# Chapter 9
# A Daughter's Filiality, A Courtesan's Moral Propriety and a Wife's Conjugal Love: Rethinking Confucian Ethics for Women in the *Tale of Kiều (Truyện Kiều)*

**Jonathan Y. Tan**

**Abstract** Nguyễn Du's Truyện Kiều ("The Tale of Kiều") is widely regarded as the epitome of Vietnamese culture and literary heritage. This essay seeks to read The Tale of Kiều intratextually to explore the implications of a powerful yet subversive tale of a woman whose unconditional commitment to filiality resulted in her gut-wrenching descent into the abyss of despair as concubine and courtesan. It seeks to show how an intratextual reading reveals the heroine of the story to be a well-educated, strong-willed, intelligent and courageous woman whose character transcended all the rigid stereotypes of traditional Confucian ethical admonitions for women. It will also discuss how Nguyễn Du sought to redefine the relations between parent–child and husband-wife, as well as explore their significance for reconceptualizing Vietnamese Confucian ethics for women away from the "Three Bonds" and "Three Obediences" to a virtue ethics for women that is derived from the Confucian Five Relations.

**Keywords** Nguyễn Du • Truyện Kiều • Tale of Kiều • Confucian • Gender ethics • Women

## 9.1 Introduction

Translated into more than 30 languages and honored as a monumental literary work of international stature, the Vietnamese narrative poem *Truyện Kiều* (*The Tale of Kiều*)[1] is widely regarded as Vietnam's national poem, the epitome of Vietnamese culture and the greatest accomplishment of Vietnamese literary heritage. A masterpiece of the Vietnamese vernacular prosody (*truyện nôm*) with its characteristic

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[1] All Vietnamese and English quotations to *Truyện Kiều* in this essay are taken from Huỳnh (1983).

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"six-eight" (*lục-bát*) verse couplet, the tightly succinct and vividly imaginative 1,627-couplet *Truyện Kiều* was written in the Vietnamese vernacular (*chữ nôm*)[2] by Vietnam's foremost scholar and national poet, Nguyễn Du (1765–1820). Originally written under the title *Đoạn trường tân thanh* ("A new cry from the Sorrowful Ones"),[3] it was first published with minor editing by a fellow scholar, Phạm Quý Thích (1760–1825) under the title *Kim Vân Kiều tân truyện* (*A New Tale of Kim, Vân and Kiều*).

The elegant simplicity of *Truyện Kiều* belies its complicated history of hermeneutical interpretation. On the one hand, as a text *Truyện Kiều* emerged from the early nineteenth century Vietnamese milieu with memories of the destruction of Lê Dynasty (1428–1788) by the Tây-sơn peasant uprising (1778–1802) and the subsequent restoration of feudal Confucian structures by Emperor Gia Long still freshly imprinted in the mind of its author as well as its first audience. The aesthetic, artistic and literary gems in this epic poem express Nguyễn Du's worldview, ethos and thoughts in his creative weaving of language, insights, understandings, meanings into the life realities of early nineteenth century Vietnam. On the other hand, in a real sense the story of *Truyện Kiều* is very much intertwined with the socio-cultural realities of the lives of Vietnamese people in every age and generation. Its powerfully emotional and evocative language is replete with multivalent layers of meaningfulness which defy easy compartmentalization. Clearly, its richly variegated and colorful mosaic of images, tones, metaphors, adages and folk wisdom strikes a deep chord in the hearts and souls of Vietnamese in every age and place. Its deep-seated popularity and wide influence are rooted in its ability to be relevant to, and to continue to nourish the Vietnamese people's ethos and self-identity amidst their daily upheavals and struggles. This is not surprising, because their daily life experiences are grounded in, as well as fleshed out by the many stories which they tell among themselves, of which the story of *Truyện Kiều* stands out as the story *par excellence*.

In other words, the story of *Truyện Kiều* and all other epic stories of cultures and peoples around the world reveal a very important dimension of stories and story-telling. Stories and story-telling are part of the foundational elements which continually embody, shape and reinforce a people's self-identity, life experiences and worldviews. People tell stories to one another because that is how they view and relate to the world. Stories are able to address deeply gnawing existential questions, as well as provide vital comfort in times of crisis or doubt. With their plots, characters, problems, conflicts, attempts at conflict resolution, and the conclusion when everything falls into place, stories are able truly to convey how the way a world is actually perceived by a people. In addition to providing an important matrix for understanding, experiencing and relating to the world, stories may also take on a subversive character and provide the context for subverting, contesting and transforming a prevailing worldview.

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[2] The *chữ nôm* script is a demotic script that uses Chinese ideograms in various combinations for either their semantic equivalence or phonetic similarity to Vietnamese words. This enabled Vietnamese *literati* to compose prosody in the Vietnamese vernacular, in addition to classical prosody in literary Chinese (*chữ Nho*), thereby giving rise to an explosion of vernacular Vietnamese poetry. According to Huỳnh Sanh Thông, Vietnamese literati wrote in *chữ nôm* as "a tool for the rediscovery and celebration of their ancestral roots… If they had been riveting their eyes on books from a quasi-mythical realm beyond the northern frontier, now more and more they turned their ears to the melodies and words, naïve but not devoid of charm or wisdom, of a poetry cultivated by their own people in the soil and mud of their fields" (Huỳnh 1979).

[3] *Đoạn trường* (literally, "cut-up entrails") is a traditional term for the "Sorrowful Ones" i.e., intelligent, talented and beautiful people who are cursed to a gut-wrenching life of woe and despair (Huỳnh 1983).

On the one hand, many scholarly and popular studies on *Truyện Kiều* in the last 100 years have often sought to interpret the highly complex character of *Thúy Kiều*, the heroine of Nguyễn Du's magnum opus, extratextually as a social-national metaphor of the Vietnamese people or nation, or as a political-existential allegory of Nguyễn Du's personal struggles with his divided loyalties (Durand 1966; Chesneaux and Boudarel 1966; Nguyễn Khắc Viện 1965; Nguyễn Văn Hoàn 1965; Huỳnh 1983; Woodside 1983). On the other hand, none of these studies has attempted to read *Truyện Kiều* intratextually as a story in its own right or critically examine the most striking elements of *Truyện Kiều* as a story in and of itself. Here, intratextual readings refer to methods of literary criticism which are able to provide close readings of the details (e.g., character, plot, point of view, etc) of stories and narratives in general, and certainly of *Truyện Kiều* in the present discussion, in order to generate new and fruitful insights. Such intratextual readings of *Truyện Kiều* would reveal Nguyễn Du's subversive portrayal of the character of the heroine, Thúy Kiều, in stark contrast with the strident androcentrism of Confucian moral-ethical norms which were being strictly implemented by the Nguyễn emperors in nineteenth century Vietnam. In other words, when one abandons an extratextual reading of the character of Thúy Kiều in favor of a critical intratextual reading, perhaps one would discover this poem to be a powerful yet subversive story of a woman whose unconditional commitment to filiality (*hiếu*) resulted in her gut-wrenching descent into the abyss of despair as concubine and courtesan. With stoic and unwavering perseverance (*nhẫn*), she eventually triumphed and was reunited with her family and her true love. While this poem certainly upholds traditional Confucian virtues such as filiality (*hiếu*) and moral propriety (*lễ-giáo*) from beginning to end, nevertheless it proceeds to *relativize* and *subvert* their oppressive impact on women.

An intratextual reading the story of *Thúy Kiều* and her confrontation with the socio-cultural challenges of the androcentric Confucian society in which she lived in raises interesting questions on how Nguyễn Du might have viewed the status of Vietnamese women and the moral-ethical norms which bound their conduct in the midst of the nineteenth century revival of Confucianism under the Nguyễn emperors. Surely it was not a mere coincidence that Nguyễn Du wrote *Truyện Kiều* at about the same time that Emperor Gia Long promulgated the *Hoàng Việt Luật-lệ* ("Laws and Regulations of the Imperial Viet") in 1812. This was a harsh legal code which was based upon the deeply Confucian Great Qing Legal Code (*Da Qing Lüli*), and which eroded the status and reinforced the subordination of nineteenth century Vietnamese women. Moreover, the subversiveness of this poem can also be seen in the fact that Nguyễn Du wrote it in vernacular (*truyện nôm*) prosody and the popular script (*chữ nôm*) rather than in the classical Chinese prosody and script (*chữ Nho*) which the Nguyễn emperors favored. Clearly, the subversive power of vernacular *truyện nôm* prosody to inspire or incite opposition to the Confucian status quo was recognized by the Vietnamese political elite, as the following folk adage attests: "*nôm-na là cha mách-qué*" ("the popular vernacular is the father of knaves and rogues"). As Huỳnh Sanh Thông explains, this folk adage "does not, as some critics or historians have claimed, sum up the utter contempt men in power were supposed to feel for the native tongue and their worship of Chinese by inference. Rather, it dramatically says how much they feared the potential mischief of antiestablishment diatribes in folk verse, either spread by word of mouth or distributed in the Southern script" (1979).

This is not to say that the various extratextual interpretations of the character of Thúy Kiều as social-national metaphor or political-existential allegory in scholarly and popular studies are inaccurate or mistaken. Clearly, as the Vietnamese national poem and the epitome of the Vietnamese literary tradition, the status of *Truyện Kiều* as a Vietnamese "classic" is not in doubt. *Truyện Kiều* fulfills all the elements of a "classic" as enumerated by David Tracy, viz., it is a text which bears "an excess and permanence of meaning, yet always resisting definitive interpretation," and "though highly particular in origin and expression," it has "the possibility of being universal" in its effect (Tracy 1987). One also notes Tracy's contention that "the classic is important hermeneutically because it represents the best exemplar of what we seek: an example of both radical stability become permanence and radical instability become excess of meaning through ever-changing receptions" (Tracy 1987). More importantly, it is precisely because of the paradox of "excess and permanence of meaning" that one can engage in both extratextual and intratextual interpretations of *Truyện Kiều*. In Tracy's words, a classic is not so easily domesticated: "It is difficult to approach any classic text and force it into the Procrustean bed of more of the same or the deceptively more modest claim that 'Well, it is similar enough to what I already know to merit no greater effort at understanding" (Tracy 1987). Likewise, Hans-Georg Gadamer emphatically argued that "not just occasionally but *always*, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author" (Gadamer 1989, *emphasis added*). As he explained:

> Every age has *to understand a transmitted text in its own way*, for the text belongs to the whole tradition whose content interest the age and in which it seeks to understand itself. The real meaning of a text, as it speaks to the interpreter, *does not depend on the contingencies of the author and his original audience*. It is certainly not identical with them, for *it is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter* and hence by the totality of the objective course of history (Gadamer 1989, *emphasis added*).

Elsewhere, Gadamer stated: "Just as the events of history do not in general manifest any agreement with the subjective ideas of the person who stands and acts within history, so the sense of a text in general reaches far beyond what its author originally intended" (Gadamer 1989). As Gadamer pointed out, new questions by new audiences often open up new possibilities of meaning. For Gadamer, these new questions, insights and interpretation are part of an ongoing and infinite process by which "new sources of understanding are continually emerging that reveal unsuspected elements of meaning" (Gadamer 1989). This ability to ask new questions presupposes the possibility of multiple standpoints and referents which are capable of revealing new insights and interpretations, leading in turn to the possibility of generating an intricately woven tapestry of diverse and profound meaningfulness. Clearly, precedents are important, but they are not exhaustive. No one approach can exhaust all the meanings of *Truyện Kiều*.

Hence, as a "classic," *Truyện Kiều* possesses multiple referents and interpretational standpoints which allow for both extratextual and intratextual readings of this poem. There is an inherent dynamism within the polysemy and multivalency of this "classic" poem which is able to generate new meanings in response to new questions by new audiences in new circumstances. In addition, the character of *Thúy Kiều* is replete with multivalency, such that both extratextual and intratextual interpretations are possible in different hermeneutical contexts. Indeed, extratextual interpretations were carried out in the past, and have become precedents for contemporary interpretations of this epic poem. At the same time, while extratextual precedents are important, nevertheless they are not exhaustive. The very open-endedness of *Truyện Kiều* as a "classic" means that fresh rereadings from different perspectives and using different methods are capable of revealing new insights and interpretations. To put it another way: both extratextual and intratextual readings of this poem lead to the possibility of generating an intricately woven tapestry of diverse and profound meaningfulness.

This essay seeks to read *Truyện Kiều* intratextually to explore the implications of a powerful yet subversive tale of a woman whose unconditional commitment to filiality resulted in her gut-wrenching descent into the abyss of despair as concubine and courtesan. It seeks to show how an intratextual reading reveals the heroine of the story to be a well-educated, strong-willed, intelligent and courageous woman whose character transcended all the rigid stereotypes of traditional Confucian ethical admonitions for women. It will also discuss how Nguyễn Du sought to redefine the relations between parent–child and husband-wife, as well as explore their significance for reconceptualizing contemporary Vietnamese Confucian ethics for women away from the classic "Three Bonds" and "Three Obediences" to a virtue ethics for women that is derived from the Confucian Five Relations.

## 9.2 Nguyễn Du: His Life and Achievements

Nguyễn Du was born in 1765 into a Vietnamese Confucian scholar-gentry family in the North with a long and illustrious heritage of service at the imperial court of the Lê Dynasty. He began his formal education at the age of six and by all accounts was a brilliant and erudite student with a prodigious memory who successfully passed the imperial examination at the young age of 19. The period in which he grew up (1765–1800) was a period of transition and crisis that was marked by much discontent, anarchy, and turbulence. The weak and decadent Lê Dynasty was a pale shadow of its glorious past, desperately clinging on to a farcical show of pomp without any real power beyond the imperial palace. Real power was in the hands of the provincial lords (*chúa*) from two feuding families, that is, the rival Trịnh and Nguyễn clans that controlled the northern and southern regions respectively since the 1620s. More significantly, the year 1771 saw the rise of the Tây-sơn revolt that began as a peasant rebellion led by three brothers, Nguyễn Nhạc, Nguyễn Lữ, and Nguyễn Huệ. Capitalizing on the peasants' deep-rooted discontent, this incipient uprising soon developed into a full-blown revolutionary movement that destroyed and replaced the hegemony of the Trịnh and Nguyễn clans with an egalitarian socio-political order with a modest program of land and wealth redistribution (Durand 1966).

Coming from a family with a distinguished record of faithful service to both the Lê and Trịnh rulers, Nguyễn Du had no sympathy for the peasant-based Tây-sơn uprising. Not surprisingly, he spent most of the first 35 years of his life alternating between resisting and surviving the Tây-sơn revolution, "haunted by the tragedy of a vanished 'orthodox succession' of emperors to which his family had been deeply attached and by the whirlpool of unstable, promiscuous political affiliations which had replaced it" (Woodside 1983). Upon his failure to join the imperial cortege of Emperor Lê Chiêu-Thống who was fleeing into exile in China in 1789, Nguyễn Du collaborated with his elder brother-in-law Đoàn Nguyễn-Tuấn in a failed bid to restore the Lê Dynasty. When this revolt was crushed, he fled to the sanctuary of his native village. Next, Nguyễn Du traveled to the south to offer his services to Nguyễn Phúc-Ánh (1762–1820), the sole survivor of the Tây-sơn massacre of the Nguyễn clan who was then fighting to recapture the south from Tây-sơn rule. Unfortunately, he was captured and briefly imprisoned by the Tây-sơn army. Demoralized, he wanted to further role in the ongoing civil war. He retreated to the countryside where he engaged in introspective self-reflection, hunting, reading, and writing poetry (Durand 1966).

After Nguyễn Phúc-Ánh overthrew the Tây-sơn Dynasty and declared himself Emperor of a unified Vietnam under the name of Gia Long in 1802, he summoned Nguyễn Du to serve him in his court. Nguyễn Du responded reluctantly, if only to ensure that his family was not persecuted for their efforts to restore the Lê Dynasty (Huỳnh 1983). In 1805, he served in an imperial "scholars' pavilion," the Đông-các Đại-học-sĩ. In 1813, he was placed in charge of a diplomatic mission to China and was promoted to be the Assessor of Ritual Propriety in the Ministry of Rites in 1815. Subsequently, he was appointed to lead a second diplomatic mission to China but passed away in Huế in 1820 before he could carry out his duties (Durand 1966).

Lest anyone should have any illusion that Nguyễn Du exercised real political power after his rehabilitation by Gia Long, his official appointments were designed to ensure that he and other members of the Confucian scholar-gentry class who had served the discredited *ancien regime* would not pose any threat to Gia Long's reign. As Woodside explains:

> [T]he Huế scholars' pavilions were usually little more than airless, apolitical sanctuaries which collected and employed elderly Lê dynasty scholars or supplied learned tutors to the children of the imperial family. Diplomatic missions to China, for their part, were customarily staffed with poetic masters of Chinese literature, who could represent Vietnamese politics in unimpeachably Chinese terms within the frigidly condescending atmosphere of a Peking audience hall (Woodside 1983).

Undoubtedly, Nguyễn Du's service to Gia Long projected a loyalty of convenience to Southern upstarts. Conveniently concealed beneath this thin veneer of loyalty was his depression and agony at his compromises with the vicissitudes of a new socio-political order that viewed people like him with much suspicion. His inner depression, which arose out of the ignominy of his rehabilitated status, led him eventually to die of illness in 1820 after stoically refusing medical treatment. Quoting from the official court chronicles Durand states:

> Minh-mệnh appréciait beaucoup Nguyễn Du qui, très fier et très indépendant de caractère, présentait cependant un extérieur doux et timide. Devant l'Empereur il parlait peu et semblait comme effrayé… Dans l'exercise de ses fonctions Nguyễn Du était humble avec ses supérieurs et il avait toujours l'air triste et peu heureux. Quand il fut malade il ne voulut pas boire de médicaments et mourut sans faire d'éclats (1966).

It was during this period of inner depression, personal disillusionment, and extended self-introspection that Nguyễn Du penned the powerfully poignant and much-beloved *Truyện Kiều* in the Vietnamese vernacular (*chữ nôm*). On the one hand, it is true that *Truyện Kiều* was not Nguyễn Du's original composition *per se*, but rather his condensed rendition into the Vietnamese vernacular (*chữ nôm*) prosody of an early Qing Dynasty Chinese prose novel entitled "The Tale of Jin, Yun, and Qiao" (*Jin Yun Qiao Chuan*) by an anonymous author who used the pseudonym, "Pure-hearted and Talented Master" (Qingxin Cairen) (Nghiêm 1966; Huỳnh 1983).[4] In turn, the Chinese prose novel is a literary fictionalization of certain historical events in 16th century Ming China:

> The novel is about historical figures who lived and died during the Ming Dynasty. In 1554, Governor Hu Tsung-hsien (Hồ Tôn Hiến) mounted a campaign to quell the revolt led by Hsü Hai (Từ Hải), whose troops controlled the seacoast area of Fukien and Chekiang. Unable to vanquish him by force of arms, Hu bribed Hsü's mistress, a former courtesan named Wang Ts'ui-ch'iao (Vương Thúy Kiều): she persuaded the rebel to surrender, and he is killed. Forced to marry a 'barbarian' (a tribal chief), she drowned herself. But in the novel the anonymous author allowed her to be rescued and reunited with her family (Huỳnh 1983).[5]

On the other hand, by condensing a 20-chapter prose novel into a tightly succinct and vividly imaginative 1,627-couplet *truyện nôm* poem, Nguyễn Du had successfully transformed a mediocre novel into a powerful expression of hope and fulfillment. Today, *Truyện Kiều* is regarded as Vietnam's national poem, the epitome of the literary heritage of Vietnam, and honored as a monumental literary work of international stature. For all his literary accomplishments, Nguyễn Du was honored by UNESCO as one of the greatest poets of humanity (Đặng Quốc Cơ 1998; Đặng Vũ Nhuế 1998).

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[4] For an excerpt of this Chinese prose novel in French translation with commentary, see Nghiêm (1966).

[5] See also Durand (1966) for a discussion of the historical allusions of this Chinese prose novel. For studies of the metamorphosis of the Chinese novel into a Vietnamese poem, see Nghiêm (1966) and Benoit (1981).

## 9.3 A Synopsis of *Truyện Kiều*

Old man Vương had three children, viz., two older daughters Thúy Kiều and Thúy Vân and the youngest was a son called Vương Quan who was studying to be a scholar (lines 13–16). Of the two daughters, Thúy Kiều was by far the more beautiful, brilliant and talented, being well versed in poetry, painting, singing, music performance and composition (lines 23–34). The plot unfurls on the "Festival of Sweeping the Graves" (*Thanh-ming*) in spring, when she chanced upon the abandoned grave of a courtesan, Đạm Tiên (lines 59–80). She was moved to make offerings for Đạm Tiên, who subsequently appeared to her in a dream that night and forewarned her of her unfortunate destiny as recorded in the "Register of the Sorrowful Ones" (*Sổ Đoạn trường*, lines 81–104, 185–202). Meanwhile, on the same day at the cemetery her eyes also glanced upon Kim Trọng, a youthful scholar and Vương Quan's classmate. Kim Trọng also caught sight of her and it was love at first sight for them (lines 133–170). Subsequently, they met secretly at his house and vowed to bind each other in eternal love (lines 289–528).

Alas for Thúy Kiều, she was hit with a double tragedy. First, Kim Trọng was suddenly called home far away on the death of his uncle (lines 531–567). Barely had she digested that heartbreaking news when her father was imprisoned on false charges (lines 575–598). Thúy Kiều agreed to sell herself into concubinage to an unscrupulous character, Mã Giám-sinh to raise the money to redeem her father (lines 599–692). Before Thúy Kiều left, she made her younger sister Thúy Vân promised that she would marry Kim Trọng in her stead (lines 693–756). Unfortunately for Thúy Kiều, Mã Giám-sinh was married to an ex-prostitute, Tú Bà (Old Lady Tú) who operated a brothel. He connived to place her there with the intention of living off her earnings (lines 805–844). In her despair, she tried unsuccessfully to commit suicide the first time (lines 979–1000). Tú Bà promised that she could leave when a decent man came to buy her out (lines 1001–1054). Meanwhile, she set a trap for Thúy Kiều, getting one of her minions to feign sympathy for the naïve Thúy Kiều, persuading her to escape with him (lines 1059–1120). In the ensuing escape, Thúy Kiều was caught and savagely beaten by Tú Bà, who used this attempted escape as an excuse to force her into prostitution (lines 1121–1274).

Eventually a wealthy man called Thúc Kỳ Tâm fell in love with Thúy Kiều, bought her out and made her his second-rank wife (lines 1275–1472). They lived happily together for a year until Thúy Kiều suggested that he should go home and introduce her to his first wife, Hoạn Thư ("Lady Hoạn") (lines 1473–1530). However, Hoạn Thư found out about her husband's deceit from public gossip. Filled with rage and jealousy, she arranged for Thúy Kiều to be kidnapped, beaten and made her slave to serve her and her hen-pecked husband, who was now too afraid to acknowledge his second-rank wife (lines 1531–1884). After humiliating her, Hoạn Thư allowed Thúy Kiều to become a Buddhist nun. Changing her name to "Cleansed

Spring" (Trạc Tuyền), she was cloistered in the shrine of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Quan-âm in the garden of Hoạn Thư (lines 1909–1936). Unable to play the game of constant humiliation with Hoạn Thư, Thúy Kiều ran away with several altar vessels from the shrine and sought refuge in a Buddhist temple, where she placed herself under the protection of its prioress, Giác Duyên (lines 2003–2060). However, Giác Duyên soon learned of Thúy Kiều's escape with stolen objects. To avoid a scandal, she arranged for Thúy Kiều to leave the sanctuary of the monastery to the care of the Bạc family (lines 2063–2086). Unfortunately, the Bạc family proved to be pimps and Thúy Kiều soon found herself back in the brothel (lines 2087–2164).

Thúy Kiều's fortune took a turn for the better. A rebel leader by the name of Từ Hải fell in love with her, redeemed her and took her as his spouse (lines 2167–2212). A year later, Từ Hải led a great uprising, defeated the imperial troops and became the ruler of a vast domain (lines 2213–2288). Both Thúy Kiều and Từ Hải lived happily together for five years. Meanwhile, the provincial governor Hồ Tôn Hiến was ordered to capture Từ Hải. Having failed to defeat Từ Hải by force of arms, he resorted to a cunning stratagem to win Từ Hải's head (lines 2451–2460). He made a spurious peace offer to Từ Hải, who immediately rejected it (lines 2460–2472). However, the guileless Thúy Kiều, naïvely believing in the fine words of Hồ Tôn Hiến, persuaded her husband to accept his peace offer (lines 2473–2502). No sooner had Từ Hải ordered his troops to disarm than the imperial army launched a treacherous attack, killing him and capturing Thúy Kiều (lines 2503–2564). In her ignominy, Hồ Tôn Hiến compelled her to marry a local tribal chieftain (lines 2565–2602). She refused, ran away, and for a second time, tried unsuccessfully to commit suicide by jumping into the Tiền-đường river, but was rescued unconscious by Giác Duyên (lines 2603–2710). While still in her unconscious stupor, Thúy Kiều met Đạm Tiên in a dream, who assured her that because of all the merits she had performed, her name has been struck out from the "Register of the Sorrowful Ones" (*Sổ Đoạn trường*) (lines 2711–2724).

Fifteen years had elapsed since Thúy Kiều was separated from her first love, Kim Trọng. At first, he had searched for her in vain upon learning about her misfortune. Unable to find her, in his grief he married Thúy Vân (lines 2739–2856). By chance, he encountered Giác Duyên, who informed him that Thúy Kiều was still alive (lines 2973–2992). Finally, Thúy Kiều was reunited with her family and Kim Trọng (lines 3009–3032). On account of the entreaties of Thúy Vân, Kim Trọng, and her family members, Thúy Kiều reluctantly agreed to marry Kim Trọng (lines 3061–3134). At Thúy Kiều's insistence, Kim Trọng reluctantly agreed not to consummate the marriage (lines 3135–3226). The household was richly blessed. Kim Trọng had a successful civil service career, Thúy Vân bore him many heirs, and Thúy Kiều lived happily together with her beloved, a kindred couple "sharing no bed but the joys of lute and verse" ("*chẳng trong chăn-gối cũng ngoài cầm-thơ*") (line 3222).

## 9.4 What Happens When One Reads *Truyện Kiều* Intratextually?

Moving from the generality of Vietnamese prosody to the specificity of *Truyện Kiều*, one must acknowledge that *Truyện Kiều* is an extremely complex poem with a complicated history of interpretation across the ideological spectrum. On the one hand, it is true that the prevailing scholarship of the last 100 years has tended to downplay the Confucian elements of *Truyện Kiều*. For example, Đặng Vũ Nhuế (1998) suggests that Confucian values "seems to be irrelevant" in the case of *Thúy Kiều* because, among other things, she failed to practise the four virtues (*tứ-đức*).[6] On the other hand, there was a vocal minority of highly conservative Vietnamese *literati* who took issue with Nguyễn Du's characterization of Thúy Kiều. They were led by the famous scholar-minister Nguyễn Công Trứ (1778–1858), who, among other things, wrote the following scathing critique of the character of Thúy Kiều for her poor ethical-moral conduct according to Confucian mores:

> "Pour les belles c'est connu, le sort est ingrat
> Kiều, dit-on, de manquer à son serment
> Elle oublia l'épingle et l'éventail donnés en gage à Kim Lang
> La piété filiale l'emporte sur l'amour, c'est juste après tout
> Mais de Mã Giám-sinh à Từ Hải
> Quand la fleur brisée se vendait aux maisons de joie
> Jusqu'à blaser abeilles et papillons
> Que restait-il de la piété filiale de Kiều?
> Le sort ingrat n'a jamais souillé les cœurs purs
> Ah! Les malheurs sans nom d'une vie de plaisirs!" (Chesneaux and Boudarel 1966)

These conservative scholars recognized, but could not accept *Truyện Kiều* for what it was, i.e., the exaltation of an independent, courageous and strong-willed woman who overcame all difficulties and sorrows in her life to achieve a marriage of equals with her true love. Their interpretation of this text as subversive of Confucian mores for women should not be surprising, especially when juxtaposed with Emperor Gia Long's program of strict Confucianization of the early nineteenth century Vietnamese society. Seen from this perspective, the many extratextual endeavors to interpret the character of Thúy Kiều metaphorically, existentially or allegorically are in reality endeavors to *relativize or avoid the profound iconoclastic impact* arising from *intratextual* readings. This is because intratextual readings invariably give rise to a damning indictment of the androcentrism of Confucianism, to the chagrin of Nguyễn Công Trứ and other conservative Vietnamese Confucian scholars.

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[6] According to the fifteenth century Sino-Vietnamese Confucian admonitions on the proper ordering of family life, *Gia huấn ca*, which instructs various members of a Vietnamese family on strict adherence to Confucian moral-ethical orthodoxy, the four virtues for women (*tứ-đức*) are *dung*, *công*, *ngôn*, and *hạnh*, which Stephen Young succinctly summarizes as follows: "*Dung* is appearance, which should be neat and attractive. *Công* is industry, which should be precise and careful. *Ngôn* is speech, which should be submissive and respectful. *Hạnh* is character, which should be upright, filial, devoted, and trustworthy" (Young 1998). Note the parallels in the Confucian Book of Rites (*Liji* or *Lễ-kí*), which states: "Therefore, anciently, for three months before the marriage of a young lady, if the temple of the high ancestor (of her surname) were still standing (and she had admission to it), she was taught in it, as the public hall (of the members of her surname); if it were no longer standing (for her), she was taught in the public hall of the Head of that branch of the surname to which she belonged – she was taught there the virtue, the speech, the carriage, and the work of a wife" (Legge 1885), as well as Ban Zhao (48–117 CE)'s presentation of the four virtues in her classic work, *Instructions for Women* (*Nüjie*) as "(1) womanly virtue; (2) womanly words; (3) womanly bearing; and (4) womanly work" (Swann 1932).

In hindsight, perhaps one could posit three ways of looking at this state of affairs. First, there are close parallels between the fictional life experiences of Thúy Kiều with the real life experiences of Vietnam's infamous poetess and Nguyễn Du's contemporary, Hồ Xuân Hương (1772–1822), whom "Vietnamese historians are virtually unanimous in acclaiming… as the 'most special' poetry writer who ever lived in Vietnam" (Woodside 1971). Both the fictional Thúy Kiều and the real-life Hồ Xuân Hương were extraordinary well talented and intelligent, witty, skilled in rhetoric and able to express themselves in excellent prosody. Both were also concubines for part of their adult lives. Both had sought to deconstruct and reshape prevailing Confucian moral-ethical norms for women by their subversive actions. In this regard, Woodside observes that Hồ Xuân Hương "wrote poetry which, for all its playfulness, may have been the darkest assault upon Confucian ethics ever delivered by a literate scholar of a classical East Asian society. Most modern Vietnamese writers agree that she often went too far, to the point where her contemporaries regarded her as a 'monster,' whose influence should be obliterated" (Woodside 1971). Just as many scholars wanted to "obliterate" the subversive and deconstructive influence of Hồ Xuân Hương, perhaps many scholars sought to relativize the character of Thúy Kiều on the same grounds.

Second, the efforts at metaphorical, allegorical and existential relativization of *Truyện Kiều* may be compared to the manner in which Vietnamese literati sought to relativize the poem of a fan's fate by Ban Jieyu (Ban Tiệp-dư), the concubine of the Han Emperor Chengdi. Citing Huỳnh Sanh Thông:

> When Lady Pan, disgraced consort of the Chinese Emperor Han Ch'eng-ti, used in her plaintive poem the fact that a fan is appreciated in summer and tossed aside in autumn as a metaphor of her fate, she must have been aware that the delta-shaped object perfectly emblems both a woman's sexuality and her condition in a world dominated by men. Yet *male writers always feigned not to see it in that light and preferred to treat the Han queen's fan as a political allegory, representing the plight of some Confucian scholar-official fallen out of favor with his sovereign or unemployed in auspicious times*: that was the interpretation adopted by Nguyễn Trãi in "For years you wallowed in the scholars' world" or by Nguyễn Khuyến in "To a discarded fan." Almost ten centuries after Lady Pan, it fell to Hồ Xuân Hương, a Vietnamese woman brought up in a folk tradition of no mealymouthedness, to confront the sexual meaning of a fan and compose a hymn to womanhood (Huỳnh 1979, *emphasis added*).

In other words, many otherwise brilliant Vietnamese Confucian scholars, e.g., Nguyễn Trãi and Nguyễn Khuyến could not, or would not accept the possibility that the fan imagery might actually be referring to a woman's quest to understand herself and her precarious position in a patriarchal milieu. They preferred a safer recourse by allegorizing the fan imagery as symbolizing the plight of an out-of-favor

Confucian scholar-gentry. In view of the foregoing, perhaps the gauntlet thrown down by Nguyễn Du was way ahead of its time and like Ban Jieyu's fan imagery, too subversive to be seriously considered. This has resulted in the tendency of generations of scholars to look for safer ways of interpreting this poem by relegating it to the realm of allegory, metaphor or existentialism. Such an understanding is also borne out by the fact that historically, many Vietnamese *paterfamilias* considered *Truyện Kiều* to be subversive of the patriarchal order and forbade their wives and daughters to read it, for fear that they would be "contaminated" by Thúy Kiều's free spirit.

Such a tendency to relativize a potentially subversive text in order to blunt its challenge to the status quo is not merely a phenomenon among nineteenth century Vietnamese Confucian scholars. Allegorizing in order to blunt the subversive edge of a text is a common strategy in many cultures and traditions. For example, the scandalous dimension of the adulterous affair between Krishna and Radha, as well as the explicit description of their love-making in Jayadeva's love poem, Gitagovinda (circa 1185 C.E.) have been relativized and domesticated by later mystics and *Vaisnava* adherents as an allegory or metaphor which describes the longing of the human for the divine. One could also say the same for allegorical and metaphorical interpretations of the Song of Songs in both Jewish and Christian scriptural exegesis.

Third, perhaps one could infer from the subversive characterization of Thúy Kiều that Nguyễn Du was interested in reconciling the harsh androcentrism of the Nguyễn emperors' rigid Confucian orthodoxy with the less restrictive attitudes towards women among the popular masses in nineteenth century Vietnam. This should not come as a surprise, especially since he would have been painfully aware that his contemporary, the extraordinarily talented Vietnamese poetess, Hồ Xuân Hương was highly outraged and embittered that despite her literary talents and excellent educational qualifications, she could never aspire to the public careers in nineteenth century Vietnam that were opened to her male counterparts with lesser scholarly credentials. He would also have been cognizant of the fact that there was no love lost among the popular masses for the Nguyễn emperors' program of strict Confucianization. As the popular folk adage points out: "*phép vua thua lệ làng*" ("the king's law [i.e., Confucianism] must yield to the village custom").

If Nguyễn Du had such subversive intentions, he could never have expressed it explicitly, for fear of running afoul of spies from the Bureau of Censors (*Đô Sát Viện*) who reported on any bureaucrat's deviation from Confucian orthodoxy. Under the Nguyễn rule, all writings were carefully scrutinized and printing presses tightly controlled. Consequently, many Vietnamese scholars disguised their views on particular socio-cultural or politic issues using the fictive literary genres of novel and poetry. The ambiguity of fiction as a literary device enabled Vietnamese scholars to cloak their subversive or anti-establishment views without attracting too much notice from the Bureau of Censors.

On the basis of the foregoing, perhaps one could draw a parallel between an intratextual reading of the subversive character of Thúy Kiều in *Truyện Kiều* on the one hand, and the tradition of subversive pro-women Chinese fictive literature written by eighteenth and nineteenth century Confucian scholars on the other hand. An important but often overlooked development in Chinese Confucianism beginning from the late-seventeenth century and reaching its apogee in the nineteenth century was the rise of subversive pro-women fictive literature by Confucian scholar-gentry as covert critique against the status quo of Confucian androcentrism during the Qing Dynasty. Not surprisingly, such veiled attacks at Confucian orthodoxy were cast by these Chinese scholars in fictive terms to avoid the loss of their positions or death for subversion. In general, these writings were remarkable for their positive portrayal of women vis-à-vis the pervasive androcentrism of eighteenth and nineteenth century Confucian orthodoxy. The ambiguity of fiction as a literary device enabled Qing-era Confucian scholars to express more positive views on women in a subtle but defiant way than what Confucian orthodoxy would permit. In doing so, they were interested to attack practices imposed upon women in the name of moral propriety (*lễ-giáo*) such as female illiteracy, widow suicide, concubinage and foot-binding.[7]

## 9.5 New Insights from an Intratextual Reading of the Character of Thúy Kiều

### *9.5.1 Education (*văn*)*

One of the first things which one notices about Thúy Kiều in the poem is her education (*văn*) and upbringing. Contrary to the Vietnamese Confucian adage, "women without talent are virtuous" (*nữ tử vô tài tiện thị đức*), which idealized a woman's ignorance to ensure her submission to familial duties and obligations, Nguyễn Du portrayed Thúy Kiều as being highly educated in the classical Confucian education. Thus, in lines 29–32, one reads:

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[7] Of the many subversive pro-women Chinese fictive narratives, three stand out: Pu Songling's *Liaozhai Zhiyi* ("Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio"), Wu Jingzi's *Rulin Waishi* ("The Scholars") and Li Ruzhen's *Jinghua Yuan* ("Flowers in the Mirror"). Written in 1679, Pu Songling's *Liaozhai Zhiyi* enjoys the distinction of being the earliest attempt by a Confucian scholar to write a fictive narrative which discusses women's gender roles, albeit in classical Chinese prose. The *Liaozhai Zhiyi* is a collection of short stories which portrayed women as more independent, intelligent, active and courageous than men in moments of crisis. Wu Jingzi's *Rulin Waishi*, which is often regarded as the first great Qing novel in vernacular Chinese rather than in classical Chinese, attacks the androcentrism of Confucian orthodoxy by, among other things, satirizing widow suicide as a pre-eminent Confucian virtue of female moral propriety. Li Ruzhen's *Jinghua Yuan* is often regarded as a fictive *tour de force* which brilliantly subverts and deconstructs the pervasive Confucian androcentrism of Qing China. This novel is best remembered for its brilliant attack on Confucian androcentrism in its imaginative satire of a "Land of Women" where gender roles are reversed. The merchant Lin Zhiyang visited the "Land of Women" hoping to make a fortune selling cosmetics. Unfortunately, he was captured and selected to be a "concubine" to the female "king," who ordered that Lin be "womanized," i.e., his feet were bound, face powdered, eyebrows plucked and ears pierced, and so forth. For a more in-depth analysis of these three novels, see Hou (1986) and Ropp (1976).

> "By Heaven blessed with wit, she knew all skills,
> she could write verse and paint, could sing and chant.
> Of music she had mastered all five tones,
> and played the lute far better than *Ai Chang*."[8]

Even her fiancé, Kim Trọng was very impressed with her literary ability, comparing her to two erudite Chinese women scholars who where the epitome of the highest learning, i.e., Ban Zhao (Ban Chiêu, 48–117 C.E.) and Xie Daoyun (Tạ Đạo Uẩn, c.340–c.399 C.E.) (lines 405–6):

> "Your magic conjures gems and pearls!" he cried.
> "Could Pan and Hsieh have measured up to this?"[9]

Two observations can be made here. First, it appears that Thúy Kiều's poetry skills mirrored closely the poetry skills of the extraordinarily talented Vietnamese poetess *par excellence*, Hồ Xuân Hương, as previously discussed. Second, and more importantly, the choice of Ban Zhao (Ban Chiêu) is noteworthy, because she was a highly respected female Confucian scholar and the first *de facto* woman historiographer in the history of China. According to her official biography in the *History of the Later Han Dynasty*, she "was 'deeply learned and highly talented' and a model of widowly rectitude" (Raphals 1998). Upon the premature demise of her elder brother, the noted Confucian scholar Ban Gu (32–92 C.E.), she was invited by Emperor He (89–105 C.E.) to the Dongguan Imperial Library in order to complete the writing of the "Eight Tables" and the "Treatise on Astronomy" in the *History of the Han Dynasty* (*Hanshu*), a task which had been left unfinished by her brother Ban Gu, thereby putting her on par with, if not above many of her male Confucian counterparts (Swann 1932).

### *9.5.2 Moral Propriety (*lễ-giáo*)*

Thúy Kiều was clearly an independent and strong-willed woman who had a mind of her own, and yet acted within the bounds of moral propriety (*lễ-giáo*). On the one hand, she was bold enough to defy the strict Confucian orthodoxy by not only freely loving Kim Trọng without parental consent, but also visiting him without her parents' knowledge (see lines 301–2). Prima facie, Confucian moral orthodoxy would consider it scandalous that she vowed eternal love to Kim Trọng without her parent's knowledge and permission. On the other hand, she had no intention marrying him without her parents' consent, as can be seen in her response to Kim Trọng's wooing (lines 333–336):

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[8] The Vietnamese text reads:

> *Thông-minh vốn sẵn tư trời,*
> *pha nghề thi họa đủ mùi ca ngâm.*
> *Cung-thương làu bậc ngũ-âm,*
> *nghề riêng ăn đứt hồ-cầm Ngại Trương.*

[9] The Vietnamese text reads:

> *Khen: "Tài nhả ngọc phun châu!*
> *"Nàng Ban ả Tạ cũng đâu thế này?"*

> When comes the time for love, the marriage bond,
> my parents' wish will tie it or will not.
> You deign to care for me, but I'm too young
> to know what's right and dare not give my word."[10]

Kim Trọng, a good Confucian gentleman himself, promised to arrange for a go-between to set up the wedding, which was the only way they could marry (see lines 341–2). More significantly, when Kim Trọng, who was intoxicated with Thúy Kiều's music and charms, began lustfully to take wanton liberties with her, she replied in no uncertain terms (lines 501–10, 519–22):

> She said: "Treat not our love as just a game
> please stay away from me and let me speak.
> What is a mere peach blossom that one should
> fence off the garden, thwart the bluebird's quest?
> But you've named me your bride – to serve her man,
> she must place chastity above all else.
> They played in mulberry groves along the P'u,
> but who would care for wenches of that ilk?
> Are we to snatch the moment, pluck the fruit,
> and in one sole day wreck a lifelong trust?
> …
> If I don't cast the shuttle in defense,
> we'll later blush for it – who'll bear the guilt?
> Why force your wish on your shy flower so soon?
> While I'm alive, you'll some time get your due."[11]

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[10] The Vietnamese text reads:

> *Dầu khi lá thắm chỉ hồng*
> *nên chăng thì cũng tại lòng mẹ-cha*
> *Nặng lòng xót liễu vì hoa,*
> *trẻ-thơ đã biết đâu mà dám thưa.*

[11] The Vietnamese text reads:

> *Thưa rằng: "Đừng lấy làm chơi,*
> *"Rẽ cho thưa hết một lời đã nao!*
> *"Vẻ chi một đóa yêu-đào,*
> *"vườn hồng chi dám ngăn-rào chim xanh.*
> *"Đã cho vào bậc bố-kinh,*
> *"đạo tòng-phu lấy chữ trinh làm đầu.*
> *"Ra tuồng trên Bộc trong dâu,*
> *"thì con người ấy ai cầu làm chi.*
> *"Phải điều ăn xổi ở thì,*
> *"tiết trăm năm nỡ bỏ đi một ngày.*
> …
> *"Gieo thoi trước chẳng giữ-giàng,*
> *"để sau nên thẹn cùng chàng bởi ai?*
> *"Vội chi liễu ép hoa nài?*
> *"Còn thân ắt lại đền-bồi có khi."*

Clearly, Nguyễn Du praised mutual love freely shared between two individuals, but he also argued that it should not be an excuse for lustful and scandalous behavior. Although men and women could freely choose their spouses, they ought to observe moral propriety in doing so.

### *9.5.3 Filiality (***hiếu***)*

Thúy Kiều did not shirk her obligations of filiality (*hiếu*) to her father when he was imprisoned on false charges. Notwithstanding the fact that she had pledged her love to Kim Trọng, she, as the eldest daughter, resolved to sell herself into concubinage to save her father. Far from being an easy decision, she struggled with the pain of deciding, torn between love to her fiancé and filial duty (*hiếu*) to her father. Nguyễn Du described her anguish at the dilemma which confronted her as follows (lines 599–604):

> "By what means could she save her flesh and blood?
> When evil strikes, you bow to circumstance.
> As you must weigh and choose between your love
> and filial duty, which will turn the scale?
> She put aside all vows of love and troth
> a child first pays the debts of birth and care."[12]

In fact, even when she was the consort of Từ Hải, the rebel leader turned ruler, her filiality (*hiếu*) did not diminish in fervor (lines 2237–2240):

> For her old parents how it ached, her heart!
> Had time allayed their sorrow at their loss?
> With more than ten years gone, if still alive,
> they must have skin with scales and hair like frost."[13]

When she was reunited with her family after 15 years, Thúy Kiều alternated between her joy at seeing them once again, and the vows of Buddhist nunhood.

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[12] The Vietnamese text reads:

> *Sao cho cốt-nhục vẹn-tuyền?*
> *Trong khi ngộ-biến tòng quyền biết sao.*
> *Duyên hội-ngộ đức cù-lao,*
> *bên tình bên hiếu bên nào nặng hơn?*
> *Để lời thệ hải minh sơn,*
> *lam con trước phải đền ơn sinh-thành.*

[13] The Vietnamese text reads:

> *Xót thay huyên cỗi xuân già*
> *tấm lòng thương-nhớ biết là có nguôi?*
> *Chốc đà mười mấy năm trời,*
> *còn ra khi đã da mồi tóc sương.*

Nevertheless, as a filial daughter she yielded obediently to her father's request to return home (lines 3057–8):

> "Heeding her father's word, had to yield  
> she took leave of cloister and old nun."[14]

While Confucian rigorists may quibble on Thúy Kiều's less-than-literal observance of Confucian orthodoxy in her life as concubine and courtesan, no one can doubt the sincerity of her unconditional filiality (*hiếu*) throughout her entire life. Without any doubt, Thúy Kiều's filiality (*hiếu*), even to the point of struggling with life's adversities with stoic perseverance (*nhẫn*), shines through clearly as the cornerstone for her moral self-cultivation. Clearly, she has faithfully and unconditionally upheld the *grundnorm* of Confucian orthodoxy, because all other Confucian virtues and ideals are either directly or indirectly rooted in the virtue of filiality. On this ground alone, Đặng Vũ Nhuế's assertion that Confucian values "seems to be irrelevant" in the case of *Thúy Kiều* because, among other things, she failed to practice the four virtues (*tứ-đức*) (Đặng Vũ Nhuế 1998) is not justified and therefore untenable. In other words, Thúy Kiều is truly a Confucian *par excellence* by her faithful and unconditional filiality to her father.

### 9.5.4 *Female Chastity (***tiết***)*

In *Truyện Kiều*, Nguyễn Du presented a most remarkable and revolutionary idea of female chastity (*tiết*) in a profoundly moving conversation between Thúy Kiều and Kim Trọng. At first, Thúy Kiều argued that she was unable to marry Kim Trọng because she felt herself ashamed and unworthy of him after failing to preserve her chastity for him (see lines 3091–3112). Kim Trọng's reply was revolutionary (lines 3115–3120, 3123–4):

> "Among those duties falling to her lot,  
> a woman's chastity means many things.  
> For there are times of ease and times of stress:  
> in crisis, must one rigid rule apply?  
> True [filial] daughter, you upheld a woman's role:  
> what dust or dirt could ever sully you?  
> …  
> The faded flower's blooming forth afresh,  
> the waning moon shines more than at its full."[15]

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[14] The Vietnamese text reads:

> *Nghe lời nàng phải chiều lòng*  
> *giã sư giã cảnh đều cùng bước ra.*

[15] The Vietnamese text reads:

> *"Xưa nay trong đạo đàn bà,*  
> *"chữ trinh kia cũng có ba bảy đường.*  
> *"Có khi biến có khi thường,*

Nguyễn Du also returns to this theme in the penultimate couplet (3251–2):

> "Inside ourselves there lies the root of good:
> the heart outweighs all talents on this earth."[16]

Clearly, Nguyễn Du was emphatic that female chastity *transcends* its literal sense (i.e., virginal chastity) to encompass a woman's chastity of heart and mind. Such a figurative understanding of chastity was truly groundbreaking in the 1810s. Not surprisingly, scholars such as Nguyễn Công Trứ criticized him severely for proposing such an "immoral" notion of chastity, arguing that it would lead to promiscuity (Chesneaux and Boudarel 1966). Subsequent generations of scholars were also embarrassed by such a "liberal" interpretation of chastity. They have tended to relativize its full impact and implications for Vietnamese women by allegorizing it instead to refer to Nguyễn Du's personal-existential struggles with his "political" chastity. In this regard, they often draw a parallel between Nguyễn Du, who was forced to renounce his loyalty to the Lê Dynasty and prostitute himself to a dynasty of usurpers to protect his family from reprisals, and Thúy Kiều, who was forced to renounce her loyalty to her betrothed and prostitute herself to scoundrels to ransom her father (Nguyễn Khắc Viện 1965; Nguyễn Văn Hoàn 1965; Huỳnh 1983).

### 9.5.5 *Mutual Respect (***kính***), Reciprocity (***thư***) & Equality (***tề***) in Conjugal Relations*

Nguyễn Du had also relativized the traditional understanding of the obedient submission (*thuận*) of a subservient wife to the dominance of her husband within the hierarchical ordering of the Three Bonds (*tam-cương*)[17] and the Three Obediences (*tam- tòng*).[18] In response to Thúy Kiều's reluctance to consummate the marriage,

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*"có quyền nào phải một đường chấp-kinh.*
*"Như nàng lấy hiếu làm trinh,*
*"bụi nào cho đục được mình ấy vay?*
…
*"Hoa tàn mà lại thêm tươi*
*"trăng tàn mà lại hơn mười rằm xưa.*

[16] The Vietnamese text reads:

*Thiện-căn ở tại lòng ta,*
*chữ tâm kia mới bằng ba chữ tài.*

[17] That is, the lordship and supremacy of ruler over minister, father over son, and husband over wife. Tu Wei-Ming argues that the Three Bonds was a relatively late development in Han Confucianism and had its roots in Legalism. He points out that "the first textual evidence of the idea [of the Three Bonds] occurs in the *Han fei tzu* (*Han fei zi*), the Legalistic classic: 'The minister serves the king, the son serves the father, and the wife serves the husband. If the three are followed, the world will be in peace; if the three are violated, the world will be in chaos'" (Tu 1998).

[18] That is, when a woman is young, she obeys her father, when she is married she obeys her husband, and when she is widowed, she obeys her eldest son. See Raphals (1998) for bibliographic references of the Three Obediences (*tam- tòng*) in the Confucian Book of Rites (*Liji* or *Lễ-kí*).

Kim Trọng graciously agreed to a platonic friendship between them as two soulmates deeply in love with each other (lines 3169–70, 75–8):

> "We loved each other, risked our lives, braved death
> now we two meet again, still deep in love.
> …
> If I long searched the sea for my lost pin,
> it was true love, not lust, that urged me on.
> We're back together now, beneath one roof:
> to live in concord, need two share one bed?"[19]

Such a platonic friendship between two soulmates was possible because Thúy Kiều, as Kim Trọng's "secondary wife," did not have to bear him any children. As a matter of fact, Thúy Vân, his "primary wife" had given him many children (lines 3237–8) in fulfillment of the classical Confucian injunction in the Book of Mencius to maintain a family's posterity.

More significantly, Nguyễn Du did not present the conjugal relations between Thúy Kiều and Kim Trọng in terms of the hierarchical submission-domination matrix of the Confucian Three Bonds and Three Obediences. Rather, their conjugal relations was built upon a *friend-to-friend relationship* that forms part of the Confucian Five Relations as articulated in the Book of Mencius (3A:4), i.e., the moral and reciprocal relationship between ruler-minister, husband-wife, parent–child, old-young, and between friends. Nguyễn Du's use of the friend-to-friend relationship is instructive because of all the Confucian Five Relations, *only the friend-to-friend relationship is a relationship of equals*. By contrast, the other four relationships are ordered hierarchically. Nguyễn Du's characterization of the conjugal relations of Thúy Kiều and Kim Trọng as mutual friendship also comes through clearly in the following excerpt (lines 3221–6):

> "Of love and friendship they fulfilled both claims
> they shared no bed but joys of lute and verse.
> Now they sipped wine, now played a game of chess,
> admiring flowers, waiting for the moon.
> Their wishes all came true since fate so willed,
> and of two lovers marriage made two friends."[20]

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[19] The Vietnamese text reads:

> *"Thương nhau sinh-tử đã liều*
> *"gặp nhau còn chút bấy nhiêu là tình.*
> …
> *"Bấy lâu đáy bể mò kim,*
> *"là nhiều vàng-đá phải tìm trăng-hoa?*
> *"Ai ngờ lại hợp một nhà,*
> *"lọ là chăn-gối mới ra sắt-cầm.*

[20] The Vietnamese text reads:

> *Hai tình vẹn-vẽ hòa hai,*
> *chẳng trong chăn-gối cũng ngoài cầm-thơ.*
> *Khi chén rượu khi cuộc cờ,*
> *khi xem hoa nở khi chờ trăng lên.*
> *Ba sinh đã phỉ mười nguyền,*
> *duyên đôi-lứa cũng là duyên bạn-bầy.*

In other words, what characterizes the marriage between Thúy Kiều and Kim Trọng is not the traditional self-abnegation, self-abasement, unconditional obedience (*tong*), and submission (*thuận*) of a wife to the lordship of her husband that one usually expects in nineteenth century Vietnam. Instead, it is the mutual respect (*kính*), loyalty (*trung*), reciprocity (*thư*), and harmony (*hoà*) between Thúy Kiều and Kim Trọng in a marriage which is expressed as a *friendship of two equals* who are deeply in love (*ái*) with, and true (*tín*) to each other unconditionally. In particular, one notes how Nguyễn Du also described the harmony (*hoà*) and mutual respect (*kính*) between Thúy Kiều and her spouse using the image of musical harmony arising from lute-playing (line 3222). This is highly significant, because lute-playing is a traditional Confucian metaphor for harmony and concord within a conjugal relationship (Chan 2000; Huỳnh 1983). Clearly, by choosing to portray this marriage as a marriage of "equals," i.e., where the wife is on an equal footing with her husband as two friends sharing the "joys of lute and verse," sipping wine, playing chess, admiring flowers, etc., Nguyễn Du was putting forward a new way of forging conjugal relations that is rooted in the egalitarianism of friendship. Hence, Nguyễn Du sought to redefine the conjugal relations between Thúy Kiều and Kim Trọng in particular, and more generally ethics for Vietnamese women more generally away from the "Three Bonds" and "Three Obediences" towards the equality and mutuality of the relations between two friends within the matrix of the Confucian Five Relations. Such a view was highly revolutionary and was neither fully understood nor grasped in the androcentric Confucian climate of nineteenth century Vietnam.

## 9.6 Conclusion

An intratextual reading of *Truyện Kiều* reveals new insights which may have escaped the scrutiny of scholars who were more intent on extratextual analysis of this poem. Perhaps Nguyễn Du's sympathetic and positive view of women could be seen as a veiled critique of the rigidity of Confucian moral norms for women that were *de rigueur* in his days. His sympathetic and realistic descriptions of Thúy Kiều's feelings, desires and aspirations brought out flesh and blood, unlike the dry and legalistic Confucian manuals of instructions for women and girls, e.g., the fifteenth century Sino-Vietnamese *Gia huấn ca* instructing various members of a Vietnamese family on strict adherence to Confucian moral-ethical orthodoxy. Clearly, Nguyễn Du was not a firebrand revolutionary that some of his disappointed Marxist admirers may have desired. Nevertheless, perhaps *Truyện Kiều* was his attempt at embedding a humanizing countertrend *within* the prevailing Confucian orthodoxy of the Nguyễn ruling elite in nineteenth century Vietnamese society which sought to relativize and subvert its cold and legalistic impact in an unobtrusive but effective manner, without necessarily wanting to overthrow it.

An intratextual reading also reveals Thúy Kiều as well-educated, strong-willed, intelligent and courageous. It highlights the fact that her character transcended all rigid stereotypes of traditional Confucian ethical admonitions for women. On the one hand, Thúy Kiều was truly a Confucian *par excellence* by her faithful, unflinching, and unconditional filiality to her father throughout her entire life. On the other hand, Thúy Kiều was not a typical submissive wife, a sex object, or a producer of children that centuries of Confucian androcentrism have come to praise. By making the relationship a mutual friendship within the Confucian Five Relations rather than the Three Bonds and Three Obediences, Nguyễn Du was able to subvert prevailing Confucian moral-ethical norms for women. For him, the ideal conjugal relationship is not hierarchically ordered. Rather, it is based upon the shared love of two equals in a manner akin to the equality of a friendship. In addition, conjugal relations are also built upon mutual respect, socio-intellectual companionship, and gender equality, rather than on the obligation to produce offspring. In the final analysis, Nguyễn Du's Thúy Kiều is truly a virtuous, courageous, and heroic woman (*liệt-nữ*) at the same time.

Moving forward, an intratextual reading opens the possibility for *Truyện Kiều* to be understood and appropriated as a *parable* which gives insights into living in an uncertain world. Here, a parable may be understood as a juxtaposition of concrete and familiar images and life experiences which seek to engage its audience and capture their imagination by its vivid realism, strangeness, inherent tension, conflict, satire, or paradox. Parables are always open-ended and unbounded. On the one hand they give rise to familiar recognition and stimulate one's imagination to new and exciting potentialities. On the other hand, they unsettle the self-contented and challenge them to introspective reflection by subverting or challenging comfortable presumptions.

As a parable of life, *Truyện Kiều* is polysemic and multivalent: it is genuinely creative and inexhaustible in meaning, enabling it always to break forth with new meanings in new circumstances. Nguyễn Du uses realistic images from daily living that catch his audience's attention by the vividness of their descriptions. Yet, the entire poem is laden with paradoxical twists. One is confronted by the fact that superficial appearances are deceptive and reality is often the occurrence of the unexpected. Like the parables of Jesus, *Truyện Kiều* is laden with paradoxes and contradictions: there are antinomies of good and evil, equity and injustice, kindness and cruelty, honesty and dishonesty, generosity and selfishness, selflessness and egotism, contentment and avarice, humanity and inhumanity, integrity and duplicity, as well as respect and disdain.

The conflicts, tensions, and paradoxical twists in the poem interrupt the normal course of things and displace uncritical complacency, thereby breaking open extraordinary meanings in the ordinary and mundane images of life. To give an example: the characterizations of Thúy Kiều and Từ Hải as prostitute and rebel leader respectively are ironic and paradoxical. In every age and place, prostitutes and rebels are marginalized for their threat to a society's well-being, proper ordering, and socio-ethical morals. Yet, paradoxically, both of them are not what one expects prostitutes and rebels to be. Their personalities, as well as moral-ethical values and ideals are juxtaposed with the circumstances of their lives to generate clashing images, tense moments, and paradoxical twists, all of which interact together to subvert and change one's way of thinking and perceiving reality, thereby generating new insights and creating new meanings for new circumstances.

Hence, one cannot reduce the diversity and pluriformity in *Truyện Kiều* to a single grand narrative or overarching symbolism. *Truyện Kiều* is more than merely a moralistic tale of good triumphs over evil. The normative meaning is always elusive: the text will always be enigmatic, thereby allowing for new interpretations and insights by new audiences in new contexts and in reaction to new socio-cultural data, including intratextual readings that afford insights for re-visioning and reimagining Confucian gender relations and gender ethics for Vietnamese women. There is a sense of open-endedness which freely invites an imaginative response from its audience to appropriate the story in their lives. In today's world, one can wrestle with *Truyện Kiều* intratextually as an overarching parable of life, recognizing one's own moral values and cultural ethos within the story, identifying oneself with the characters and events, and allowing oneself to be transformed by this encounter.

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