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Spring Essence: The Poetry of Ho Xun Huong

Ho Xuan Huong
John Balaban, translator
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A conscientious objector, translator Balaban; an eighteenth century concubine and poet, Ho XuÃ¢n Huong; and a linguist from New York University, Dr. NgÃ´ Thanh NhÃ n; have created a book rife with firsts. Like many groundbreaking, nationalistic writers, Huong wrote her poetry in the vernacular of her people, the Vietnamese. Through the efforts of NhÃ n, the original ideographic script, Nom, has been replicated for the first time using moveable type. Balaban discovered the writer while doing humanitarian work during the Vietnam War. Most scholars believe that Huong was a concubine who lived at the end of the second Le Dynasty, a period of social and political unrest. From this chaotic daily life, Huong drew her subjects of patriarchy, sexuality, and power.

Most of her poems work in two distinct ways. First, they fulfil Western expectations for Asian poetry. They have an elegant simplicity in wording and structure, a longing for things eternal, and the suggestion that this writing is merely part of an ongoing poetic conversation. She writes in “Autumn Landscape,”

Drop by drop rain slaps the banana leaves.
Praise whoever sketched this desolate scene:
the lush, dark canopies of the gnarled trees,
the long river, sliding smooth and white.

On the other hand, they also read powerfully as sexual poems, employing sensual double entendre. Because the book is formatted to show, over a double-page spread, the poems written in the original Nom, modern Vietnamese and the translated English, a knowledgeable reader can derive even more pleasure from the word play created by changes in the tonal language. The meaning of Vietnamese words changes based on tonal inflection; Huong exploits this linguistic trait, and Balaban clues readers in through his careful and informative endnotes.

Huong resents the concubine's fate, shows a profound awareness of women's fate, and acknowledges sexual joy and its loss through aging and societal response to that process. In "Confession (I)," she writes:

I haven't shaken grief's rattle, yet it clatters.
I haven't rung sorrow's bell, though it tolls.
Their noise only drags me down, angry
with a fate that says I am much too bold.
Men of talent, learned men, where are you?
Am I supposed to walk as if stooped and old?

This collection places readers in two triumvirates; one of history, sexuality, and literature; the other of poet, translator, and linguist. The finished product is an interdisciplinary experience few books can replicate.

Camille-Yvette Welsch