet.vn/vn/buon/115805 (accessed September 15, 2007).
146. Lê Văn’s complete name is Trần Lê Văn.
147. The interviewer is not identified. See “Lê Mai: ‘Lê Văn giống tôi ở sự thẳng thắn’” [Lê Mai: “Lê Văn Is Like Me in Being Straightforward”], <http://vnexpress.net/GL/Van-hoa/Guong-mat-Nghe-sy/2007/10/3B9FB3DF/?q=1> (accessed September 9, 2008).
148. The fact that Vietnamese women are typically left with *nghĩa* and with fewer outlets than men to achieve *tinh* leads to the question of whether this *tinh* vs. *nghĩa* opposition is one of those binary oppositions that, poststructuralists and feminist scholars argue, “suppress ambiguous or interstitial spaces between the opposed categories, so that any overlapping region that may appear . . . becomes impossible according to binary logic.” See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2000), 23–24.
149. “In traditional China and Vietnam it was commonly believed that men [*sic*] received their nature (*tinh*; Chinese, *hsing*) or their endowment of abilities and aptitudes from heaven, which was the ultimate source of all things.” See Alexander Woodside, *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 9.
150. Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “Fortune Is a Woman: Talent and Destiny in the Lives of Women in 18th Century Vietnam,” unpublished Harvard University manuscript, 1985. See also Anne Marie Leshkovich, “Woman, Buddhist, Entrepreneur: Gender, Moral Values, and Class Anxiety in Late Socialist Vietnam,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no. 1–2 (February/August, 2006): 277–313 (298).
151. Nguyễn Du, *The Tale of Kiều*, trans. Huỳnh Sanh Thông, lines 5–6.
152. *Ibid.*, lines 1906–1907.

153. Lê Vân and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Vân: Yêu và Sống*, 344. Italics for emphasis are in the original.
154. *Ibid.*, 47.
155. Lê Mai used the phrase *duyên nợ* in the interview cited in note 147.
156. Đạm Tiên, Kiều's soul sister, gives *nhân duyên* this meaning when she tells Kiều that they are both doomed to lives of sadness. See Nguyễn Du, *The Tale of Kiều*, trans. Huỳnh Sanh Thông, lines 201–202.
157. Literally this compound word means “orphan-widow,” apparently a shortening of the four-syllable expression *cô-nhi quả phụ* [An orphan when a child, a widow when a woman], but here it simply means “sad and lonely.”
158. Lê Vân and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Vân: Yêu và Sống*, 50.
159. *Ibid.*, 151.
160. See Lê Vân and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Vân: Yêu và Sống*, 304.
161. Lê Vân suggests she and Abraham were married, but she and Abraham never officially wed. Her comment about living far from each other refers to the fact that Abraham's work took him to distant places. She lived with him in Rome but did not accompany him to North Korea and other distant places.
162. See Anh Vân and Đỗ Duy, “Lê Vân: “Tôi không có ý vạch áo cho người xem lưng.””
163. Lê Vân and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Vân: Yêu và Sống*, 44.
164. This was a dissident movement in the 1950s led by a group of literary and artistic figures.
165. Lê Vân and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Vân: Yêu và Sống*, 305.
166. *Ibid.*, 359.
167. This passage is quoted in my section on “Sacrifice.”
168. Lê Vân and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Vân: Yêu và Sống*, 345.
169. CHTN Nha Trang, “Traditional Roles of Women,” 198.
170. *Ibid.*, 199.
171. It is possible, however, that in this passage Lê Vân uses fate as a code word for gender inequality and social injustice. Note that she speaks not of fate exactly but of “that which is called fate” and that this passage follows immediately one in which she refers to ungrateful husbands and chides women for their endless sacrificing.
172. Nguyễn Du, *The Tale of Kiều*, trans. Huỳnh Sanh Thông, lines 3250–3251.
173. Lê Vân and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Vân: Yêu và Sống*, 344.
174. See Lê Vân and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Vân: Yêu và Sống*, 313 and 320.
175. Nguyễn Du, *The Tale of Kiều*, trans. Huỳnh Sanh Thông, lines 2279–2280. Kiều also compares herself to a raindrop (lines 619 and 1961), a weak willow (2422), and a piece of floating duck weed (2475). Expressions like “*bồ liễu*” [sedge and willow] were ways to refer to “the weaker sex.”

176. Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 353.
177. “*Thủy chung*” is a compound word. “*Thủy*” means beginning and “*chung*” means ending. Someone who is faithful is with someone from the start to the finish of a relationship.
178. Interview with Anh Dương, “Tôi đã đau đớn mười mấy năm trời” [I Was in Anguish for Ten Long Years] www.tintuonline.vietnamnet.vn/vn/buon/115805 (accessed September 15, 2007).
179. However, she is far from ordinary. She never officially married, and her “husband” is a Dutch Indonesian.
180. Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 272.
181. *Ibid.*, 357.
182. For Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh’s questions and responses by those present, see “Hai ngày đáng ghi nhớ mãi” [Two Days to Remember Forever], *Văn Nghệ* [Literature and Art] 42 (October 17, 1987), 1.
183. The complete text of Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh’s fifty-minute speech was later printed in *Văn Nghệ*. See “Đồng chí tổng bí thư Nguyễn Văn Linh nói chuyện với văn nghệ sĩ” [Comrade General Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh Talks with Writers and Artists], *Văn Nghệ* [Literature and Art] 42, October 17, 1987, 3.
184. Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 110.
185. *Ibid.*, 357.
186. Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân, *Thi Nhân Việt Nam* [Vietnamese Poets] (Sài Gòn: Hoa tiên, 1968), 52.
187. Greg Lockhart, “First Person Narratives from the 1930s,” in *The Light of the Capital: Three Modern Vietnamese Classics*, trans. Greg Lockhart and Monique Lockhart (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1–49.
188. See Phong Điệp’s interview with Đoàn Cẩm Thi, “TS [Tiến sĩ] Đoàn Cẩm Thi: Tương lai tự truyện Việt Nam còn ở phía trước” [Dr. Đoàn Cẩm Thi: The Future of Autobiography Lies in Front of Us], <http://hvn.vn/News.Asp?Cat=&SCat=36&Id=379> (accessed October 21, 2008).
189. *Ibid.*
190. *Ibid.*
191. Hoàng Lan Anh, “Nghệ sĩ và ‘cơn sốt’ viết tự truyện” [Artists and the Fever to Write Autobiographies], www.tintuonline.vietnamnet.vn/vn/vanhua/115893 (accessed September 15, 2007).
192. Lockhart, “First Person Narratives from the 1930s,” 3.
193. *Lê Văn: Loving and Living* was published by the Writers’ Association [Hội Nhà Văn], a government agency.
194. This appears in a postscript entitled “Why I Chose Lê Văn” [Vì sao tôi chọn Lê Văn]. See Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 361.
195. Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 72.

196. In her postscript (see note 194), Bùi Mai Hạnh explains that she and Lê Văn met dozens of times and that on their last meeting Lê Văn turned over to her “all her letters, diaries, newspaper articles, and souvenirs,” saying she couldn’t bear to look at them: it would be like digging up a grave. So, Bùi Mai Hạnh says, “I became the person who exhumed the grave.” See Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 362–363.
197. See James L. Peacock and Dorothy C. Holland, “The Named Self: Life Stories in Process,” *Ethos* 21, no. 4 (December 1993): 367–383 (368).
198. Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image—Music—Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 146.
199. “Display what is fine, conceal what is ugly” [*Tốt đẹp phô ra, xấu xa đậy lại*].
200. Hồ Chí Minh used this expression in a talk with cadets at a military school in Sơn Tây on May 22, 1946. Sometimes “party” [*đảng*] replaces “country” in this expression. See Võ Nguyên Giáp, *Những năm tháng không thể nào quên* [Unforgettable Years and Months] (Hà Nội: Quân Đội Nhân Dân, 1974), 248.
201. Bảo Ninh, “Bảo Ninh nói về tự truyện Lê Văn” [Bảo Ninh Talks about Lê Văn’s Autobiography], <http://vietbao.vn/The-gioi-giai-tri/Bao-Ninh-noi-ve-tu-truyen-Le-Van/50765> (accessed October 7, 2010).
202. Trịnh Thanh Sơn, “Chân—thiện—mỹ ở đâu?” [Truth—Goodness—Beauty—Where Are They?], <http://vietbao.vn/The-gioi-giai-tri/Chan-thien-my-o-dau/50765910/399> (accessed July 8, 2009).
203. Dương Cường, “Ngựa ‘đầu’—Mã ‘viện’: Nói với Nhà Phê Bình Trịnh Thanh Sơn” [Buffalos and Horses: Talking with the Critic Trịnh Thanh Sơn], www.vanchuongviet.org/vietnamese/vanhoc_tacpham.asp?TPID=5755&LOAIID= (accessed November 11, 2008).
204. Nguyễn Quang Thiều, “Lê Văn—Như một cây sau bão” [Lê Văn: Like a Tree after a Storm], www.cand.com.vn/News/PrintView.aspx?ID=103732 (accessed November 19, 2008). See also Nguyễn Quang Thiều, “Lê Văn: Một ví dụ đúng” [Lê Văn: A Good Example], www.talawas.org/talaDB/suche.php?res=8578&rb=0102 (accessed November 22, 2008).
205. While involved in her tortuous relationship with Người ấy, Lê Văn marries a man whom she does not love who had pursued her for nine years. Four days after signing the wedding papers, before even holding his hand, she convinces him to sign divorce papers. See Lê Văn and Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Văn: Yêu và Sống*, 203–206. Before she gives birth to her two sons, Lê Văn becomes pregnant with Abraham’s child and has an abortion. She has the flu and believes that as a result the child would be “malformed and defective” (268). Then, when her first son fathered by Abraham is ten months old, she and the Wanderer get a divorce.

206. Wendy Duong, "Gender Equality and Women's Issues in Vietnam: The Vietnamese Woman—Warrior and Poet," *Pacific Rim Law & Policy Journal* 10 (March 2001): 1–108 (41). Accessed online at: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=964659 (accessed October 9, 2008).
207. Lê Thị Nhâm Tuyết, *Hình ảnh người Phụ nữ Việt Nam trước thềm thế kỷ XXI* [Images of Vietnamese Women on the Threshold of the Twenty-first Century] (Hà Nội: Thế Giới, 2000), 41.
208. Barbara Johnson, "The Critical Difference: Balzac's 'Sarrasine' and Barthes's 'S/Z,'" in *Untying the Text: A Post-structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge and Kagan Paul, 1981), 165.
209. Duong, "Gender Equality and Women's Issues in Vietnam," 45.
210. All quotations from "Warrior's Wife" are from Huỳnh Sanh Thông trans., *An Anthology of Vietnamese Poems* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 401–418, lines 1–4.
211. Thanh Lăng, *Bảng lược đồ văn học Việt Nam, quyển thượng nền văn học cổ điển từ thế kỷ XIII đến 1862* [Survey of Vietnamese Literature, vol. 1: The Classics, 18th Century to 1862] (Sài Gòn: Trình Bày, 1967), 518.
212. "A book reread is one fewer sold," Michael Moriarty says. See Michael Moriarty, *Roland Barthes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 127.
213. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 15–16.