

## THE TALE OF KIÊU

Nguyễn Du (1766-1820)

Translated by N.T.Lâm

A hundred years long in this lifespan of ours,  
Talent and fate seem to be in mutual hatred.  
When ocean waves roll over mulberry fields,  
'Tis heartbreaking to see what occurs then.

5. Is it strange that plenty goes in pair with want?  
Azure Heaven oft turns against rosy fair damsels.

Light an oil lamp and read a worthy account,  
An old amorous tale told by ancient scrolls:

- In the dynasty of Ming, under the Jiajing reign,  
10. The land lived in peace, both capitals stood strong. (1)  
There abided a notable of the house of Vuong,  
In an estate that was neither rich nor poor.  
His youngest child, a boy called Vuong Quan,  
Was to carry on his name and literary fame.
15. The siblings were two ravishing maidens,  
Thuy Kiêu, the eldest and the younger, Thuy Vân.  
Blessed with apricot grace, snow pristine mind,  
Each had her own poise and her perfect manners.  
In quiet courtliness Vân was beyond compare,
20. Her face, a moon, her brows two perfect arcs.  
Jade tinkled in her seemly, bloomy laugh,  
Her flowing hair flouted the floating clouds,  
The white snow envied her milky skin.  
Kiêu was of a quick wit and an alluring charm,
25. In talent and in charm she was a notch above.  
Her eyes had all the shades of autumn,  
Her brows were as neat as hill lines in spring.  
Flowers grudged her glow, willows craved her grace,  
Her bewitching glamour shook kingdoms and cities,
30. Supreme in splendour, she knew no peers in talent.  
Blessed by Heaven with bright, sharp mind,

- Write verses and paint she could, sing and chant.  
The five pitches and tones of music she mastered,  
The art of pipa lute playing she made her own. (2)
35. From "Cruel Fate" that she herself composed,  
She'd play mournful tales of the ill-fated.  
Noble maidens the sisters were, in the age of consent,  
Yet they snugly stayed behind curtains and walls,  
Leaving suitors to swarm like butterflies and bees.
40. Spring days and swallows darted like shuttles,  
Of the ninety days, three scores had already fled.  
Tender green grass grew to endless space,  
Pear trees were decked with dots of milky blooms.  
The Light Festival lasted the month of March,
45. Those were grave-tending and grass-treading days.  
From far and near flocked excited young lovers,  
In new attires the siblings strolled and danced.  
Men of talent, women of beauty flitted and flirted,  
A stream of horses, of carts, there was, a flurry of clothes.
50. Pell-mell people helped each other up the burial hillocks,  
Letting ghost money, joss paper ashes fly into the wind.  
Then the eye of heaven slowly glided to the west,  
Hand in hand, the siblings wandered towards home.  
At a leisured pace they strolled along a runnel,
55. Took their time to view the fine and quiet scenery.  
The babbling brook lazily curved and curled,  
Downstream a footbridge spanned its cascade.  
By the path lay a mound just above the ground  
Where fading wilted grass grew. Kiêu said:
60. "How strange that during the Light Festival,  
This knoll should be deprived of joss-stick scent!"  
Vuong Quan tried to explain to his sister:  
"She was a famous singer once, Dam Tiên,  
Renowned in her day for her art and her looks.
65. Lovers galore pushed and shoved at her door.  
But a beauty's fate was to be short-lived,  
This divine young woman's life was cut short.  
Spurred by her fame that had spread far and wide,  
From a distant land a guest came to toy.
70. When the lover's boat finally made port,  
She had long been reduced to nought.  
Her room was vacant and cold, sad and silent,  
The carriage tracks had been blurred by moss.

- He wept and wailed then freed his grief:  
75. 'Fate must want the two of us to be apart.  
Since in this life we are not meant to be united,  
May these tokens augur well future bond.'  
He then ordered a coffin and a hearse,  
Laid her to rest in this rose and weed-covered grave.
80. The moon and the sun set and rose many a time  
But who'd come to visit a forsaken tomb?"  
O such a heart that was prompt to feel pity!  
The story Kiêu hardly heard, she burst into tears.  
"How agonising a woman's lot can be,"
85. She cried out, "a cruel fate we all share.  
How harsh and ruthless can the Creator be  
That withers our youth and shrivels our beauty!  
Alive, Dam Tiên was the wife of many a man,  
Now dead, she may be a single ghost.
90. Where are they all that shared her cuddles?  
And those who longed and lusted for her lure?  
Since no one cares to give her a thought,  
Let me at once light some incense sticks,  
A way to mark that we crossed paths.
95. May she, down there at the Yellow Springs, know."  
Pray Kiêu did, now softly, now out loud,  
She knelt, bowed before the grave then left.  
Twilight fell on an expanse rank with waning weeds,  
Where a gentle breeze fluttered the heads of reeds.
100. She now drew a hairpin from her hair,  
On a tree bark, she carved a few verses.  
Her mind and heart sank deeper in daze,  
All hushed she stood, stunned, set to stay.  
Her fair face grew more sullen and sad,
105. As grief swelled or shrank, tears ran or dropped.  
"Sister dear, aren't we funny," Vân said,  
"Have tears to spare, weep for one from the past!"  
Kiêu replied: "Since old times, the fair and beautiful  
Have seen cruel fate spare not a single one.
110. The sheer thought of it aches my heart,  
She, lying there, what will become of me?"  
Vuong cut in: "Sister, fine words are these!  
Putting yourself in her unique stead, it's unheard-of.  
Let's leave this glum and gloomy setting,
115. The shade's lengthening, the way home's still long."

- "When a great talent dies," Kiêu added,  
"Her body and mind vanish, there remains her soul.  
A loving heart may meet another loving heart,  
Let's wait and soon by a wonder she'll appear."
120. Before her siblings could answer these words,  
From nowhere a whirlwind started to blow,  
Twirling, swirling it snatched buds, shook trees,  
Whiffs of perfume drifted in its fierce flows.  
The wind wake they followed and found
125. Fresh footprints clearly stamped in the moss,  
They stared at one another, terror-struck.  
"My deep faith must cause this", Kiêu said,  
"A twin soul of mine comes to meet me.  
True sisters make fun of life and death."
130. Since Dam Tiên had cared to manifest herself,  
To thank her, Kiêu wrote a few more lines.  
Her poet's inspiration fluttered and throbbed,  
She etched a classical poem on a tree foot.

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- While wavering to stay or to return home,
135. The siblings heard the jingling of bells.  
They looked and saw a young man of letters  
Who loosened his reins, slowly rode forward,  
Carrying on his back a case of poems,  
And followed by a flight of teeny-weeny servants.
140. His horse was of snow-white colour,  
His coat mixed the tint of grass and the hue of the sky.  
As he drew near his features became clearer.  
Slowly dismounting he came to their encounter,  
His buskins gently treading on the grass.
145. His beauty and his poise radiated all around.  
Knowing him, Vuong Quan went to meet him,  
As his demure sisters took refuge behind flowers.  
The young man came from not so far away.  
Kim Trong he was, an offspring of a noble house,
150. Since his birth endowed with wealth and talent.  
Mere men blessed him with letters, Heaven with wit.  
His grace and gifts set him above the common crowd.  
Refined he was at home and chivalrous in society.  
This region all around was his land, his motherland,

155. Where he'd been Vuong Quan's schoolmate.  
Rumors of his neighbours' fame had reached his ears,  
Reminding him of the two Kiêu of old  
Who were locked in the Bronze Sparrow Tower. (3)  
The sisters too were shielded by mounts and rivers,
160. Thus he could only languish and love in secret.  
Now, fortune so arranged that they met,  
A love-hungry lad facing love inspiring lasses!  
From afar he saw the sisters' forms,  
Spring orchid and autumn mum, so fine and fair.
165. She, the beauty of the land and he, a man of talent,  
In love they already were but still too shy to show.  
`Tween waking and dreaming, they endlessly drifted,  
Should one stay, ought one leave, they shifted.  
Sombre shade foreshadowed sorrows,
170. He was set to mount his steed, still she glance did.  
Under the footbridge, water ran clear and limpid  
As nearby, willows danced with dark shadows.

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- When Kiêu returned to her maiden room,  
The sun had set and the curfew gong had rung.
175. The moon stilted its indiscrete face,  
Sparkled the brook with its silvery rays  
And cast tree shades over the yard.  
Camellia trees drooped to the eastern quarters,  
Their tender branches heavy with dewdrops.
180. Forlorn Kiêu silently watched the shiny orb,  
Troubled by a tangle of hopes and fears:  
"What a fate, that of Dam Tiên!  
A dazzling life is but life to be dashed!  
And then why should he and I meet?"
185. In a hundred years will our fates be linked?"  
Her mind full of countless disturbing thoughts,  
She wrote a gem of a poem to pour out her heart.  
As the slanting moonlight lit through the blinds,  
Leaned against a sill, Kiêu was slumbering.
190. Out of nowhere appeared a young girl,  
So graceful and so pure she was.  
Her face was fresh as dew, her body bright as snow.  
She glided to and fro, her feet, two golden lotus flowers. (3)

- Kiêu warmly welcomed her and discreetly enquired:  
195. "From the fairyland did you go astray, ending up here?"  
The girl politely said: "We two are kindred souls,  
We met earlier on in the day, don't you remember?  
My pitiful abode lies in the western confines,  
Where the river runs under a footbridge.
200. Tender thoughts, precious verses you graced me.  
I kept the Keeper well informed who said  
Your name's noted in the Book of the Doomed.  
Let's face now what former lifes impose upon us,  
We are of the same lot, sailing on the same boat.
205. Well then, I have thought of ten new themes,  
Use your magic brush, kindly write new divine verses."  
Kiêu acceded to the request, following the topics,  
In a flurry of brush-strokes, her fairy hand wrote ten epics.  
The maiden read them and marvelled to herself:
210. "Stitching stichs like embroideries is out of the common.  
Were they to be put in the Book of Sorrow Songs,  
The top prize would go to none other than her."  
Her guest turned to the doorstep, set to leave,  
Kiêu held her back, eager to further confide.
215. A sudden gust of wind rattled the blinds,  
Kiêu awoke and realised she had dreamed.  
She looked around but no one was to be seen,  
Though a pervading perfume hung in the air.  
Alone with her misgivings, far into the night,
220. Musing on her future years she took fright.  
A weed swept by waves, a flower blown by winds:  
Such was her fate, such was her lot, that was all.  
Waves followed waves of mournful thoughts,  
More thoughts brought more fits and tears.
225. Her moan and groan passed through the drapes,  
Her mother woke and asked: "What's wrong, child?  
Why stirr and fret in the dead of night?  
Like a flower in the rain, your face's bathed in tears."  
With respect Kiêu said: "I am young and green,
230. And still in debt to you for birth and care.  
On this festive day we ran into Dam Tiên's grave,  
Right away, tonight she appeared in my dreams.  
What untold sufferings fate has in store:  
She gave these themes, on them I composed.
235. Let's infer from what this dream portends,

This lot of mine won't have much awaiting!"  
Her mother tutored: "Dreams are misleading,  
And why bring woe upon grief on yourself?"  
These words of advice seemed to uplift Kiêu,  
240. As she was pondering, she shed flows of tears.  
From her window she heard orioles chatter,  
Willow catkins flew over a neighbour's wall.  
The slant moonlight lit across the eaves,  
Kiêu stayed alone, alone with her grieved heart.

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245. Remember! That is the way of love and lovers,  
Don't even try to unravel its silken tangle.

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Back to his study room after their encounter,  
Kim could not clear her from his tormented mind.  
His bushel of grief he'd empty, it'd soon filled anew.  
250. One day of longing was three autumns long.  
Like a screen of clouds, silk curtains veiled her window,  
To dream might be the stream to the beloved's shadow.  
The moon was on the wane, his oil lamp dying away,  
He longed for her face, his heart sighed for her heart.  
255. His room had a gloomy air, as cold as bronze,  
His brushes stood dried by his slack-stringed lute.  
Winds played music with the quivering blind slats,  
Incense stirred longing, tea tasted no whiff of love.  
Could this be a debt carried over three lives?  
260. Why keep bewitching his soul, toying with him?  
Forlorn, he long for the setting, longed for her,  
He rushed to where they chanced to meet.  
An expanse now overrun by deep green grass,  
Where the clear brook water reflected nought.  
265. The twilight breeze seemed to stir ripples of grief,  
Reeds rustled as if resolved to mock and sneer.  
The longing lover's heart was full of hope.  
Straight towards the Blue Bridge he hurried.  
Forbidding high walls and locked door allowed  
270. Neither letter nor bluebird, messengers of love.  
A thinned willow slowly drooped its drape,

On its branch an oriole tried a cheeky chatter.  
 Behind those bolted gate and closed door,  
 Beyond the wilted flower-filled yard, where was Kiêu?  
 275. Stunned and numb, there at length he stood.  
 Strolling about, he then found a vacant house nearby,  
 The home of a merchant who travelled wide and large.  
 He posed as a touring student, asked to rent  
 And promptly moved in with books and lute.  
 280. The house had fancy trees and rocks, and a sign  
 Bearing the name Lam Thuy in fresh gilt letters.  
 He was glad at heart: the Lam Thuy - Thuy Kiêu pairing  
 Must be an auspicious omen sent from Heaven!  
 His window was always ajar, so day in day out  
 285. Towards the wall he'd dart eager glances.  
 Only a hand span parted them, and also a locked gate!  
 Not even a fleeting figure could he ever figure out.  
 Since he slowly settled in this stranger's home,  
 One moon soon bowed to another moon.  
 290. Then on a balmy day, beyond the wall,  
 A slender form floated in the shade of peach trees.  
 He put his lute down, snatched a coat, dashed out.  
 There hovered a deep scent but no one was to be seen.  
 He walked along the fancy wall for some distance  
 295. When he saw a golden hairpin on a peach branch.  
 He raised his hand for it and took it home:  
 "From a girl's room, how did this get here?  
 'Tis a jewel that must be treasured,  
 How can it land into my hand, were it not for fate?"  
 300. He stayed up all night, fondling the brooch, gazing at it,  
 A slight lingering santal scent was still to be smelled.  
 As morning mist cleared, a shadow was seen by the wall,  
 Fazed and confused, searching and rummaging.  
 Kim was awaiting, over the wall he sounded her out:  
 305. "From thin air I chanced upon this hairpin,  
 Like the pearl of the old tale, should it be returned?" (5)  
 Kiêu's voice was heard from the other side:  
 "Thank you, nobleman, for returning a petty hairpin .  
 Why should you mind about a mislaid trinket,  
 310. You that cherish virtue well above wealth?"  
 Kim added: "We come and go in the same parts,  
 Of late strangers we are no more.  
 Now, I owe this moment to a whiff of flying scent,



- That makes up for long felt misery!
315. At long last, I am granted a short moment,  
Stay for a while and hear my heartfelt feelings."  
He hurried home and brought back  
A pair of golden bracelets and a scarf of silk.  
A wicker ladder helped him ease over the wall,
320. She no doubt was the one he met the other day.  
Reserved, meek and modest, she lowered her head  
As he scrutinised her face and said:  
"Ever since we chanced to meet, secret longing  
And silent missing have pestered my heart.
325. My slender frame is so withered and waned  
That no one could think I'd last until today.  
For months my thoughts flew with the winds,  
My fate I accepted, it is to wait and wait again.  
Now, a wish I shall make if I may:
330. Will the bright star ever shine on a dull weed?"  
Troubled and unsure Kiêu politely said:  
"Our ways are snow-pure, plain as common greens.  
Love messages or red threads of wedlock, (6)  
My parents choose to receive or reject.
335. I am grateful for your finely voiced feelings,  
But a child I am, too green to dare reply.  
Kim said: "It may rain this day and storm the next,  
Spring offer us scarce chances to meet.  
Should you scorn my blind love,
340. I'd lose a lot but what would you gain?  
A trifle, give me a trifle as a binding token,  
And formalities can be looked into later on.  
Were Heaven to thwart my deep-felt hope,  
I'm ready to suffer the loss of my tender years.
345. And if your gentle heart resolves to stay tight,  
The woeing and courting are still worth the sighing."  
Kiêu silently listened to these lulling lines,  
A fresh dream made her warm eyes waver.  
She said: "This's a new and strange moment!
350. To an open heart, how to close one's heart?  
Your noble feelings you confided in me,  
In my heart, not in gold or stone, shall they be set."  
Her words seemed to free his heavy heart,  
The golden jewels and the pink scarf he handed out,
355. With these words: "A hundred years starts this instant,

Please call these small gifts a token of my love."  
 A shell fan and a brocaded cloth she gave in return.  
 Vows of long-lasting love they exchanged.  
 From the road then came a din of people.

360. They brushed past bushes and ruffled flowers,  
 They hurried, he to his lodge, she to her room.  
 Thus the touchstone had tested the gold's purity.  
 The further their love, the deeper their sorrows,  
 The Love River, a stretch of shallow water, kept them apart,

365. She longing at the spring, he sighing at the mouth.  
 Cold as snow, thick as fog, distance parted them,  
 News of their love they found no way to trade.  
 Windy days and moonlit nights flew slowly away,  
 The summer's tints longed to see the spring's tinges fade.

370. On the mother's father's birthday,  
 Clad in their newly bought festive clothes,  
 Her parents as well as her sister and her brother  
 Went to present their gifts and their best wishes.  
 Kiêu stayed in, alone in the deserted house.

375. Now, that was a golden chance!  
 Fruits and food were swiftly arranged,  
 Her fine feet flashed her towards the wall.  
 Over shrubs she made her little voice heard,  
 There Kim was, waiting by the flowers,

380. Ready to blame: "What a cruel coldness!  
 Why let the newly lit flame dim days after days?  
 Now in longing, now in sorrow I stand,  
 My hair blends the colours of snow and fog."  
 She pleaded: "Chained by winds, checked by rains,

385. I have hurt your feeling much against my wish.  
 And now that nobody's home for a short day,  
 Let my own love thank you for your love."  
 She skirted around a small man-made mound,  
 Found a newly gated entrance at the wall's end,

390. Rolling up her sleeves, unlocked the dream abode.  
 She had moved clouds apart to find the Land of Promise.  
 The more they looked at each other the more they beamed.  
 One greeted happily, the other worriedly enquired.  
 Shoulder to shoulder they went into his house.

395. Light were their words, like wind and moonlight,  
 Eternal their pledges, like rivers and mountains.  
 On his desk lay brushes and sheets of poetry,

A scroll hung on a wall, depicting a green pine tree,  
 True to live, it swayed in mist and wind.

400. "The more one looks, the livelier it gets", she praised.  
 Kim begged: "Its final touches I recently put,  
 Please write some words to add to its feel."  
 Her fairy hand as swift and soft as the breeze  
 Brushed a four-verse poem above the tree.

405. He exclaimed: "Four verses, four gems and pearls!  
 This magic is unmatched by Pan and Xie. (7)  
 Were it not for your good deeds in previous lives,  
 You'd not be awarded such a blessing."  
 She replied: "I dared a glance at your fair face,  
 410. You'll be a man of high office and lofty duties.  
 As to my fate, it is as flimsy as a dragonfly's wing.  
 Will Heaven so devise that our futures match?  
 I remember when I was in my tender years,  
 There came a seer who at once said:

415. 'Brilliance and charm this girl clearly shows  
 She'll live in artistry, cursed by a somber fate.'  
 Let's look at who you are and then at who I am,  
 Should a bright future and a sombre lot be joined?"  
 Kim replied: "Our chance meeting is the deed of fate,  
 420. Yet the will of men often defeats the whim of Heaven.  
 If the thread that us unites were to break,  
 True to our oath I'm ready to surrender my life!"  
 So many of their soul's secrets they warmly shared,  
 Their hearts light with new pure love,

425. Their heads dizzy with besotting fresh wine.  
 A short handspan was the length of happy moments,  
 The dying sun sank behind the western mounts.  
 Away from home too long she ought not stay,  
 Taking her leave, Kiêu hastened back to her room

430. To be told her parents were at the dinner still.  
 She drew down her door blinds, hurried straight  
 To his garden, alone in the thick of the night.  
 Through drapes, his lamp flickered its firefly light,  
 Cast twinkling dots on the shivering twigs's shades.

435. Kim was at his desk, half awake half asleep,  
 Her wind-light footstep stirred his flimsy doze.  
 The moonlight eased her shadow nearer and nearer.  
 In a haze, Kim was at the height of his loving fancy,  
 He floated in slumber, in hope, in dreams.

440. Kiêu confided: "Lonely in the long dark night  
My heart in love set off for your loving heart.  
Now side by side, our presences we share,  
Later who knows, will all this be but a dream?"  
Elated, he rushed out to welcome her in.
445. Oil to the lamp he added, incense to the burner.  
On fine paper they wrote a page-long love pledge,  
With a golden knife, cut a lock of her dainty hair,  
And they then halved it for them to share.  
The gleaming full moon was high in the sky,
450. As in one voice, they traded the same oath.  
Their hearts' tiniest secrets they shared,  
Forever in their souls they sealed their loves.  
Their jade wine cups glittered like a pair of pearls,  
Their scents merged, so did their shapes in the mirror.
455. "The breeze's fresh," Kim said, "pure's the moonlight,  
For some time now a concern's been throbbing,  
The jade pestle has not pounded the fairy leaves. (8)  
Should I fear my bold liberties may cause offence?"  
Kiêu replied: "The red thread of union us bound,
460. One single word's all we need to read our minds.  
Let's not trifle with flirt and frivolity,  
Besides, who's missing what from who?"  
Kim said: "I've heard of your great fame at the lute,  
The airs Jung-zu-Chi enjoyed, I'd wish to hear." (9)
465. "Why mention my poor artistry? " asked she,  
"Since you've been kind to command, I'll obey."  
A moon lute happened to hang in the part house,  
Courteous Kim presented it to her with a deep bow.  
"My art's a modest one, trained for my ears alone,
470. Too humble to bother you to such an extent."  
One string she struck, another she stroked,  
All four, thin or thick, tuned to perfect harmony:  
She started with "The Battle of the Han and the Chu",  
Clashes of steel and brass clanged and blasted, he heard.
475. Then she played Su-ma's "The Enamoured Phoenix",  
Groans of rancour, wails of sorrow did he catch?  
Next was Chi K'ang's "Peace at the Imperial Tombs",  
The streams flowed anew, the clouds resumed their flights.  
The fair Jao-jun, in the final piece "At the Frontier Gate",
480. Shed tears of equal sorrow for king and kin.  
Clear like the crane's cries were the notes,

As muffled as a stream meandering from its spring.  
 The overture started like a gentle breeze,  
 The finale shook with wild winds and rumbling rain.  
 485. Bright then dim, the lamp flickered to the music's pace,  
 Following the flow, Kim was now bewitched then forlorn,  
 He'd lean onto his bolster then bow his head,  
 He'd feel his heart twist, knit his brows.  
 "Good, very good indeed", he cried out,  
 490. Alas! such swallowed bile, such held in bitterness!  
 Why such a choice of mournful music  
 That hurts your heart and haunts my soul?"  
 Kiêu replied: "A sheer habit, what can be done?  
 Sadness and joy are gifts from heaven, that is all.  
 495. Your wise advice I shall certainly heed,  
 Your sound views will help me to hopefully abate."  
 The more her charm effused its warmth,  
 The more all his being in passion was inflamed.  
 The waves of love started to travel sideways,  
 500. In his tenderness a touch soon turned loose.  
 Kiêu pleaded: "Of this do not make a game,  
 Please keep some distance, let me have my say.  
 Fragile as a peach flower, I am too tender to know  
 How to raise fences to keep a bluebird away.  
 505. One that has been promised the spouse's rank  
 Shall submit to her man and make purity a virtue.  
 Were a girl to frolic in shrubs and bushes,  
 No suitor would she find that aspires after her!  
 Would we live pushed by haste, pulled by want  
 510. And sacrifice a thousand years for a single day?  
 Let's think about chance loves of ancient times:  
 No couple could compare to Cui and Jang. (10)  
 Sigh, moan they did and undid their solid bond,  
 Too yielding she was, so weary he became.  
 515. As the couple cuddled and snuggled,  
 Their disdain-filled hearts secretly stayed aloof.  
 In free love they lived, letting their vow's fire die out,  
 Their deep, ardent love turned to shamed love.  
 Should I fail to stoutly reject your courting,  
 520. In disrepute we'll both live, who's to be blamed?  
 Why this haste to force the sprig, pester for the bud?  
 Keep your restraint, you might be requited, one day."  
 As he listened to these honest and simple words,

- His respect rose, his love grew to dizzy heights.  
525. The pale moon dwindled behind the eaves,  
A messenger's voice was heard at the entrance.  
Kiêu hurried back to her maiden room,  
Kim quickly crossed the peach yard.  
As soon as he unbolted the brushwood gate,  
530. A young valet came in with his parent's letter,  
Informing him his uncle had died in faraway land.  
In strange Liaoyang behind cliffs and passes,  
The poor remains were lying amid unknowns.  
Kim was pressed to go look after the mourning rites.  
535. What a dreadful piece of news that was,  
He set forth to her home to pour out his heart.  
He fully informed her, told her his grief,  
His family's loss, his own despair in separation:  
"We've been given no chance to share a little time,  
540. We've been given no time to tie the knot.  
The attesting moon's still up there, impervious,  
Dares to stay far away, yet shows its unfriendly face.  
Leagues aplenty, long winters away from you,  
It'll take untold time to unknot my grief's tangle.  
545. Be well and safe, bright as gold, pure as jade,  
Give me some comfort as I'll be at world's end."  
A wrench for her suffering heart were these words,  
Haltingly she tried her best to answer them:  
"Does He hate us, He that picks the silken thread? (11)  
550. The joy of meeting, so soon the sorrow of parting!  
The one to the other we've made our solemn vow,  
My hair may fade and wither, my love will never wilt!  
Long months, lasting years they may be? I'll wait,  
Feel for you, a man exposed to rain and wind.  
555. I shall be bound by the pledge of mutual love,  
I'll never play my lute on another man's boat. (12)  
Mounts shall rise, rivers shall run, time shall be,  
You shall return, I shall recall you that here stand!"  
They wavered, hated to let go of their hands.  
560. The sun was already rising above the roof.  
Step by reluctant step they tore themselves apart,  
Each farewell word added drops to the string of tears.  
His horse he saddled, his bags he tied in haste,  
Sadness they shared, then ways they parted.  
565. In alien land his grieved eyes met foreign views,

Cuckoos in droves gathered in brushes,  
Thin flocks of geese flew far in the sky.  
Poor soul that bore weekly rain, monthly winds,  
Each day felt the heavy weight of his broken heart!

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570. There stood Kiêu, leaned against the old porch,  
Her twisting thoughts tangled in a silken skein.  
A breath of smoke she looked, about to fade away,  
A flower now paling, a slender willow wilting.  
As listless and longing she paced her plush room,
575. Her family came back from the birthday feast.  
Little time they had to trade news of their healths,  
When brazen minions rushed in from all parts.  
Some wielding a cudgel, others waving a scimitar,  
All half beasts, half brutes, roaring and crashing.
580. Both Vuong, father and son, were placed in cangues,  
Miserably tied together by a paltry rope.  
The racket of these rats resounded in the house,  
They took down the looms, broke up the thread boxes.  
Worthless nothings, petty bits and pieces,
585. All were neatly swept into their greedy bags.  
Whence came this misfortune, who was behind it?  
Who set the snare, who tripped the trap?  
After much querying it was then learned:  
A cheap silk merchant had lodged a complaint.
590. Staggered and terrified was the whole household,  
Earth and sky shook as they plead innocence.  
All day they cringed and begged and bowed,  
Before pitiless deaf ears, harsh merciless hands.  
To a beam the victims were hanged by their feet,
595. A stone would be moved, what of human heart?  
Their terror-struck faces twisted with pain,  
Heaven was too far away to hear their appeal.  
'Twas another day for the minions' quirky habit,  
They would wreck and ruin, all for money.
600. How best could she save her flesh and blood?  
Facing adversity, she yielded to greater forces.  
Love chance granted, virtue parents imparted.  
Love and filial duty, which carried more weight?  
She brushed aside all solemn vows of love,

605. A child first paid the debt of birth and care.  
Once clear-minded, Kiêu was resolute:  
"Wait! Let me sell myself to redeem my father!"  
There stood Chung, an old clerk, also a kind man  
Who was moved by Kiêu's faith in filial piety,
610. Secretly felt for her and suffered in her stead.  
Palms to be greased, strings to be pulled:  
Three hundred taels it'd be to settle this matter.  
In their own house her kinsmen would be confined,  
She was told to see to it within three days or two.
615. Poor, poor child, so tender and so innocent,  
So suddenly afflicted by the storm of misfortune!  
Farewell to her sad love meant adieu to life.  
Her life she did not grieve, why grieve her love?  
A raindrop should not brood on its humble state.
620. A child owed her young life to her father.  
She made her wish known to marriage brokers,  
Like mist, news ran far and fast, wave after wave.  
Living close by, an old hag came with a guest from afar,  
She wanted to introduce him for a formal proposal.
625. "Scholar Ma " was the name given when asked,  
"Nearby Weixian" was the answer as to his origin.  
Past mature age he was, well in his forties,  
Clean-shaven face he had, richly and neatly clad.  
Master leading servants, a rowdy crowd came in,
630. The broker ushered him to the women's quarter.  
The flippant scamp hopped on the highest seat,  
Pressed Kiêu to come out and welcome him.  
With her own grief worsening her family's woes,  
Each of her steps added to the flow of her tears.
635. Her swaying form shied away from breeze and mist,  
Sheepish her shadow looked, sad her face in the mirror.  
The crone would tweak her hair, squeeze her hands,  
A wane flower was her face, her gait a twisted twig.  
Her looks he measured, her art he weighed,
640. An air of her lute, a verse of her poetry he required.  
The savour and flavour he put down then praised,  
The happy guest was set for the winding haggle.  
"To buy a beauty," he said, "I've come to the Blue Bridge,  
As wedding gifts, how much would be enough, pray?"
645. The broker said: " She's worth her weight of golden taels,  
But the ill-starred family won't dare to insist."



Broker and buyer bargained hard and long,  
 Struck a deal: four hundred and some taels it'd be.  
 The final word steadied the dizzying back and forth.  
 650. Names and star signs were given as troths.  
 When to hand presents to the bride's family,  
 When to bring her home, all dates were set.  
 Ready money galore, what couldn't be settled?  
 At once the matter was referred to Chung, the clerk,  
 655. The arrest stay plea carried, old Vuong went home.  
 Poor them, the aged man and his young maiden!  
 He looked at her, felt his heart ache and bleed:  
 "I raised you, nursing high hopes for your future,  
 Chose the thread that'll lead to your worthy man. (13)  
 660. O Heaven why inflict such suffering onto us?  
 Who slandered us to tear our family apart?  
 Tools of torture leave this decrepit soul cold,  
 But his child's harmed, this old man's abused.  
 Whether now or later it makes no difference,  
 665. I'd rather face death than suffer the stings of woes!"  
 More words he spoke, more tears he shed,  
 Meant to dash his head upon a whitewashed wall.  
 To hold him back, to keep an eye, they all hurried.  
 To calm, deter him, Kiêu tried all manner of words:  
 670. "What's the worth of a pretty trifle that's paid  
 Not an ounce of her debt for birth and care?  
 Begging for forgiveness, I already fall short of Ying,  
 Selling my life am I far from living up to Li-ji? (14)  
 Reaching its old age, a tree like you grows taller,  
 675. A tree that has to bear many a bough.  
 If moved by love you are loath to let go of poor me,  
 Storms and gales may tear apart root and crown.  
 'Tis better that just my life to fate be offered,  
 One flower will fall but leaves will yet adorn the tree.  
 680. Whatever my destiny be, it will be accepted,  
 Think of me as a bloom nipped off in its early days.  
 Please stop vain views, drop wasted worries,  
 Lest you ruin our family, also harm your good self."  
 Her father found solace in her soothing words,  
 685. They stared at each other, wept and sobbed.  
 At the entrance there appeared Scholar Ma,  
 Deal freshly signed, gold newly conferred.  
 He that ruled over wedlocks, so cruel he could be,

- So casually he would knot the silken threads.
690. Money aplenty, 'twas easy to freely turn white black,  
The clerk did his best to give a helping hand,  
Gifts and grafts were given, the case was duly closed.  
Her family's matter was for now settled,  
The newlywed was pressed to face her nuptial duty.
695. In the dead of the night, by her lamp lonely Kiêu stood,  
Her gown soaked in tears, her hair tangled by grief:  
"Such is my lot and must be taken as such,  
But my heart suffers, long haunted by our vows.  
So much, so much of his love had he offered,
700. Yet I, so attached to him, I left him midstream.  
Our love vows hadn't run out in our golden cup,  
When I broke my pledge, ravaged that very love.  
Wandering in the hills and vales of distant Liaoyang,  
How can he know this wreck's my own doing?
705. So many vows of love did we pledge!  
Such is this present life, what else is there?  
The wheel of live has not cut short this troth,  
I'll be reborn, as draft beasts, to return what I owe. (15)  
To him I still have not paid my debt of love,
710. My passion still pure shall I take to the netherworld."  
Her mind dwelled on throbbing thoughts,  
As her lamp dimmed, her tears soaked her scarf.  
Kiêu Vân then woke up from her pure sleep,  
Came into the flickering light, tenderly enquired:
715. "In Heaven's scheme of complex sea changes,  
Among us you alone were chosen to bear injustice.  
Is this the reason why you stay up so late?  
Or are we involved in some secret love?"  
Kiêu said: "My heart's beset with waves of woes,
720. My love's snared in a fine mesh yet untwined.  
Bashful I feel to part my lips and confide,  
Yet keeping it in my heart, I would betray Kim.  
I have trust in you and hope you'll pay heed,  
Please be seated, I'll bow to you then speak.
725. The thread that bound our love suddenly broke,  
I leave it to you to splice the two estranged ends.  
After that day when I met young Kim,  
To make a pledge I offered him my fan,  
One night we drank wine to swear our oath.
730. Then a sudden storm broke upon me:

- How to fitly fulfill both filial duty and love.  
You're still in the long-lasting spring of your life,  
By the blood that us binds, please honour my pledge.  
Though my flesh and bones to nought will be reduced,
735. Down there, in secret smiles, I shall share your bliss.  
Take this bracelet and this text of our oath,  
They are now also yours and will secure your fate.  
Though you man and wife be, you'll grieve  
This ill-fated me, will hold me in your hearts.
740. No longer shall I be here, thin traces may still remain:  
Some lute frets and shards of old incense.  
Sometime in the distant future, if ever,  
Burn that incense, tune the lute, start to play,  
And if you see grass and leaves stir,
745. You'll know I'm back in the light breeze.  
My soul, still heavy with the burden of my oath,  
Will strive to atone the couple that could never be.  
In the realm of night, I'll be denied of form and word,  
Please shed some tears for a wronged soul's sake.
750. All's broken now, now my life's shattered,  
But how to say my love, my infinite love?  
Tell my beloved, to him I bow again yet again in regret,  
Our brief love was given that, only that much.  
How stale's my lot, a bloom bobbing adrift on wild water.
755. O Kim! O dear, my dearest Kim!  
Alas! Alas! It is from now that I'll betray you!"  
After these words, her mind, her body deadened,  
Her breathing went silent, her hands turned stone cold.  
Sound asleep, her startled parents woke up,
760. The household was a hustle and bustle,  
Pell-mell some brought potions, others gave pills,  
She came round and shed new painful tears.  
When asked about the strange goings-on,  
Sobbing Kiêu stuttered, caring Vân whispered:
765. "This is the bracelet and this the sworn oath..."  
"I, your father, caused your love tie to break.  
Your sister shall renew this bond, I am resigned to it.  
Who let a seed and a husk, a magnet and a needle part?  
Who let a weed drift on water, a cloud be torn by winds?"
770. You have spoken your words, made your pleas,  
They shall be our golden rule, stones may wear to dust."

Kiêu bowed low before him then softly begged:  
 "Father, help me please to fitly return his love,  
 No matter the bondmaid's fate that befalls me,  
 775. Nevermind that my bones will bleach in alien land."  
 Her despair and distress she struggled to tell,  
 As watchmen seemed to rush the changes of guards.  
 The nuptial coach appeared at the gate, ready to depart.  
 Flutes and lutes started to play, pressed for farewell,  
 780. How very sad for her that went, for them that stayed.  
 So flowed their tears, hard rocks would mellow,  
 Their heart tie tautened like a tired silkworm's thread.  
 Gloomy clouds drifted and darkened the sky,  
 Wet in dew, grass drooped, branches dangled.  
 785. She was led to a guesthouse where all alone  
 She was put behind thick locked doors.  
 Now shame for looks she felt then regret for charm.  
 The more she mulled the more her heart ached,  
 Heaven given virtue was thrown to villain's hands,  
 790. Once kept from rain and shine for other man:  
 "Had I only known I'd sink to this depth,  
 My stamen I'd have let my beloved snatch.  
 I tried to shield it from his vernal longings,  
 Frustrated him then and now break his heart.  
 795. If ever some day we were to meet again,  
 With this stained body, what hope could there be?  
 If I was born to carry an unhappy lot,  
 Could I still live as an untainted maiden?"  
 There, on a low table, lay a paperknife,  
 800. She grabbed it, wrapped it in her scarf :  
 "Just in case the swells are ready to sweep,  
 It'd come handy to settle with my life."

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The autumn night second by second went by,  
 Lonely Kiêu floated between dream and wake.  
 805. She could not guess master Scholar Ma ,  
 That scoundrel, was plainly given to carnal love.  
 He'd had a fast life, met a rough patch,  
 And made it a habit to live off dalliances.  
 In a house of ill fame there was a certain Tu Ba,  
 810. A shady world member now a grim old wretch.

- Their casual meeting could only be set by chance,  
A trickster and a swindler, they formed a perfect pair.  
Shoulder to shoulder they ran their own shop.  
Beauties and damsels were yearly high yield goods,  
815. Cities and the country they scoured for this crop.  
The hired misses were taught the shady trade's tricks.  
Luck and ill-luck rest on Heaven's hand,  
Misfortune had now picked a poor afflicted girl.  
Woe of her, such an innocent young beauty,  
820. A frail flower in trafficker's rough greedy hands!  
Cheat and ruse had tricked her into his trap:  
Petty cash for a scrap of paper then a hasty wedding.  
Wily Scholar Ma exulted in secret: "The trophy's mine,  
My blood boils the more I gaze at this gem.  
825. Her beauty's equal to heavenly splendour,  
One of her smiles is worth tons of taels, I swear!  
Back home, before plucking this bud,  
Men of noble stock will surely fight with posh lot.  
At least three hundred taels would be brought in,  
830. That'll recoup the stake, the rest's profit.  
The titbit's right here close to my lips,  
My asset I'd regret but the godsent good I crave.  
The divine peach is within grasp of mortal hand,  
I'll twist it from its twig, and quench my thirst.  
835. How many amongst the lust-driven lot  
That fondle flowers, know their inner secrets?  
Some pomegranate skin extract,  
A few drops of cockscomb blood,  
With their tint, all's healed up and real intact.  
840. Some vague fuss will then fool the dupes.  
She'll bring in the same amount, where's the loss?  
Were the old crone to find fault with me,  
I'd kowtow and have it over with in little time.  
Besides, the journey home will be long,  
845. If I still don't act, it'd look fishy."  
What a pity! What a pity for the tender flower!  
The bumblebee found its way, went back and forth.  
Gusts and gusts of wind pressed and thrust,  
Without mercy for the pearl, regret for the beauty.  
850. Her wedding night was but a bad dream,  
All alone in the light lit for nuptial love she lay,  
Drops of tears poured like pearls of rain,

In hatred for him, in shame for her sullied self:  
 "A base strain must have bred this stinking filth,  
 855. My precious body's now a stain on my beauty.  
 To hope no more, for what hope may come?  
 Life's no more that has come to this end."  
 Her fate she resented, her lot she lamented,  
 She grabbed her knife intent to kill herself.  
 860. But then she thought it all over again:  
 "For me it matters not, for my kin what then?  
 Whatever the future turn of events may be,  
 The money will be reclaimed from my hurt parents.  
 Perchance my plight one day will ease,  
 865. Whether in a hurry or slowly, it all happens only once."  
 Left to right, top to bottom she was gauging,  
 When over the wall she heard eager rooster crows.  
 As the watchtower horn blared its dawn call,  
 Scholar Ma rushed in, hurried the departure.  
 870. How heart-rending could separation be!  
 Horses hopped and leapt, the coach rocked and jolted.  
 Ten leagues down the road, at a stage post,  
 Old Vuong to all offered a farewell feast.  
 Host and guests flocked and cheered in the open air,  
 875. As to mother and daughter, indoors they hugged.  
 Their tears streamed while they looked at each other,  
 In a whisper Kiêu confided to her pained mother:  
 "Alas! I was born a weak and naive girl,  
 To you and to father, not even in another life  
 880. Could I return all your love and care.  
 Lost where water turns to mud and dust's cleared,  
 Only my heart can I offer for the hundred years to come.  
 How telling is what occurred these past few days:  
 I have been grabbed by an old thug's claws.  
 885. When at home, he leaves me all alone;  
 When returning he wavers, when leaving he speeds;  
 When eating and speaking, he is coarse;  
 When dealing with his servants, they defy, he scorns.  
 Nothing of a noble sire, nothing of a refined man,  
 890. Watched up close, he's got an air of a procurer.  
 Well, what should your child add about herself?  
 In alien land I shall live and die on foreign soil."  
 Upon hearing her words, Dame Vuong screamed,  
 Wishing to tear the sky open to cry injustice.

895. Before the rounds of parting cups were drained,  
Our man rushed out, pressed the coach to leave.  
The heavy-hearted father, torn by his child's pain,  
Lowered his head before the rider and pleaded:  
"My girl is frail and weak, young and tender,  
900. For our family's plight, you she now serves.  
In the wide wild world, she will be forlorn,  
In alien land, harmed by heat, bitten by cold.  
May you be the strong tree that some vine shelters,  
Stretching its kind cover against snow and dew."  
905. Thereupon Scholar Ma politely said:  
"The sacred ties of wedlock now us bind.  
Events may twist and turn, were I to fail,  
The moon and the sun will expose my guilt,  
And I shall surrender to the devil's tools!"  
910. Hurried by the winds, flying with the clouds,  
The coach soon vanished in a shroud of ochre dust.  
The old couple tried to wipe their farewell tears,  
The same distant horizon they stared and searched,  
Day and night they secretly sighed and longed.

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915. Kiêu travelled in far, far away unknown land,  
Over white-frosted bridges, through black, heavy clouds.  
Shivering reeds huddled, fearful of cold gusts,  
The forlorn autumn sky saved for a sad lonely soul.  
In the night, through thick endless banks of mist,  
920. The moon emerged, shaming her for her breached oath.  
Autumn sprinkled amber tinges onto the woods' green,  
Birds' chirrups reminded her of her parents' fluttering love.  
Across strange streams, eery mounts she travelled,  
Then after one full month to Yixian she came.  
925. The adorned carriage stopped by a gate,  
From behind a bamboo blind, a woman stepped out.  
Seen from a distance she certainly looked wan,  
But so tall and so portly, a healthy eater that one!  
She neared the coach and casually bid welcome.  
930. Upon Tu Ba's call, Kiêu entered the house and found,  
This side, a line of girls with plucked arching brows,  
The other, a row of seated men of the shady world,  
In between, a shrine with its required incense-table,

On the wall, a picture of a white-eyebrowed man. (16)  
 935. The houses of ill fame had a time-honoured tradition:  
 Worship him as the patron saint of their trade,  
 Day and night offer him flowers and incense.  
 The unlucky little miss that had sparse clients  
 Would strip bare, shamelessly, in front of the tutelard,  
 940. Light incense sticks, mumble prayer after prayer,  
 Offer flowers, put old ones under her sleeping mat:  
 From all corners, customers would come back running.  
 Still green and untaught, Kiêu stood all ears,  
 At a command she bowed as the hag started to pray:  
 945. "May our house be blessed with good trade,  
 May our days and nights be endless feasts and fests,  
 May clients by the thousands fall under your spell,  
 May they come in rowdy flocks and brazen swarms,  
 May billets-doux and love letters come thick and fast.  
 950. At the gate, you'd say bye and hello at the back door."  
 Strange and empty words to Kiêu's stunned ears,  
 She thought hard but couldn't make heads or tails.  
 To the patron saint prayers and offerings thus made,  
 Tu Ba promptly hopped on the trestle bed  
 955. And instructed: "Come and bow to me, your mother,  
 And then go to bend before him, your father."  
 Kiêu declared: "Driven from home by misfortune,  
 I've accepted my low lot to be a concubine.  
 From a second rank wife I'm to be a daughter,  
 960. Too naive I am to know what's expected of me.  
 Betrothal gifts, wedding deed, all's properly done,  
 As husband and wife we live and share our bed.  
 Now ranks and status are suddenly changed,  
 I beg you for a few words to be apprised."  
 965. Tu Ba was now aware of what had happened,  
 She raised the devil, flew into a terrible rage:  
 "Well well, what occurred is as plain as day to see,  
 This husband stealer has caught my man alive!  
 He was told to be on the prowl for beauties,  
 970. To please our guests and make a living.  
 But this two-faced, this hard-hearted rogue,  
 He had this darned tickling to play and taste.  
 Her veneer has been tainted and cracked,  
 Bye-bye funds and goods, all's gone to the devil!  
 975. Hey, you! You've been sold to me,



- In my house, you'd better follow its laws!  
When this old thug aired his lewd design,  
Slap him you did not but yielded to his call.  
Why let yourself be so readily ravished?
980. Intact teen, so soon feel the fleshly itch?  
Just you wait! I'll let you have a piece of my rules!"  
She grasped a leather whip, pounced, ready to hit.  
Kiêu cried out: "Cruel Heaven! Ruthless earth!  
This life I gave up the day I left home,
985. Well then, this is it, freed from regrets!"  
Thereupon, from her sleeve, she drew her knife,  
Woe! Gone for ever was the gem, the bloom!  
The hag stood aghast as Kiêu closed her thrust.  
Such a pity! such talent, such splendour,
990. A sharp edge severed all cruel earthly ties.  
The mournful news travelled far and fast,  
People poured in, jammed the house.  
Kiêu was motionless, lost in an endless sleep,  
Tu Ba just stared and shook, out of her wits.
995. Kiêu was then carried into the west porch,  
Carers were appointed, healers welcomed.  
Perchance her bond to this world wasn't split:  
In her swoon a maiden was standing by  
Who whispered: "From your karma you're not freed,
1000. Have you settled yet all your debts of suffering?  
Your lot's still heavy with your fair maiden's fate,  
One may wish to try but not against Heaven's will!  
Do your best to live out this wretched life of yours,  
Then later on, by the Qian-Tang river, we'll meet." (17)
1005. Balms and brews were given for a full day,  
Kiêu slowly rallied from her long slumber.  
Tu Ba was on the watch at her bedside,  
With careful soothing words she tried to entice:  
"How many lives does each one of us have?
1010. The flower's pistil is fresh, your spring days are new.  
Erred you have, false steps you've surely made,  
Yet I've no heart to force you into fleshly affairs.  
Due to a slip, you stepped into this house,  
Hold your virtue intact until your nuptial night.
1015. She that her body saves, her fortune keeps,  
Look for a worthy party, a decent sort of man.  
Why do wrong and suffer fate's redress?

- Harming yourself and ruining me, what's the point?"  
 For Kiêu, those pressing whispered entreaties
1020. Made good sense, sorting out right from wrong.  
 She recalled the words in her dream did say:  
 "Perchance our destiny was written in the stars.  
 Let's not leave a debt unpaid in this life,  
 'Tis an unfair burden added to the next."
1025. She listened from start to finish, pondered  
 Then said: "Whoever wanted this to happen?  
 If what you said is true, I am a lucky one,  
 But come tomorrow, will all this stay the same?  
 Were I to treat and entertain clients and guests ,
1030. I'd rather die in honour than live in shame!"  
 The crone replied: "Be at peace, my little girl!  
 I did not open my heart to lie and play games.  
 If in the future I do not live by these very words,  
 From above, the sun will expose my darkness."
1035. These firm, proper words little by little mollified Kiêu.  
 She was locked in the Blue Hall, as sole company  
 The distant shapes of mounts and the nearing moon.  
 As far as her eyes could see, there appeared  
 Stretches of golden sand dunes, whirls of russet dust.
1040. In glimmering dawn, in lamplit night she'd sit in shame,  
 Let her heart be torn by both view and love.  
 She'd dream of him, of their moon, of their gilded cup,  
 He that day after day longed in vain for her news.  
 Alone and lost in far away land and distant shores,
1045. When could she let love's print ever wear out?  
 Poor them that awaited long days at their door,  
 Who now fanned them, covered them from cold?  
 After so many rainy and sunny seasons,  
 The yard catalpa must've grown so big, so old.
1050. She sadly watched the estuary in the twilight,  
 The wavering shapes of ships, the fleeting sails.  
 She sadly watched the tidal swells' crests,  
 Where would this lost and drifting flower end?  
 She sadly watched the field of withering grass
1055. Where sky and land met, blending their hues.  
 She sadly watched the wind whirl into the bay,  
 The waves' roaring engulfed her as she sat.

Forlorn midst unknown streams and hills,  
 Kiêu chanted a few poems to tell her sorrow.  
 1060. As, deep in grief, she was drawing her bead blind  
 When over the wall, matching verses were heard.  
 Appeared a young man, in the prime of his life,  
 Well turned out, spruced up, smartly dressed.  
 She thought him brought up in learned stock,  
 1065. When asked, he introduced himself as So Khanh.  
 Her fair figure fluttered behind her shade,  
 A glimpse of her pushed him to voice his warmth:  
 "Good heavens! Divine splendour, ethereal grace,  
 Whence came she to be cast out to this place?  
 1070. She should reign close to the moon, up in the sky,  
 Why should this beauty be in hurt, in abuse lie?  
 In wrath I am, so enraged against the stale fate,  
 Who could make this feeling known for my sake?  
 If only the fair captive knew she's met a hero,  
 1075. Set to free her from her cage, it's mere child's play!"  
 Through shutters his strong words echoed in her ears.  
 She thought of him then thought about herself,  
 Moved by his pity, she felt less lonesome.  
 Scorching days sluggishly followed freezing days,  
 1080. When would this journey in dust and wind end?  
 She'd summon courage to send him a few lines,  
 A helping hand would rescue a drowning wretch.  
 In a letter she'd tell him her short and long ordeals:  
 How she requited her father, strayed from kith and kin.  
 1085. No sooner had the early morning mist cleared  
 Than a messenger was sent out with her missive.  
 The gold-lit sky was barely blurring in the west  
 When his answer came in with his news.  
 On adorned paper, his note contained two words,  
 1090. "Tich Viêt", that she put her mind to decipher:  
 "The twenty-first, the Hour of the Dog, would do?" (18)  
 At nightfall, some birds still flew back to the woods,  
 The moon came up, half-hidden by camellia branches.  
 Shadows of leaves danced on the western wall,  
 1095. So Khanh half-opened the door and stealthily slipped in.  
 Uneasy and ashamed, Kiêu ventured out to greet him,  
 Her welcoming bows over, trusting, she confided:  
 "Foam and bubble I am, a girl astray from home

That carries a heavy weight for being a loose one.

1100. I now dare beg you to risk life and limb,  
My gratitude forever, forever I shall show."  
Casually he sat and smirked, vainly he nodded:  
"Think nothing of it. I am not like any other man,  
Maybe you've heard about me, by repute?

1105. I make it a point to drain your sea of sorrow."  
She said: "All things rest on your good self,  
Please do decide and to all this put an end."  
He added: "I have horses as swift as wind,  
And a valet who happens to be of stalwart strain.

1110. Let's grasp this golden chance and slip away,  
This is the best among the many good steps.  
We may be thwarted by storm and flood,  
Here I firmly stand, there will be no mishap!"  
For Kiêu these words started to sound suspect,

1115. Yet too embroiled, could she now begin to fret?  
She would be bold and blindly go on her way,  
Letting fickle fate rule her halting path.  
Down the stair together they walked by stealth,  
Now side by side, now in single file they rode.

1120. In the dark, time dripped its water clock drops,  
The shy moon shone through wind-stripped trees.  
On the beaten path, grass paled, faded by dew,  
Each step added cruel throbs to her homesick heart.  
At daybreak, a riot of cockerel crows grew loud,

1125. A hubbub they then heard, voices of chasing men.  
Frightened Kiêu was about to burst into tears,  
So Khanh had long spurred his horse out of sight!  
There she was, alone, not knowing where to head,  
The ride on the uneven forest paths was a biting test.

1130. How heartless of the Creator! Without pity snuffing out  
The crimson flame of life, the hope of rosy future.  
From all parts, men in droves leapt on her,  
She had no claws to dig in, no wings to fly away!  
Tu Ba came straight for Kiêu, snarled and cowed,

1135. All in the same breath, marched her back home.  
No questions she asked, no questioning she did,  
Just violently and cruelly she battered the poor girl.  
Of bone and flesh the weakling was made,  
Her bone crushed, her flesh lashed, she suffered.

1140. Kiêu spared no words to confess, beg for mercy,

Bent her ripped back, bowed her bloodied head.  
 "Mine is a woman's fate," she said, "I ended here,  
 Split from land, from home, from kith and kin.  
 The decision's all yours, to let me live or die,  
 1145. My life is what it is, that's the way it is.  
 Myself? What do I care about myself?  
 I accept my lot, but what of your assets?  
 To be an eel and mind soiling its head?  
 Hence I'll shy away from fulfilling chastity."  
 1150. This was an opening Tu Ba would not miss,  
 She requested a guarantor to write a pledge.  
 Among Kiêu's equals, there was young Ma Kiêu,  
 Who took pity, ventured to stand as surety.  
 The hag dwelled on, ranted and flayed,  
 1155. Pressed and grilled, only stopped when spent.  
 Helping Kiêu into the house for cure and rest,  
 Ma Kiêu was ready to opine and advise:  
 "My, my! you've been duped, let's face it!  
 This character, So Khanh, is nowhere a stranger,  
 1160. A well-known loose lecher in vice dens,  
 In his hands many a flower has lost its corolla.  
 Feint and riposte these two planned, ruses plotted,  
 A devil and demon duo, it's no wonder!  
 Thirty taels changed from hers to his claws,  
 1165. If not, he wouldn't have gone through the trouble.  
 Their deed's done, soon there'll be an about-face,  
 Hold your tongue, lest your life's quickly at risk."  
 Kiêu replied: "So solemnly he swore his oath,  
 Now proves to be a man of such dark design!"  
 1170. She was still struggling with her thoughts,  
 When there appeared the shameless face.  
 He raised his voice to be heard loud and clear:  
 "I just heard one of your lot has spread rumours  
 She's has been seduced and led astray,  
 1175. Let her have a good look and see who I am!"  
 Kiêu replied: "Let things remain as they stand,  
 Nothing happened you said, then nothing happened!"  
 So Khanh fumed and railed, blew his top,  
 Came at her, ready to punch and strike.  
 1180. Kiêu cried out: " Heaven knows what occurred!  
 Now then, who lured me, who enticed me?  
 He led me on then dumped me into the deep pit.

He gave his word and right away reneged on it.  
 I've kept the note with the "Tich Viêt" words,  
 1185. Clearly who could've written it but this man?"  
 Standing far or near, people heard these honest words,  
 Many taunted his treachery, others jeered at his perfidy.  
 The deceit was clear, ashamed, he beat a quick retreat.  
 Alone in her room, Kiêu brooded, melted in tears,  
 1190. She thought about her life, mourned her sorry lot.  
 "Alas! Clean silver and pure frost a girl may be,  
 When hard times strike, like us all she's not spared.  
 Joy and sorrow, they are parts of our lives.  
 A woman's beauty is not there to last forever!  
 1195. In another life I must have badly failed,  
 In this one, to even up, I have to redeem.  
 No matter what, my innocence is lost,  
 My body I shall offer to settle my debts to life."  
 As the full moon, limpid mirror, was shining bright,  
 1200. Tu Ba came by, leisurely gave her guidance:  
 "The trade of pleasures takes care and pain,  
 We, its servants, must know the secrets of the art."  
 Kiêu said: "Faced with heavy rains and harder winds,  
 If I have to give my body away, so I will."  
 1205. Tu Ba added: "If you girls are all alike,  
 Why would men steadily come to spend?  
 Our trade to boot harbours amusing secret tricks,  
 At night, when to close up, when to open out,  
 In daytime, how to be exclusive or shared.  
 1210. My girl, try to learn them by heart:  
 The seven ways to seduce, the eight means to satiate.  
 Let the patrons be spent, the clients be drained,  
 Let your men roll in rapt, let them lie torpid.  
 Now play with frowns, now woo with side-glances,  
 1215. Now chant love poems to the moon,  
 Now in open secret smile at the blooms.  
 Those are the tips and tricks of our house,  
 Master them well, dear, then you can shine."  
 From the first word to the last Kiêu was all ears,  
 1220. Then she knit her eyebrows, then she blanched.  
 The advice she heard filled her with shame.  
 So many eerie hardships had life in reserve:  
 To be born and raised in smart dwellings,  
 And now forced to be drilled in such strange trade!

1225. Or was she now brazen-faced, thick-skinned?  
Her earthborn life had reached such dire lowliness!  
Woe of her that had the fate of a girl gone astray,  
In the clench of cruel hands, what was to be done?  
Soon down came the bawdy house's curtain,
1230. The dearer the price, the higher the demand:  
Swarms of eager butterflies, clouds of keen bees,  
Nights of rowdy parties, months of drinking sprees.  
Her favours frail Kiêu gave to all the winds,  
At dawn saw a beau off, welcomed a suitor at dusk.
1235. Late at night, when emerging from the fumes of wine,  
She'd flinch, wallow in self-pity, torment herself.  
Once clad in silk and brocade, now a shredded lost flower.  
Her face by wind and dew so hardened,  
Her body thus thrown to lust and satiety.
1240. Burning heat and raging passion she had met,  
But had she ever felt the joy of love?  
Leaned against flowers, grazed by the wind,  
She'd watch the moon through the snow-covered blinds.  
This scenery, like all sceneries, was bound to be sad,
1245. For a saddened heart could there be any happy scenery?  
Sometimes she'd paint or write a few verses,  
Pluck the lute in the moonlight, play weiqi near flowers.(18)  
But all this was feigned jollity, forced glee,  
Where was a soulmate to share a breath of warmth?
1250. Indifferent to wind in bushes, to rain on plum trees,  
She was lost in a tangle of thoughts and fears.  
Sorry images from distant or nearer past  
Quivered in her dazed mind, throbbed in her pained heart.  
Grateful, she thought of her parents and her duties,
1255. They that were weakening with each sinking sun.  
Far away they were, behind high mounts and deep waters,  
Little idea they had of the fate bestowed upon their child!  
In their home, her siblings were still so green,  
Who could replace her to cosset the old couple?
1260. She also thought of the pledge of eternal love,  
From where he was, could Kim feel what she felt?  
Once back, he must have asked about his promised lady,  
Alas! her youth was cut short, passed to an expert hand.  
In the name of their affection, had Vân redeemed her love?
1265. Had the young flower been grafted into the new stem?  
Her first love now a skein of untangled silken threads,

Dreams of her home kept haunting her long nights.  
By her silk-draped window, lonely Kiêu eyed an alien sky,  
While twilight was followed by yet another twilight.  
1270. As the moon silver gleam yielded to the sun golden lustre,  
She suffered like all her peers that were damned.  
They all were endowed with the rose's splendour,  
Blessed, then harmed, then ruined, for mere balance!  
Doomed to a dire life of dust and draft they were,  
1275. Doomed till all shame was suffered to the full.

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Then a customer named Thuc Ky Tâm asked about her,  
A man of learned breed coming from Wuxi, in Hangzhou.  
Now in Yixian with his father to open a trading house.  
The renown of fair Kiêu took no time to reach his ears,  
1280. He handed his calling card, in he was invited.  
Behind the curtain he faced pure beauty,  
Her charm so so alluring, her features so so tempting.  
The camellia sparkled, in the prime of her youth,  
Her heady glamour deepened with each spring rain.  
1285. He wooing her, she arousing him, by passion ravaged,  
On a spring night how to subdue one's heart?  
'Tis no wonder that kin spirits should meet,  
Tied by such a bond, who could pull them apart?  
From dawn to dusk they shared the joys of love,  
1290. Soon, light frivolities became burning passion.  
A strange stroke of luck served them well:  
It was then that his father was called back home.  
In love Thuc had been, now he was all bewitched,  
No sweet day would he spend without his sweetheart.  
1295. On the breeze-swept terrace, in the moonlit yard,  
They'd drink to the elves, devote verses to the deities,  
In the morn sharing pleasures, in the eve a cup of tea,  
Confronting their weiqi skills, enjoying their lute playing.  
They let themselves indulge in sheer abandon.  
1300. The better they knew each other, the deeper their ardour.  
What a strange wave a beguiling gaze could be  
That could readily wreck citadels and ruin cities.  
Young Thuc came to squander money with both hands,  
Spending a fortune just to see her burst into laughter!  
1305. Tu Ba whetted his appetite, honed his spending spree,



- Greedy she was, easily rapt with the smell of money.  
 In the moonlit night cuckoos sang their summer songs,  
 Above the wall, pomegranates flickered their fires.  
 On a soft, lovely day, in her quiet boudoir,
1310. Behind her light silken drape Kiêu took her fragrant bath.  
 As pure as pearl, as white as ivory her body was,  
 Full and ripe, a work of art shaped by the hands of nature.  
 Young Thuc beheld and praised each comely feature,  
 He then voiced his wonder in an improvised Tang poem.
1315. She said: "You have put your heart and soul in these lines,  
 Jade and gems they are, embroidered in fine brocade.  
 Well or badly inspired, I ought to offer them a rejoin,  
 Alas! My mind is beset by longing thoughts of home.  
 My heart's floating in search of home clouds and sky,
1320. Please deem that the owed poem is a fleeting debt."  
 "How very strange these words of yours, said Thuc,  
 Are you not the old lady's flesh and blood?"  
 Her eyes darkened, no longer pure lakes in the autumn,  
 The very thought of her ill fate struck her with grief:
1325. "I am but a flower snatched from its stem.  
 And you're the flitting butterfly, fit for fun,  
 A well settled lord with abode and wife.  
 'Tis not worth our little time speaking at length."  
 Young Thuc replied: "Ever since we here met,
1330. My heart's afire, craving to see us bound for life.  
 For a hundred years a fitting match I wish to find,  
 Thus need to retrace the stream to its very spring."  
 Kiêu replied: "You shall forever be thanked,  
 But I fear, for you and for me, it won't be easy.
1335. You have been lingering in this house of pleasure  
 Where beauty's prized if smartened up.  
 When the powder's faded, when the perfume's stale,  
 Will your loving heart keep its tender poise?  
 And then, in that starry dream dwelling of yours,
1340. There naturally rules its legitimate dweller, your wife.  
 You have been tied by the bond of marriage for so long,  
 Adding another spouse, your heart will be divided.  
 Do not let this bobbing weed, this drifting cloud  
 Dictate the highs and lows of your deep affection.
1345. I would be the cause of much chaos and confusion,  
 In the next lives who would bear Heaven's retribution?  
 Were you to have a firm command in your household,

- I can hope to have a little of your protection and help.  
Now, if her grip were to exceed your clout,
1350. I shall be tied hand and foot, cast into the lioness' jaws.  
Under your own roof, I shall creep, my head bowed,  
The heat of jealousy burns like the fire of fury.  
And ruling above you two, there stands your father,  
Will he look down on me or care to show some pity?
1355. Would he snub this wild weed, this waste flower?  
Freed from this bawdy house, to it I shall be returned!  
Inanity added to shame, I am resigned to this fate,  
But I fear most for your good name.  
If you can love me fairly then love me,
1360. Study all avenues, study them fully, obey I will."  
Thuc said: "Why should you have these qualms,  
Does your heart not know all the secrets of my heart?  
Be not afraid of the vagaries of our long journey,  
Count on me to settle its thousand and one events.
1365. Near you I am, why fret about things remote?  
Unswerving in our love, we'll brave the tricks of fortune!"  
They told their thoughts, they shared their hopes,  
Seas and mounts they named as witnesses to their vows.  
Nights are short for the tender cooing of loving hearts,
1370. In the west, the moon was already below the hilltops.  
Thuc took Kiêu out, pretending a refreshing stroll,  
Near his home, he hid her in a safe place.  
Eager for fight, ready for truce, he made plans for both,  
Wizards he sought, agents he sent to spy.
1375. The news was simply slapped on Tu Ba's face,  
Outplayed, she could but look for a deal.  
The redress was duly paid to the hag in person,  
To turn the page, the deed was duly recorded.  
So then, officially and privately, all was in order,
1380. Light as a fairy, Kiêu was freed from her ring of misery.  
The lovers snuggled under the same roof,  
Their endearment deepened as their love grew.  
Their passion was fanned into a fiery blaze,  
This gem's sparkle sharpened that jewel's shine.
1385. As an intimate couple they had lived for half a year,  
When maples were spotted with golden leaves,  
Along the hedge, mums shot their tender buds.  
From his hometown, Thuc's father rode back.  
He raged and thundered in an outburst of wrath,

1390. Gnawed by anxieties, he planned to split the pair.  
He was intent to dismiss all pleas and excuses,  
Ordered the courtesan back to the red-light house!  
Thuc saw that his father's reprimand was final,  
He made bold to appeal to his good heart.
1395. He implored: "Father, I confess my many offences,  
Your thunderbolts and hatchet blows I fully deserve.  
Now that my hand is dipped in indigo dye,  
How from a fool make him a wise man?  
Had we been in unison for one single day,
1400. Who'd hold a lute then heartlessly rip off its strings?  
Were you to be resolute in showing no mercy,  
I will not betray her and my life shall not regret!"  
Boiling with anger at his son's unyielding words,  
The old father humbly referred to the authorities.
1405. Over the quiet earth rolled waves after waves,  
A magistrate ordered a summons to be issued.  
They all followed the bailiff's steps,  
Duly bowed low in the judge's yard.  
Looking up they saw his stern leaden face,
1410. Strutting about he delivered a harsh address:  
"You got yourself in a gross groove, reveller.  
And this trickster here's a shifty cheat,  
A sort of scrap flower, of spent beauty,  
That with rouged face dupes a greenhorn.
1415. To judge by the state of affairs in this complaint,  
Nothing at all has been squarely settled.  
Pursuant to the law, a sentence is ordered,  
There are two ways, it is up to her to choose:  
Either she stays and faces corporal punishment
1420. Or she's sent back to her bawdy house!"  
Kiêu instantly replied: "My choice is made,  
The spider cannot spin its web time and time again!  
Murky or pure it may be, I put up with my life,  
Weak and young I will face the rigour of the law."
1425. The judge ordered: "The punishment be carried out!"  
The frail girl was shackled, cuffed and cangued.  
Resigned, she did not even dare cry injustice,  
Tears ran down her pink cheeks, her brows twisted.  
In the courtyard she lay in dust and mud,
1430. Her fair face tarnished, her slight frame harmed.  
Looking at his loved one, young Thuc was full of pity,

- From afar he glanced at her, his heart broken.  
He cried: "I caused this unfair misfortune,  
Had I heeded her words, she'd have been spared.
1435. How can my shallow mind beget deep thoughts?  
Her distress, her grieves, who is to bear the fault?"  
The magistrate overheard these sad laments,  
Touched with pity, he plied him with queries.  
In tears, Thuc readily complied and told their story,
1440. The ins and outs he gave, since the day he proposed:  
"Kiêu had given this her far and wide thoughts,  
She even foretold what her life is facing now.  
Since I took it all in hand, I am to be blamed  
For letting her face such a woeful state!"
1445. The words the judge heard stroke a chord,  
He mellowed and proffered to best this plight:  
"If what you have told me were to be true,  
Then this girl of ill repute knows right from wrong."  
Thuc replied: "Though humbled by fate,
1450. She's practiced hard and dabbled in poetry."  
The judge laughed: "So, she's made it then!  
Let her show her art on the theme of the cangue."  
Kiêu complied, set the brush and started to write,  
The flowery paper was laid on the magistrate's desk.
1455. He was profuse in praise: "This is Tang poetry at its best!  
How priceless is that talent, how treasured this grace:  
Truly, a man of parts meets a woman of beauty,  
Where to find a better match for two houses?  
Now then, feed anger and nurse rancour no more,
1460. Why break the beat of two phased instruments?  
When a case is brought before the court of law,  
Within the bounds of justice lies compassion.  
A daughter-in-law's a follower of a family's mores,  
Try to quell your discontent, all will end well!"
1465. Orders were forthwith given for the official function,  
The litter flew with the wind, torches glowed like stars.  
A tumult of piping flutes, of booming drums  
Ushered the newly-weds to their nuptial room.  
He loved Kiêu for her virtue, regarded her for her talent,
1470. Elder Tung came to restrain his storm of anger.  
Lily and orchid aromas bathed the lucky home,  
Old bitterness made new happiness sweeter.  
In the morn wine they drank, in the eve weiqi they played,

- Then peach trees withered, lotus leaves started to show.
1475. On a silent night, they quietly sat behind their drapes,  
Kiêu confided to Tung her fears and qualms:  
"To your strong hands I have trusted my weak self,  
Wild geese replaced swallows, a full year has passed.  
News from your home is hard to come by,
1480. Passion boils for your bride, love cools for your wife.  
After reflection, this really deserves some wondering,  
From slander and gossip who could have shielded us?  
Rumour has it that the one that reigns in your house  
Lives by strict rules and says what is right.
1485. How utterly fearful are those unrivalled souls,  
Their hearts are harder to fathom than rivers and seas!  
For a full year, we have been sharing our lives,  
We could not have kept it from her knowledge.  
For a long time, her silence seems not to thin out,
1490. Who knows, something must be afoot.  
Please do make pressing plans to hurry home,  
She'll love the thought and we'll know her thinking.  
Day and night we plan and plot to hide our secret,  
Now waffling, now delaying will not save the day."
1495. Those quiet words of caution were worth heeding,  
Thuc agreed and decided to return to his home town.  
At dawn, he informed his father about his plan,  
The old man also urged him to make the trip home.  
The couple shared a cup of wine to bid farewell,
1500. From their loving berth they strolled to the parting gate.  
The Ch'in river unrolled its blue ribbon, along its banks  
Scattered willows waved their twigs to say goodbye. (20)  
Hand in hand, they stood in sighs and tears,  
Parting left their wine untouched, their words unspoken.
1505. Kiêu said: "Though mounts and streams will us divide,  
Only if your wife lives in peace shall I feel at ease.  
Can a red shawl or a needle's eye blur one's sight?  
Blindfold, who will try to catch and cage a bird?  
You and I share a tender bond, light it may be,
1510. Upon arrival, do try to make this clear and becoming.  
If storm and fury were to suddenly erupt,  
Let her keep her rank, I am resigned to my place.  
'Tis better than trying to hide and shroud,  
Risking that some future calamity us strikes.
1515. Hold me in your heart, keep my words in your mind,

- Though long it may seem, a year will quickly pass.  
Let's now raise our cups to bid farewell,  
Today next year, we shall happily drink to your return!"  
He was up on his horse, she let go of his gown.
1520. Autumn was tinging maple woods with sombre tints,  
Ochre clouds of dust engulfed the lone rider  
Who soon vanished behind masses of green brambles.  
She went back, a solitary figure in the dark night,  
He rode on and on, alone on the wide-open road.
1525. What heartless hand parted the moon in halves,  
One rested by her pillow, one lit his long journey?

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- Let us skip over the ups and downs of his trip,  
And follow the steps of this home's queen bee:  
She was born into the renowned Hoan family,
1530. Her father, a mandarin minister, named her Hoan Thu.  
Lucky time, timely chance, chancy swings  
Long ago had led her and Thuc to be wed.  
Her manner could be said to be suitable,  
Though at arm twisting she was rather an old hand.
1535. She caught wind of the new flower added to his garden,  
Tongues loosened but from his lip not a single word.  
A muffled fire of wrath was a fanned furious flame,  
Blowing against the traitor's flitting fickle heart.  
"Had he simply told me the whole truth,
1540. I'd have lowered myself to pardon the lesser girl.  
What's wrong in trying to keep one's rank,  
What's the good in suffering the jealousy's shame?  
He'd rather hush up, shirk and hide,  
All childish game that calls for a snuffy laugh.
1545. Out of sight out of news, so he reckons,  
Hide from me he does, I'll return the favour!  
Me worrying about this trifle? Don't you worry,  
Crawling in a bowl, where does the ant hope to go?  
I'll see to it that they can't even face each other.
1550. I'll see to it that, shamed, she can't even rear her head!  
I'll see to it that he watches it with his own eyes.  
Giving up the old for the new? He'll learn who I am!"  
She kept her fury well hidden in her heart,  
Letting the wind of rumours fly right past her ears.

1555. Then the following week two people appeared,  
Telltales they certainly were, raving to curry favour.  
In anger the young lady blared and blasted:  
"Vile people that embellish just to pester me!  
My husband's surely not like any other man,
1560. Your mouths just spat a pure piece of slander!"  
Forthwith, in a show of authority, she ordered:  
One to be slapped, the other's teeth to be pulled out.  
The household lay low, shushed and hushed,  
Who'd dare to blurt a single word?
1565. In her room she'd idle morn till eve,  
Carefree, she'd go about, talk and laugh,  
Yet night and day anger boiled in her bosom.  
Alighting from his horse, Thuc came home,  
Joy of reunion they shared, chit-chat they did.
1570. The warmer their love, the fierier their fervour.  
Dusted down and cheerfully drunk to he was,  
Yet who could read the feelings each kept in his heart?  
Thuc had come back to sound his wife's thoughts,  
He was about to openly confide his story.
1575. Cheerful and chatty, whether tipsy or sober,  
She would not drop a hint about his affair.  
The pot was tightly capped, he thought to himself,  
Why should one confess without being questioned?  
So he did nothing but falter and waver,
1580. Fearing to pull a vine and stir the whole woods.  
At times, in the middle of their merry talks and laughs,  
The young lady would drop some idle trifles:  
"We can make out jade and stone, gold and bronze,  
Each other's quality we totally trust.
1585. Praiseworthy are those long-tongued people  
That spread baseless rumours on foraging bees.  
Being artless I never pay much attention to them,  
Feeding one's heart with trash one is the laughing stock!"  
Thuc found her words casual and playful,
1590. He played along to parry smacks and jibes.  
The couple bantered and dallied to their hearts' content,  
Their shadows mingled in the night lamp's light,  
The moon they admired side by side.  
He took a liking to the pleasures of home life,
1595. Soon some plane leaves started to fall into the well.  
He longingly recalled the rough stretch, the pass

Where for four seasons he had lived a fleeting love.  
 Before he dared whisper his silent thoughts,  
 His young wife was one step ahead and coolly said:  
 1600. "It's been a year since you left your cloud-haired father,  
 To Yixian you should return and pay your respect."  
 How relieved he was, forthwith rode through alien land.  
 Gleaming lakes and streams mirroring the azure he saw,  
 Sparkles of sapphire blue citadels, flashes of golden peaks.  
 1605. Hardly had the whip prodded his steed for a long trip,  
 Than his wife boarded her coach, back to her parents'.  
 To her mother she reported all her hard-luck,  
 How false he'd been and how she'd to take her lot.  
 "A jealous rage is like scratching a rash,  
 1610. It draws shame but brings one no praise.  
 So I looked the other way and kept my mouth tight,  
 All this while I have contrived a skilful scheme.  
 By road, the trip to Yixian will take a full month,  
 By sea, though, a ship reaches port in no time.  
 1615. One fits out a junk, one chooses the right hands,  
 One has her chained and brought back here.  
 Let her be roughed up, let her be worn down,  
 Let her taste grief and pain and face bitter shame.  
 First I'd thus vent my anger against these two,  
 1620. And then they'd be a mockery for all time!"  
 The old lady praised her for her wonder wife,  
 She humoured her child by giving her a free hand.  
 Sails and rigging were set to face wind and fog,  
 Hound and Hawk recruited a gang of thugs.  
 1625. The men all got full and clear orders,  
 Wind in its sails, the light junk headed for Qi.  
 Behind her silk-curtained window, Kiêu sat confused,  
 In a turmoil she was, torn by untold worries and sorrows:  
 "My old parents are waning, like fading mulberry shadows,  
 1630. Are they free from heat and cold, served proper meals?  
 My hair, cut for my pledge, is now shoulders long,  
 Was it rock-solid oath, ageless as hills and streams?  
 A creeping vine, that is my humble lot,  
 Will our union be cursed or blessed by fortune?  
 1635. Why are my life and fate so unfairly doomed?  
 O to live forsaken like the Moon Fairy in her mansion!"  
 In the autumn night, a breeze stirred the curtains,  
 A crescent and three stars gleamed on the dark dome.



To the deity's temple, Kiêu brought incense sticks,  
1640. With burning words she was still pouring out her soul,  
When from the shrubs leapt a band of cruel fiends,  
Who roared and howled, scaring even devils and genies.  
Drawn swords and sabres glittered in the dark yard,  
Awestruck, Kiêu knew not what to do, where to run.  
1645. They sprayed a drowsy drug upon her,  
Senseless she lay in a stupor, in a deep dream.  
In no time they put her astride on a horse.  
Her bed chamber and reading room they set afire.  
An unclaimed corpse happened to lie by the river,  
1650. Into the fire they threw it in her stead, to mislead.  
Her menials were frightened out of their wits,  
They scurried behind bushes and trees to find refuge.  
Living nearby, the elder Thuc saw the rising flames,  
Panic and horror struck the poor old man.  
1655. Master and servants hurried to the scene,  
In a rush to fight the fire, in tumult to look for Kiêu.  
The flames flared, fanned by a raging wind,  
The minions hunted and scoured, of her no trace.  
Wild-eyed and frantic they looked at one another,  
1660. At random wells they probed, bushes they combed.  
They then sped to where her room was,  
And in the ashes found bones burnt to a cinder.  
Too upright he was to suspect dirty work,  
It was her he thought and no one else,  
1665. The old man endlessly moaned and cried.  
He pitied the worthy woman his absent son had lost.  
He had the remains gathered and brought home,  
Laid out, shrouded, prayed upon and laid to rest.  
The befitting rites for the funeral had ended,  
1670. When overland, in rush Thuc came home.  
He stepped in the room where they used to chant  
To find heaps of cinders and four rain-beaten walls.  
In the main building of his father's residence,  
He saw an altar and her name tablet thereon.  
1675. Alas! How in full tell his despair,  
His heart-rending grief, his gut-wrenching pains?  
He writhed on the ground, he sobbed and wailed:  
"For such a lady, such an unfair doom!  
So certain we were that united anew we shall be,  
1680. Who'd have guessed farewell would be adieu?"

- Love kindled old memories, memories stirred pain,  
Who could douse his sorrow, smother his grief?  
A soothsayer, he was told, practiced in those parts,  
With spells, he'd rally spirits, read their riddles.
1685. The heaven's Three Isles and the Nine Springs of hell  
He'd scour on and on until he found out.  
Thuc sent precious gifts, invited him home,  
Bade him to find Kiêu, to enquire her fate.  
Before the altar, the seer went down on his knees,
1690. The incense sticks still burning he got into a trance.  
He came to and declared in no uncertain words:  
"I've not seen her face but have studied her case.  
This soul's caught in a dark, evil karma,  
Many debts she still owes and cannot simply die!
1695. Her star says she suffers dire calamity,  
A year will elapse before you hear from her.  
You two will stand face to face again, yet strangely,  
You want your eyes to meet but dare not let them!"  
Those were weird and tall words,
1700. Knowing her fate, who'd risk to believe him?  
All that must be sheer medium's blather,  
Kiêu was no more yet was seen in this life!  
Thuc mourned her, grieved their happy days,  
How often could a man meet a nymph?
1705. Swells had swept off the fallen flower,  
Who was to know Kiêu was living hell on earth?  
Hound and Hawk had pulled off their vile plan,  
They drew her off the horse and flung her in the junk.  
The fully rigged boat sailed to the wind,
1710. Set course for Wuxi across waves and sea.  
Once it berthed they set off to the mansion,  
Duly rewarded Hound and Hawk delivered Kiêu.  
She was carried off to the servants' quarters,  
Fazed and dazed, in troubled dreams she lay.
1715. When she came round from her baleful sleep,  
Where was her home, what was this palace?  
Still half drugged half clear-headed she drifted,  
From the stateroom a voice ordered she be on duty.  
Maids ran from this floor to that, pressing one another,
1720. In haste, she followed one, fright on her face.  
Looking up she saw vast chambers, endless hallways,  
A hung sign titled "Imperial Grand Mandarin".

- In broad daylight, two lines of candles were lit,  
An old lady was sitting on a richly inlaid bed.
1725. She queried, from top to bottom she enquired,  
Politely Kiêu told her all that was to be told.  
Suddenly the lady flew into a rage and rebuked:  
"This here belongs to the hard-boiled vagrant breed!  
The lowly girl is not honesty made flesh.
1730. A lawless drifter, a faithless tramp, a husband cheater,  
A graveyard loitering cat, a midden scratching hen,  
With muddled answers she leaves me perplexed.  
To be a serf to my household she sold herself,  
And now cocksure she puts on airs and graces!
1735. You people! Apply our family habits and customs,  
Deal her thirty slashes so she knows who's who!"  
In unison her servants shouted loud "Yes, Ma'am",  
Even with a hundred mouths Kiêu could've said no word.  
They went all out to thrash her with bamboo sticks,
1740. Whose flesh and heart wouldn't flinch and tremble?  
Woe is her, poor woman, as frail as twig,  
Pained by rain, tormented by storm then torn apart.  
Her name was ordered be changed to Slave Flower  
And she was to join the ranks of menials.
1745. She drudged and served in the servants' blue garb,  
Exposed, her hair was tousled, her skin lead-grey.  
Among the housekeepers there was an old woman,  
Who took to her bearing, to her nature and pitied her.  
She brought her tea or gave her medicine,
1750. Looked for words to help her find taste for life.  
She softly said: "Clearly it's a matter of chance,  
Though weak as a willow try to take care of yourself.  
You must be paying for a sin from a previous life,  
Meeting with such fate is never without reason.
1755. Beware! Walls have ears, forests have eyes,  
If you run into an old friend, just look away.  
At any moment thunderbolts can strike,  
Ants and bees are hard put to cry injustice."  
Drops of pearls poured down Kiêu's poor face,
1760. Dread and worries plagued her torn heart:  
"My life's had its ample share of gusts of wind,  
Alas! It now has to face a gale twice as strong!  
When would cruel fate loosen its grip,  
Why time after time burden a bound beauty?"

1765. Debts of previous lives plainly have to be redeemed,  
Flowers fade and jade shatters, 'tis the price we all pay."  
As Kiêu hunched her shoulders waiting for better days,  
Hoan Thu chose to pay a visit to her parents.  
Mother and daughter chatted, talked about trifles,  
1770. Then the old lady summoned Kiêu and told her:  
"The young lady needs hands for menial tasks,  
I'll let you go and serve as a chambermaid."

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- Upon this order Kiêu followed her new mistress,  
Wondering where hell was and where was heaven.  
1775. Day and night washcloth she'd bring, hair she'd comb,  
A servant she was, the servant's tasks she dared not fail.  
One night when all was peaceful and still,  
She was asked to play the lute, the lady's own art.  
Docile Kiêu tuned and plucked the strings,  
1780. The lament slowly lulled the listener's soul.  
The young lady seemed pleased with her skill,  
Her stern expression even softened, slightly.  
In stranger's house, abused Kiêu lived her humble life,  
At dawn, she'd seek refuge in her shadows,  
1785. Deep in the night, she'd sooth her heart's regrets.  
Her Yixian fragile love lingered in her mind,  
But they'd probably meet again in another life.  
Toneless white clouds covered the infinite sky,  
She looked towards her land but where was her home?  
1790. As time went by, estranged Thuc was aware of nought.  
Since from Yixian his fair lady had flown away,  
An empty room kept a lonesome man lost in time.  
He saw her eyebrows in the curve of the crescent,  
Felt haunting scents and mourning thoughts.  
1795. Then lotus flowers withered and mums bloomed,  
His sorrow swelled with time, winter yielded to spring.  
Where now to find his beloved mate of old?  
He'd call it fate to ease the agony of absence.  
He thought of the past, he longed for native soil.  
1800. Missing home he could but find his way back,  
With such warmth was he greeted by his wife!  
Their free and easy out-pouring was barely over,  
When the screen to her room was rolled up.

- A voice instructed Kiêu to come, greet and grovel,  
1805. Step by reluctant step, Kiêu inched close.  
Nearing, she started to discern a distant face:  
"Am I blinded by the sun or dazzled by the lamp?  
It's him, it's clearly Thuc that is sitting there!  
Only now can my mind see through her mind,  
1810. Let's face it! Headfirst we fell into a trap.  
What a ruse! What an out of the ordinary ruse!  
And what a woman! What a crafty woman!  
To the pair of us each has been allotted a rank:  
One's a servant, the other a master, clearly kept apart.  
1815. On her face, she is all smile and kindness,  
In her heart, she plots to kill without a knife.  
I crawl low on the ground, he flies high in the sky,  
How to behave towards him, how to address Thuc?"  
She grew more distraught as she watched his face,  
1820. A tangled skein, her heart was in a turmoil.  
In awe of authority she dared not break the rule,  
In the apricot yard, she lay low, hanging her head.  
Mute stood Thuc, frantic, out of his mind he was:  
"Woe is she! Is this Kiêu standing before my eyes?  
1825. What caused her to be in such a wretched state?  
Clearly we've been caught in someone's snare."  
Fearing to cosy up and air his secret thoughts,  
He tried but failed to prevent his tears from dropping.  
His wife looked him in the eyes and enquired:  
1830. "You just came home, why are you so sad?"  
Thuc replied: "My mother's mourning just ended,  
I grieved for her loss, my suffering will last forever."  
She praised him: "What a dutiful son you are,  
Let's drink to your return, dispel this eve's gloom."  
1835. She toasted his return, he drank to her welcome.  
Kiêu was forced to stand by and wait on both,  
Forced to pour fast or slow down as ordered,  
Forced to kneel before Thuc and hand him his wine.  
Thuc was stunned, stupefied he even was,  
1840. His tears dropped or ran as he drank cup after cup.  
He turned away, talked and laughed by fits,  
Then he feigned to be drunk, asked to be excused.  
Right away Hoan Thu screamed: "Slave Flower!  
Entice him to drink up or you'll be thrashed!"  
1845. With a pained soul and a heavy heart,

- Thuc took the tendered cup and quaffed the bitter wine.  
Half drunk the young lady laughed and chatted,  
Then to enliven the binge she devised a game.  
She said: "Slave Flower's a girl of many a talent,  
1850. To humour you, from her repertoire she'll play a piece."  
Stunned and numbed, Kiêu did what she was told,  
She came before the screen and tuned her lute.  
The four strings seemed to sob and moan,  
Shortly the feasting man's heart fell to pieces!  
1855. To the same sound of music they listened,  
The outsider openly smiled, the insider wept in secret.  
As the stream of tears ran without restraint,  
He lowered his head to discreetly wipe them off.  
The young lady then screamed at her maid:  
1860. "Why spoil our pleasure with gloomy tunes?  
How much more thoughtless can you be?  
You are to be blamed if my spouse's sad!"  
More distress, more unrest did Thuc feel,  
He strained to talk, laugh to ride out the storm.  
1865. The waterclock now marked the third watch,  
Hoan Thu watched their faces, looking pleased.  
She was in high spirits, harbouring a secret joy:  
"This glee makes up for the long muffled pain."  
His heart consumed by despair and muted wrath,  
1870. Thuc's throbbing thoughts sharpened its bitter stings.  
The couple entered their room to share its single pillow,  
The night long, Kiêu lay awake in the glow of a lamp:  
"Only now can I see through her design,  
What jealousy! What a rare jealous woman!  
1875. What a plot to split two loving doves,  
Each kept in his part, parted from the other!  
A gulf and a world apart we are held,  
Light or sober chats no more, no more moral talks.  
Now light as feather, my debt, now heavy as lead,  
1880. If I'm freed from it, what'll become of my love?  
A frail humble woman I am, that's faltered and tripped,  
Shall I be saved unharmed from an unrelenting sea?"  
Lonely in the darkness she brooded over her plight,  
The lamp oil ran dry, wet were her eyes.  
1885. Day and night, she humbly served at the mansion,  
Hoan Thu chanced upon her, deigned to question her.  
With measured words, Kiêu respectfully replied:

- "Now and then I feel sorrow over my plight."  
The young lady turned to Thuc and said:
1890. "I count on you to fully probe her sincerity."  
A tight vice viciously squeezed Thuc's heart:  
Confess he would not, witness he could not!  
Fearing that worse vexations befell her,  
He ventured to choose a way for his enquiry.
1895. Her head low, kneeling in the fine yard,  
Kiêu wrote down a brief account of her life.  
Before the young lady, she submitted her work,  
Glancing at it, Hoan Thu was amazed, slightly moved.  
At once she handed the paper over to Thuc:
1900. "A talent to be honoured, a plight to be pitied!  
Were she born into rank and riches,  
Her skill would have warranted her a golden palace!  
Yet this beauty is bobbing on the sad sea of life,  
So blessed with talent to face such an eerie fate!"
1905. Thuc answered: "How right are your words,  
Young beauties are easy preys for cruel fate.  
This seems to be the case since time out of mind,  
Please show mercy, treat her with a gentler hand."  
Hoan Thu added: "She wrote she wished
1910. Her fateful lot to be entrusted to the Emptiness Way. (21)  
All right then, I'll indulge her with that one wish,  
So she can be freed from the wheel of her woes.  
Happily, our garden shelters a temple to Kuan Yin, (22)  
Where grow a lofty tree and four-season flowers. (23)
1915. Where ancient trees shade rockeries and pools,  
Let her tend the temple and copy the sacred texts."  
At the break of dawn when the light was still faint,  
The five offerings were brought for the rite. (24)  
Kiêu was led before the Buddha's shrine,
1920. She pledged to the Three Jewels, the Five Precepts. (25)  
The blue garb she doffed and donned the brown frock.  
She was now called by her nun's name, Pure Spring.  
Day and night, she'd ensure the altar oil lamp be lit,  
Helped by Spring and Autumn with the services.
1925. Thus in the flower garden Kiêu'd found refuge,  
So near beatitude, so far from the dusty world.  
For earthly love she no longer yearned,  
Freed from beauty and from the shame it brought.  
At Buddha's feet, she muted her misery and sorrow,

1930. By day she'd tend the temple, at night light the incense.  
So then, a few droplets from a willow branch would (26)  
Damp the fire of passion and quench the fury of fate!  
Since she donned the dhyana brown frock,  
The moon had waned and waxed many a time.
1935. Put behind a barred door, under a fine-meshed watch,  
Kiêu would talk in company but would cry in solitude.  
Her praying attic was so far away from his reading room,  
Seemingly a hand span near yet a thousand miles apart.  
As Thuc held his sighs, swallowed his laments,
1940. Hoan Thu had to dutifully visit her parents.  
He seized the chance thus offered, stole out,  
Hurried straight to the garden to meet Kiêu.  
Between sobs and sighs, he told her his woes,  
His tears streamed down, soaked his elegant blue coat.
1945. "I alone resigned myself to betraying our love,  
Yet the Lord of Spring chastises only this flower!  
A man's weak mind's no match for a woman's brain,  
I watched with a broken heart but kept a cautious silence.  
A pure pearl soiled by mud, a life spoiled in its spring,
1950. You are beset by misfortune, I am to be blamed.  
Rapids and precipices I was ready to face,  
Ready to live and die, loyal to our pledge of love.  
Yet to my forbears I still owe a heavy debt, an heir,  
Clenching my teeth I had to part my vow in two.
1955. Shamefully I breached my rare and precious troth,  
Can a hundred lives redeem a broken word?"  
Kiêu said: "I am but a slight skiff tossed by storms,  
Pure chance decides whether it floats or sinks.  
A poor wretch that wriggles in muck and mire,
1960. A spent life that is stunned to last until today.  
Tis' a raindrop that tries to hang onto a twig,  
Offers its tiny self to passers-by's gaze.  
What a pity! The lute's attuned to the strings,  
Not a hundred years, for scant days united.
1965. Please find a way to free me from this abode:  
A token of keen love, deep will be my gratitude!"  
Thuc said: "I've nursed that nagging thought,  
Then 'tis hard to fathom a devious heart!  
Besides, violent storms will no doubt break out,
1970. Inflicting torment on you, thus on me more pains.  
Run away, fly away as far as you possibly can,



- Only that much love we have been bestowed!  
 Each one of us will soon go his own opposite way,  
 When shall we renew the tie that us binds?
1975. Rivers may run dry, rocks may wear away,  
 A silkworm, dead, clings onto the thread it has spun!"  
 They talked and talked, about their past, their future,  
 They spoke then spoke again, words failing words.  
 Eyes in eyes, hands in hands, they would not part.
1980. A servant then warned them of a nearing presence,  
 They froze, fell silent and stepped apart.  
 Brushing flowers aside, there appeared the lady,  
 She laughed, she spoke, she sweet-talked:  
 "My dear, you just came here for a visit?"
1985. Thuc groped for some excuse, weighing his words:  
 "Picking flowers I strayed so watched her copy the texts."  
 The lady cried in praise: "Such refined brush strokes!  
 They no doubt measure up to the Lantingji Xu. (27)  
 What a pity that she's a drifting, roaming rover,
1990. Such a talent well worth a thousand gold tael!"  
 They drank up a cup of the temple's plum-leaf tea,  
 Then they strolled back to their book-lined room.  
 Kiêu stood more abashed and forlorn than ever,  
 She discreetly asked the servant about the event,
1995. "The lady's been here quite a while", was the answer,  
 "She stood on tiptoes, hiding for a good half-hour.  
 She saw it all, missed not a tiny bit, not a jot.  
 She heard every single word, saw through it all:  
 The trials you met, the love that you feel,
2000. The master's spell of despair, your own grieving.  
 She instructed me not to move, not to speak,  
 She got her earful then she went upstairs."  
 Kiêu was horror-stricken by the servant's account:  
 "This woman must be one of a kind!
2005. This is called audacity, this is pure talent!  
 The merest thought of it sends shivers down my spine!  
 A mind of great depth made for life's cruel game  
 That laughs at my helpless Thuc and ties his hands!  
 It was clear that she caught us in our deed,
2010. Gnash her teeth, knit her brows like any jealous wife?  
 No! There she was, without a rant, without a rave,  
 Cheerfully greeted him, chatted with manners and grace!  
 To vent one's wrath would have been usual,

- Her laugh speaks hidden slyness and silent deceit!
2015. It rests with me to worry about my life,  
That finds itself in tigress' maw, in snake's venom.  
Were I to take flight into a distant refuge,  
She would find me and break me like a twig!  
Yet a weed does not fear violent flows,
2020. Floating into the wild, it still will be afloat.  
I only fear that alone and lost in alien land,  
Bare-handed, how to find roof and food?"  
Kiêu thought back and forth, her brain in a muddle.  
On the altar there lay some gold and silver artefacts,
2025. She grabbed them, clung to her future living.  
As drumbeats marked the third nightwatch,  
She climbed over the temple flowery wall,  
Felt her way westwards following the waning moon.  
A heavy fog shrouded sand trails and wooded hills,
2030. Cockerels were heard crowing in the moonlit night,  
Footprints were marked on dew-wet bridges.  
In the dead of night, a lonely girl was lost in her flight,  
Fearful of craggy tracks, fighting hostile winds.

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- The breaking dawn sparkled its pearly light,
2035. The lone wanderer roamed, in quest of a home.  
Appeared a pagoda, named "Retreat of Blessed Peace".  
Kiêu ran, flew to the temple, drummed on its door,  
Hearing the knocks, an old nun came to welcome her in.  
Seeing Kiêu wearing her novice's brown frock,
2040. The gentle abbess, Giac DUYÊN, at once felt for her.  
She fully probed about her origin and her past,  
Feeling strange, Kiêu tried to get by with hedges:  
"I am a mere novice from Beijing, my home town,  
For some time I've been living by Buddha's teaching.
2045. My own head nun will shortly pay you a visit,  
She has told me to give you these cult objects."  
With deep respect from her tunic she produced  
A small golden bell and a silver cup gong.  
The abbess had a quick look at them and said:
2050. "So they come from Hang Thuy whom I hold dearly.  
I'm worried to see you on the roads alone,  
Why not wait for my elder and stay for a few days?"

Kiêu had found a refuge in this remote monastery,  
 Frugal food she received, a carefree life she had.  
 2055. Prayers and sutras she knew by heart,  
 Incense, candles, shrine office all seemed familiar.  
 She'd tend the sacred texts and the pennons,  
 Light lamps at dusk, strike the bell at dawn.  
 The abbess found her mind above the norm,  
 2060. Thus held in high esteem, Kiêu felt more steady.  
 The monastery then ended the spring fast,  
 Flowers cast their shades o'er vales and hills.  
 On a windless, clear day when all was at peace,  
 Came a follower to pray at the shrine.  
 2065. She glanced at the golden bell and the silver gong,  
 "They truly look like lady Hoan Thu's!" she praised.  
 Giac Duyen started to be truly alarmed,  
 In the still night she queried Kiêu again  
 Who thought it wise not to hide the truth.  
 2070. She decided to tell it all from start to finish:  
 "As things stand right now, my vile fate,  
 For better or worse, rests on your will."  
 The abbess heard these words in sheer horror,  
 Her bosom was torn between pity and dread.  
 2075. She whispered, words coming out of her heart:  
 "The Buddha's gate is wide open to all.  
 I only fear the unexpected could happen,  
 You are to be pitied were you to suffer.  
 Sidestep well ahead, look for an escape,  
 2080. 'Tis unwise to sit and wait for the rising flood."

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Nearby there lived a woman named Bac Ba,  
 A frequent visitor who'd bring oil and incense.  
 She was sent for and given detailed orders,  
 Be all set to briefly offer Kiêu a shelter.  
 2085. So glad she was to have found a safe haven,  
 Kiêu hastened in, not giving it a second thought.  
 How to suspect 'twas a hardened trickers' den,  
 Bac Ba with Tu Ba trained in the same shady trade?  
 She found Kiêu's beauty natural, her charm fresh,  
 2090. Secretly revelled in having goods for a juicy deal.  
 Out of thin air she'd weave a web of lies

To terrorise the bewildered girl more often than not.  
 She'd repeat time and again she'd throw her out,  
 Resort to nasty threats to force her to get wed:

2095. "Thousand of leagues from home, you're all alone,  
 A poor repute you drag, that of a double-dealer.  
 You're a calamity that'll bring ruin to our home,  
 Whoever is daring enough to take you in?  
 Don't drag your feet, look for someone to wed,

2100. There isn't a chance you can fly from here.  
 Close by, it won't be fit to arrange a match,  
 Farther off, it won't be easy to find a man.  
 Look, there's Bac Hanh, a nephew of mine,  
 A relative, a blood relation, not just any fellow.

2105. He owns and runs a shop in the district of Taizhou,  
 None's more honest, never breaks his word.  
 In any case, you've got to do as told,  
 Once wedded, try to make your way to Taizhou.  
 There, who is going to make out who?

2110. You'll be sailing free, the boundless world's yours.  
 Now, if you're adamant in rejecting my advice,  
 Forget not, behind defiance lurks misfortune."  
 Kiêu listened, her face sullen, her brows knit,  
 Each of the crone's words hurt like a whiplash.

2115. She knew she lacked room, had made missteps,  
 Feeling cornered she started to lament at length:  
 "I'm like a swallow strayed from its flock,  
 Once harmed by bows, it fears an arched twig!  
 In a deadlock I am, then wedlock I have to face,

2120. Must I not know him, know his face, his heart?  
 If ever things take a turn for the worse,  
 Dealing with wild beasts, can I ride on a safe back?  
 Whoever it may be who aspires to be united,  
 Let him take an oath with a sincere heart.

2125. Let him solemnly swear before Heaven and Earth,  
 Then I will not flinch from heading for the open sea."  
 Armed with this consent, the witch told her nephew,  
 At once the whole family made ready.  
 They tidied the house back to its old splendour,

2130. Swept yard, set altar, cleaned vase, lit incense.  
 In no time the young Bac was down on his knees,  
 Pledged profusely to all tutelary deities and genies.  
 In the yard, the couple took their sincere oaths,

- Behind a curtain they traded the red threads of wedlock. (28)
2135. Married then she was, Kiêu was led down on a junk,  
Tailwind blowing, it swiftly sailed for the port of Taizhou.  
There, scarcely had the craft safely berthed,  
Young Bac leapt off first, made for the good old place.  
It was the same den of iniquity of yesteryears,
2140. The same dealers that bought and sold maidens.  
Kiêu was weighed up for a proper value,  
At ten times the asked price, she was handed over.  
A sedan chair was hired to carry her away,  
Savouring his sale, unsavoury Bac headed for the hills.
2145. The palanquin dropped Kiêu at a flowered porch,  
An old trot hurried out of the house,  
Led Kiêu in, had her bow before an altar, before  
The white-eyebrowed guardian of the dens of vice!  
A brief glance was all she needed to know her plight.
2150. A caged bird could simply not soar and flee:  
"O cursed fate of a woman of ill repute!  
It loosens its grip then tightens its grasp at will.  
Musing over my existence, I am weary of life,  
Why so much talent only to let heavens envy?"
2155. What a shame! With alum the water's purified,  
To be time and again clouded by streams of mud.  
The Creator would wring his young creature,  
Relentlessly twist her anew without mercy.  
I have gone astray since I strayed from home,
2160. Yet I have strived to live by my parent's teaching.  
What wrongs did I commit in my younger days  
That in vain I have to yield part of my youth?  
My fate cannot escape the ruthless heaven,  
I'll offer my flimsy lure to end the prime of my life."

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2165. A breeze was cooling the clear moonlit night,  
When came a customer, fresh from the borderland.  
A tiger's beard, jutting jaws, eyebrows like silkworms,  
Broad shoulders, a portly body, a towering height:  
A stately hero he was, respected wherever he went,
2170. A master of martial arts, an expert of all arts of war.  
Crowned by clouds, he'd proudly trample the ground,  
His name was Tu Hai, a native of Yueh Tung. (29)

A rolling stone he was, acting only on his free will,  
 Sword and lute on his back he'd roam hills and rivers.  
 2175. He'd come to be amused and heard of Kiêu's fame,  
 A beauty's tender heart would soften a hero's firm soul.  
 His calling card was handed to her chamber,  
 Their eyes covertly met, their hearts at once melted.  
 Tu Hai said: "A bond of souls and hearts is tied,  
 2180. Not 'tween fickle lovers, for a fleeting moment.  
 I have long heard of your renown beauty,  
 Truly, none has ever found favour in your wary eyes?  
 Fine, noble hearts are rare in this world of ours,  
 Yet why deal with tank fishes and cage birds?"  
 2185. Kiêu said: "You honour me with too kind a word,  
 How dare wretched me look down upon anyone?  
 In my heart of hearts, I am after a touchstone,  
 But who can be safely trusted with my soul?  
 As to those that come and go in this house,  
 2190. I'm denied the right to fussily sort gold from brass."  
 Tu Hai added: "How sensitive what you just said!  
 The story of Ping Yuan comes forthwith to mind. (30)  
 Please come nearer, have a closer look,  
 How much of your trust can you put in this man?"  
 2195. Kiêu replied: "Yours is a generous and noble heart,  
 Chin Yang will soon see a dragon in the clouds. (31)  
 As this lowly, vile flower benefits from your grace,  
 Forever it'll put its woeful fate under your wing!"  
 Tu Hai nodded contentedly, roared with laughter:  
 2200. "So few are twin souls that share one's heart!  
 Your insight and wisdom are worthy of praise,  
 That see a hero in a man cast in this dusty world!  
 A single word's enough for you to know my soul,  
 If ever blessed with riches and rank, it'll be together!"  
 2205. Their hearts and minds were in pure unison,  
 A nascent love longed to be fed with renewed love.  
 Words were then sent out to the matchmaker,  
 A hefty sum was paid to release Kiêu's debt.  
 They chose a lovely quiet place for their nest,  
 2210. Ordered a richly inlaid bed and embroidered drapes.  
 Him, a hero lord, matching her, a fair lady,  
 Splendour was in happy league with majesty.  
 Six months went by, their passion still afire,  
 When the hero's heart longed for wide-open spaces.

2215. He dreamed of boundless skies, of infinite seas,  
He girded on his sword, saddled his horse, set to fly away.  
Kiêu said: "A wife's duty's to be by her man's side,  
Wherever you go, please allow me to follow suit."  
Tu Hai said: "We are one, feeling, thinking alike,
2220. Have you not shed the common woman's ways?  
I shall return with one hundred thousand men-at-arms,  
Drumbeats will shake the earth, standards dark the sky.  
Who I really am the world'll be surprised to learn,  
Then I will happily welcome you home.
2225. For now I am footloose, here today gone tomorrow,  
With you in tow, I'd be at a loss to pick my way.  
I beg you to be patient, consent to a short wait,  
In a year at most I will be back, why the hurry?"  
This said, he tore his sleeve from her grip, rode away,
2230. Carried by the wind the eagle flew to distant shores.  
Kiêu stayed in the shadow of apricot trees,  
Forlorn in the endless nights, kept in by cloaks of fog.  
In the courtyard, wet moss was now free of footprints,  
Overgrown grass smothered the stunted willows.
2235. Lingered sad memories of the row of home elms,  
Nostalgia drifted her towards her distant native land.  
Her poor, poor parents must be bending under old age,  
With the passing days, have their grief and longing waned?  
How time flew! Well over ten years had passed,
2240. If still living, they must be wrinkled and grey.  
Thoughts of her first true love ate away her heart,  
The lotus stalk broke yet still clung by its tiny threads.  
Though her younger sister was fated to retie the knot,  
She must be carrying babes with both arms.
2245. Living on alien soil Kiêu longed for her own land,  
Her heart a troubled tangle of doubt and dread.  
As the eagle glided off, graceful on its unfold wings,  
Her strained eyes kept searching the infinite sky.  
Day and night, she'd brood over her silent thoughts.
2250. Then the roaring rage of war set the region aflame.  
The strong stench of ruthless battle tainted the air,  
Beasts prowled rivers, armour-clad men stormed roads.  
Close friends and neighbours came rushing,  
Advised Kiêu to seek a temporary shelter.
2255. She said: "I have made him a promise,  
Even in danger never will I break my given word."

- She was still confused and wavering, when, outside,  
 She saw fluttering banners, heard loud clamour.  
 Armour-clad soldiers crowded around the house,
2260. They shouted in unison: "Where is My Lady?"  
 Two lines of ten generals were formed before Kiêu,  
 Their sabres, their helmets at their feet, they bowed low.  
 Ladies-in-waiting and maids of honour came forward:  
 "By order, we are here to serve and attend Your Grace."
2265. They presented her with the full royal regalia,  
 Her diadem flickered, her white dress glimmered.  
 Banners were raised, drums pounded, the march started,  
 Musicians at the front, the guard of honour at the rear.  
 A herald ran on without a pause announcing its arrival,
2270. The Southern Court drum called to arms at headquarters.  
 On ramparts flags were hoisted, cannons blasted,  
 Lord Tu Hai rode to the gate to welcome Kiêu.  
 Strange he looked with his regal headgear and sash,  
 Yet still had his jutting jaws and silkworm-like eyebrows.
2275. He said laughing: "Fish and water are destined to meet!  
 Do you still remember the words you once said?  
 Only a hero's heart can know a heroine's soul,  
 Now then, have I fulfilled your hopes?"  
 Kiêu said: "I am but an innocent nothing,
2280. Luckily the frail vine enjoys the shade of a tree.  
 Though only now do I see our dreams come true,  
 In my heart of hearts, I knew from the early days."  
 They gazed at each other's face, they happily laughed,  
 Hand in hand, they retreated to trade their secrets.
2285. A banquet rewarded officers and humble foot soldiers,  
 War drums boomed and banged, martial music mounted.  
 New honours and glory atoned old misery and darkness,  
 Each passing day deepened the sweetness of renewed love.

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- In the busy camp life, Kiêu found a welcome moment,
2290. Quietly she told him her sorry, woeful journey:  
 How she was dragged to Yixian then tricked to Wuxi,  
 Where she was duped and failed, where she was pitied.  
 "Of all burdens my life is now relieved, yet two old scores,  
 Vengeance and gratitude, have yet to be settled."
2295. Lord Tu listened to the story from beginning to end,



- His discontent exploded in a thunderous fury.  
He readied his troops, named their commanders,  
Formally ordered them to hurry and go on their hunt.  
Flying the red flag, columns would start their action,
2300. One would dart to Wuxi, the other rush to Yixian.  
Those traitors of old that had lured and trapped Kiêu,  
Would be tracked down, brought back for questioning.  
An authorised emissary was to be urgently sent  
To Thuc's house to see to the family's well-being.
2305. The old housekeeper and the abbess Giac Duyen  
Would receive an invitation and an escort for a friendly visit.  
An edict kept the troops fully apprised of the matter,  
Angry they got, eager they were to carry out their orders.  
Awe-inspiring was Heaven's way of retribution,
2310. In one neat haul, they brought home a hefty catch.  
Armed with curved swords and long spears,  
Lines of uniformed guards stood to attention.  
Rows and rows of mighty bronze canons were at the ready,  
A swarm of flags and standards shaded the atrium.
2315. The Great Hall lay right at the heart of headquarters,  
There, side by side, sat Lord Tu Hai and his regal spouse.  
No sooner had the first opening round of drum ended  
Than the captives were brought for roll call at the gate.  
Tu Hai said: "Be it retribution or reward,
2320. It is in your sole remit to award the proper sentence."  
Kiêu said: "Under your authority and might,  
May I first reward those that deserve my thanks.  
Debt of gratitude once paid, I will wreak vengeance."  
Tu Hai said: "You are free to do as you please."
2325. An armed officer was ordered to bring young Thuc  
Who, his face indigo pale, quivered like a snide.  
Kiêu said: "My gratitude to you weighs mountains,  
The soul of old, from Yixian, do you still remember her?  
The evening and morning stars only crossed paths,
2330. Who forced me to betray an old friend's good heart?  
These hundred rolls of brocard, these thousand silver taels,  
I offer them as a mere token of my thanks.  
As to your wife, that devilish, devious woman,  
This time around the footpad meets an old hand.
2335. The ant is only recently crawling in the bowl mouth,  
Her deep-laid plot will duly meet a well thought-out plan."  
Thuc's face was then a sight to behold,

- Soaked in sweat it was as if drenched by rain.  
His heart secretly harboured joy and fear,
2340. Frightful fear for his wife, silent joy for his old love.  
Next came the old housekeeper's and the abbess' turn,  
Kiêu hastened to invite them to the seats of honour.  
Unveiling her face, holding their hands, she said:  
"Slave Flower and Pure Spring are both me!
2345. I remember what you did when I slipped into woe,  
No amount of gold could requite your compassion.  
Here are a thousand gold taels, a poor plain present,  
What bullion could equal Mother Xiêu's kindness?" (32)  
At a loss, the two women warily looked at her face,
2350. In fright they were yet elation they also felt.  
Kiêu said: "Please remain seated for a while,  
Watch their faces, you'll know I am getting even!"  
Officers were then ordered to bring in the captives,  
To produce charges and proofs of their offences.
2355. Under flags, swords and scimitars were unsheathed,  
The main culprit, Hoan Thu, was brought forward,  
Right away Kiêu politely greeted her:  
"So at long last, you are also here, My Lady!  
Women of your calibre are few and far between,
2360. In history how many the likes of you are to be found?  
It certainly is in the nature of women to be lenient,  
The more cruelties they show, the harsher their lot!"  
Hoan Thu was frightened out of her wits,  
Bowed low under the hangings, chose her words,
2365. She moaned: "I have an ordinary woman's heart,  
Jealousy is alas! a passion shared by many.  
Remember the time you copied the sacred texts,  
Remember, I sent no one after you when you fled.  
I nursed respect for you in the secret of my heart,
2370. Yet which woman would willingly share her man?  
Against my will, I certainly was a thorn in your side,  
In your clemency, have mercy on me, I beseech you!"  
Kiêu praised her: "In truth, this is what's been said,  
Fitting in wit, you are, proper in speech.
2375. To have mercy upon you might augur well,  
To punish you would only show one's pettiness.  
Your remorse for your offences earns my grace."  
She then ordered her men to free her at once.  
Grateful Hoan Thu threw herself to the ground,

2380. Forthwith a guard brought a string of captives.  
Kiêu cried out: "Mighty Heaven be my witness,  
Those that harmed shall be harmed, 'tis beyond my will."  
There came Bac Hanh the nephew and old Bac,  
Then the henchmen Hound and Hawk, next So Khanh,
2385. Last but not least Tu Ba and Scholar Ma,  
Did all these criminals truly deserve any pity?  
An order was given to the headsmen, as they swore  
They were to duly carry out corporal punishment.  
Blood gushed, flesh crushed, bodies torn to parts,
2390. All those present stood numbly, horror-struck.  
Let it be known, all things happen by Heaven's order,  
Harm one day, the next you are harmed!  
The perfidious hearts, the fiendish souls,  
Let them reap what they sowed, who cares?
2395. The soldiers crowded the execution ground,  
In broad daylight they were made to witness.  
Kiêu's reward and retribution deed was over,  
Giac Duyệt asked permission to take leave.  
Kiêu said: "Once in a thousand years,
2400. Old friends we are, yet 'tis how often we meet.  
Duckweeds and clouds gather then scatter,  
How to find the heron lost in mountain mist?"  
The nun answered: "I am sure it won't be long,  
You'll see, in five years time we'll meet again.
2405. I remember, on my pilgrimage in a faraway area,  
I came across nun Tam Hop, once a seer,  
And was foretold when we are to meet:  
First this very year, then five years from now.  
We know she's not mistaken in her prophecy,
2410. Her first augur's right, her second won't be wrong.  
Our mutual friendship has much in store,  
Be patient, our fate-decreed bond has not ended."  
Kiêu said: "A prophecy made by a seer:  
This nun's wise words surely cannot fail.
2415. If ever you chance to meet her again,  
For my sake, please ask her what still lies ahead."  
The abbess happily acceded to the request,  
Bade farewell and in a moment she was gone.

- Now that Kiêu had requited harm and help,  
2420. The tide of woes slowly receded in her soul.  
She bowed before Lord Tu Hai to say her thanks:  
"Could a humble soul ever hope to live such a day?  
Under your roaring might, I did my show of strength,  
Thus a burden's been lifted from my soul!
2425. In my heart, my bones your kindness shall be kept,  
In soul and body, I honour your sky-high grace."  
Tu Hai said: "For time long past,  
Has any great man easily found his twin soul?  
A hero worthy of that name will never ever
2430. Leave unpunished a wrong that he might uncover.  
And since all that concerns you now affects me,  
Thanks are not needed, silent thanks are true gratitude.  
'Tis a shame that you away from your parents be,  
You living in Yueh and they dwelling in Shanxi.
2435. I'll be at ease if you could cross the thousand leagues  
To see their faces and join them under the same roof."  
He then ordered a banquet for his troops, in numbers  
Officers and their men feted the redress of wrongs.  
As easily as splitting bamboo or wrecking roofs,
2440. His mighty army stormed the four corners of the land.  
He extended his reign to boundless horizons,  
Taking civil and military powers, he parted the realm in two.  
A swirling maelstrom swept through the empire,  
Destroyed strongholds, ran over five southern bastions.
2445. His sword twisted and twirled in dust and wind,  
Mere scarecrows made out of rags were his foes!  
High and mighty he ruled over the borderland,  
No less than an overlord, no less than a king.  
No one dared stand up to his flying flags,
2450. For five years he reigned over the coastal region.  
Now, in the imperial court, there was a governor,  
Hô Tôn Hiên he was, a seasoned statesman.  
Spurred on a special mission by an imperial decree, (33)  
As general-in-chief he had full power to quell the rebellion.
2455. Tu Hai was a heroic warrior, Hô was aware,  
Kiêu's voice on war matters was heeded, he also knew.  
He held his troop in camps, feigning friendly intent,  
For parley, envoys were sent with gold and pearl,  
Silks and brocades, and special tributes for Kiêu:
2460. Two maids of honour, gold and jade aplenty.

- When news of the offer reached his headquarters,  
 Lord Tu Hai stood utterly lost and bewildered:  
 "With my own hands have I built this realm,  
 I lord over the seas of Chu and the streams of Wu.
2465. Hand and foot bound at the emperor's court,  
 The bowed subject will be at a loss to know his fate.  
 In court dresses, entangled with lines of courtesans,  
 Why play the noble so as to crawl and cringe?  
 Nothing can be compared to one's own dominion,
2470. And what power is strong enough to fight my might?  
 The heavens can I mock, seas I can stir at will,  
 In the wide world, where is he that looms above my head?"  
 Soft-hearted and honest, Kiêu readily trusted people,  
 Gifts of gold, cajoleries would easily win her trust..
2475. "A fern adrift on rough water", she thought of herself,  
 "I've wandered far and wide, suffered untold rigour.  
 Were we to yield and accept to be imperial subjects,  
 How wide would be the path to glory and fame!  
 Public and private matters would be neatly settled,
2480. Then I'd find a way to return to my homeland.  
 I'd enjoy the rank of a noble's respected consort,  
 I'd win fame for myself, bring honour to my parents.  
 First my country I'd serve, then my family,  
 I'd fulfill my duties to my parents and my loyalty to my king.
2485. 'Tis better than to remain a puny craft caught midstream,  
 Wary of slapping waves, in fear of tricky reefs."  
 Often did they trade views on matters of import,  
 Kiêu took the chance to present the boon and bane:  
 "Profuse is His Majesty the Emperor's bounty,
2490. Like a caring rain, it nurtures large and deep.  
 His is an era of long-lasting peace and virtue,  
 Treasured and enshrined by all and everyone.  
 Let us ponder, since you spread the fires of war,  
 Bones of unknowns have heaped to head height.
2495. Why leave a bad name to future ages?  
 For a thousand years no one praises Huang Ch'ao. (34)  
 Compare that to having great profit and high post,  
 Is there any safer avenue to position and fame?"  
 Allured by Kiêu's inviting line of thought,
2500. Ready for attack, Tu Hai now accepted surrender.  
 With great pomp, he promptly welcomed the envoy,  
 Set the day to disarm his troops, the plan to disband.

Peace pledges were reassuringly given on the ramparts,  
Flags hung limp on their posts, night watches slackened.

2505. Military affairs were unduly left unattended,  
What happened on the field escaped not the royal army.  
His ruse worked, Lord Hô jumped at the chance,  
Behind his gifts, troops were readied for an ambush.  
The flag of truce was unfurled at the vanguard,

2510. Rituals they followed up front, at the rear guns they hid.  
How could innocent Lord Tu Hai know?  
In full-dress, he stepped out of the camp gate.  
Lord Hô then waved the attack secret signal,  
From all corners shots were fired, flags flew.

2515. Taken by surprise, caught in a deadly trap,  
The legendary hero, the fiery tiger was crippled!  
Tu Hai accepted the ultimate sacrifice on the field,  
Showed a great warrior knew how to face death!  
His soul had already risen to the heights of Heaven,

2520. He boldly stood solidly set amidst a ring of fire.  
Firm as a rock he was, as hard as bronze,  
Shake him, move him many tried yet none could.  
The pitiless imperial troops ran after their fleeing foes,  
The stench of death rose high to the sky.

2525. Outer trenches, inside ramparts lay ravaged,  
Kiêu was escorted to the spot by some rebels.  
She saw, in a shower of arrows and stones,  
Untroubled Tu Hai still standing firm and high.  
"You were wise and brave beyond peers," she cried,

2530. But you heeded my advice and alas! met this end!  
How am I now to look you in the face?  
I'd rather die with you on the same day!"  
Her flow of grief poured out in floods of tears,  
Silently, head first, she threw herself to the ground.

2535. So mysterious was this match in love and in woe:  
As she fell to the earth, he too came down with her!  
Soldiers ran about in a hustle and bustle,  
Some caring ones heaved her to her feet.  
She was led to headquarters to meet Lord Hô,

2540. He heartily enquired about her in warm welcome.  
" You are indeed a poor fair lady," said he,  
"To be pitied for suffering the woes of war.  
Though we owe victory to the Court's plan,  
We prevailed also thanks to your part.

2545. Now that everything is squarely completed,  
 You are at liberty to ask for your own reward."  
 Kiêu cried and cried, then cried again,  
 In halting speech she poured out her mind.  
 She added: "Tu Hai was the hero incarnate,
2550. Master of the wide world, lord of the sweeping sea!  
 Putting his trust in me, he unduly heeded my plea.  
 Victor of a hundred battles, he made himself a vassal,  
 Man and wife would be honoured, or so he thought.  
 In an instant, he was alas! reduced to nought!
2555. Five years of unbridled reign over seas and realms,  
 That end with self-sacrifice on the battlefield.  
 Skilful words you used to tell my service,  
 Sharp words that stab my heart like swords!  
 I believe myself more guilty than a helpful hand,
2560. I tried to end this trifling life of mine.  
 Please favour me with a plain piece of land,  
 A resting place to honour him in life and death."  
 Moved by the plea, lord Hô had the remains  
 Shrouded in grass, without ritual buried by the stream.

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2565. The army was feted to celebrate the victory:  
 A hurly-burly of music, of troop's howl and hurrah.  
 Kiêu was compelled to attend on Hô in his tent,  
 Tipsy, Hô required the airs she'd played for her lord.  
 Melodies of wailing rains and weeping winds,
2570. Under her fingertips, the strings shed pearls of blood,  
 No gibbons' howl, no song of cicadas could be so sad.  
 All ears, Hô furrowed his brow, shed a few tears,  
 He asked: "Whence does it come, this mournful tune  
 That invites infinite sorrows and stirs untold grudges?"
2575. Kiêu politely answered: "It's entitled 'Cruel Fate',  
 An air scored for the lute in my tender youth.  
 A much favoured melody in days long gone  
 That more than fittingly mirrors today's cruel fate."  
 Enthralled he listened, bewitched he watched,
2580. 'Tis strange a steely face could be dazed by love.  
 He advised: "That we be united was decided by fate,  
 Let me join the broken strings and make the lute whole."  
 Kiêu politely said: "I am a poor soul gone astray,

- That deems herself guilty of a man's unjust demise.
2585. What is left for the withered waning flower?  
 Like Ziao Lan's lute strings, my love ties are broken. (35)  
 Be so kind as to feel for this frail woman,  
 Let her be lucky, before dying see her land!"  
 Victory toasts aplenty, Lord Hô lost his head,
2590. At the break of day he then recalled what he did.  
 He was the eminent envoy of the State, he thought,  
 Exposed to his master's watch and public eyes.  
 Did he perchance belong to the loose kind ?  
 Now, how was he to go about this whole matter?
2595. At the mandarin's office, as the day's work started,  
 He made up his mind, a device he'd concoct.  
 Who'd dare contest a grand mandarin's order?  
 Kiêu was assigned by force to a tribal chieftain.  
 O how wayward was he that weaved human fates,
2600. In haste and at random he tied the marriage knot.  
 A nuptial palanquin carried Kiêu straight to a junk,  
 Quickly the blinds were drawn, the lamps lit.  
 How sad, how very withered she'd grown,  
 No trace, there remained no tiny trace of glow.
2605. She'd been buried in dirt, drowned in swells,  
 Robbed of duties to her parents, denied a bright life,  
 Adrift on wild seas at the world's edges.  
 Where to find a place to rest her bones?  
 Where was her love, who broke its silken threads?
2610. Whoever had forced this debt into her lap?  
 How could a life sink to such a sore state?  
 Each new day was a day too many to live.  
 Not only did she not know life was joy,  
 She was not to guess that longing was love.
2615. Forsaken, she felt the many stings of nasty fortune,  
 Her life'd been reduced to nought, she'd end it all.  
 A crescent was setting behind the western mounts,  
 Distressed lonely Kiêu sat and rose, rose and sat again.  
 Soon she heard the roar and rumble of a tidal river,
2620. She asked and learned it was the river Qian-Tang.  
 She clearly recalled the words in her eerie dream:  
 "'Tis here where my ill-fated life shall end.  
 Dam Tiêm, O Dam Tiêm, please remember!  
 A tryst you made, be ready to greet me there below."
2625. Under the lamplight lay a piece of flowery paper,



- Kiêu wrote a short poem as a farewell note.  
 She then parted the junk's beaded curtain,  
 The high sky and the broad stream fused in infinite black.  
 She thought: "Lord Tu Hai treated me with kindness,  
 2630. Yet for a State affair I betrayed his esteem.  
 I killed my man then wed another man,  
 How then can I dare live and face the world?  
 Let me die and by dying end it all,  
 To skies and waves let me entrust my heart and soul."  
 2635. Kiêu cast a glance at the boundless stream,  
 Then flung herself into the mighty river's swirls.  
 The tribal chieftain at once jumped in for a rescue,  
 The ethereal figure had already sunk into the depth!  
 Such a shame, a life no different from any other life,  
 2640. Yet bearing alas! so futile talent and charm.  
 So many wrongs littered her wandering journey,  
 Waiting for such fate to end, what would her life be?  
 For fifteen years on end, she did it all over again:  
 Set a living example for fair women to see.  
 2645. What a low life hers had been! But 'tis hard to know,  
 In the wheel of life yin turns into yang.  
 For those of us who have shown piety and loyalty,  
 Does Heaven torment them to show them greater pity?

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- Since leaving Kiêu, Giac Duyệt was on the open roads,  
 2650. Carrying her gourd and her box for her long pilgrimage.  
 On her way, the abbess met Tam Hop the diviner nun,  
 She took time to ask her in detail about Kiêu's fate:  
 "For this woman, a model of piety and loyalty,  
 Why should fate hold only sorrow and distress?"  
 2655. The nun replied: "Boon and doom come from above,  
 They are also rooted in the human heart.  
 Heaven imparts but man plays his part.  
 Renunciation's the path to bliss, love's a chain of pain.  
 Thuy Kiêu is blessed with mind and beauty,  
 2660. Bad luck for the fair and beautiful is a given.  
 Then she carries a heavy load, the yoke of love,  
 Shackling herself with the bonds of passion.  
 Thus even in moments of quietness and serenity,  
 She cannot sit still, her mind is always restless.

2665. She is goaded by spectres, guided by evil spirits,  
Of her free will, she chooses the way to misfortune,  
Moving from one disaster to another calamity,  
Twice sent to the bawdy houses, twice served as a serf.  
She's lived guarded by naked swords and spears,
2670. Exposed to wild beasts' fangs, mingled with slaves.  
Into rough currents and roaring waves she'll fling herself,  
Offering a lonely bait to monsters of the deep.  
Affliction will always shadow love; that,  
She alone can know, she alone shall endure.
2675. As an exile she's lived, she'll die as an outcast,  
Till the end endure she must then her fate will end."  
Awe-struck by what she just heard, Giac Duyệt said:  
"A whole life! What then will be left of wretched Kiêu?"  
The nun replied: "But still, all this's not all there's to it,
2680. Past misdeeds and merits are weighed many a time.  
Judging by the transgressions Kiêu has committed,  
She was snared by love but free from lechery.  
Her love she offered to better serve her filial piety,  
Stirring Heaven's pity by selling her body.
2685. She doomed one man, countless men were saved,  
She tells right from wrong, knows vile from pure.  
Whoever could equal her peerless virtues?  
Sins of her previous lives are made light and clean.  
Heaven knows how to indulge deserving mortals,
2690. Pay one's debts, one will be rewarded in future lives.  
Giac Duyệt, in the name of your mutual affection,  
Ease a raft of reed in the Qian-Tang River, wait for her.  
Do your very best to fulfill your own word,  
'Tis your fate and perchance a blessing from Heaven."
2695. Hearing this, the old abbess' heart leapt with joy,  
She went about finding a place by the Qian-Tang River.  
She thrashed some thatch to cover a straw hut,  
A shack set between jade stream and golden clouds.  
Two fishermen hired year-to-year were to rope their boat,
2700. On the lookout, their cast nets crisscrossing the river.  
Steadfast at heart, the abbess didn't mind a steady toil,  
Fortunately, this meeting was in the natural order of things.  
Into the silvery depth, Kiêu had thrown herself,  
Currents at random drifted her into these parts.
2705. The old fishermen pulled their nets and fished her out,  
Tam Hop did not boast, her prophecy was wholly true.

- On the boat Kiêu lay, her silken robe drenched,  
 Soaked she was, her radiance had not dimmed.  
 Right this instant, the abbess recognised her friend,
2710. A friend still deep in her lasting sleep,  
 Her soul drifting slowly in the realm of dreams,  
 Where appeared Dam Tiên, a figure from the past,  
 Who said: "With all my heart I've been longing,  
 Waiting here to no avail for over ten long years.
2715. Flimsy is your destiny yet firm are your virtues,  
 Such a cruel fate paired with such a peerless soul.  
 Heaven's been moved by your true, pure heart,  
 Selling yourself is piety, saving lives is compassion.  
 You've set one duty, to serve country and people,
2720. In the long run, your silent merits carry weight.  
 Your name's been struck from the Book of the Doomed,  
 I need to return your poems written on the damned.  
 Your future life still holds many a delight,  
 Your old love will be restored, your life spent in bliss!"
2725. Still dreamy, Kiêu hardly knew what was going on,  
 When she heard a voice whisper: "Pure Spring!".  
 With a start she wakened from her slumber,  
 She was too dazed to know where to turn her eyes.  
 On the boat, there was no trace of Doan Tiên,
2730. She only saw, sitting by her, the abbess Giac Duyên.  
 Weren't they overjoyed to see each other again!  
 The boat they left, Kiêu was showed in the thatched hut.  
 Under the same roof, they shared an inseparable life,  
 Wind, moonlight, frugal fare cleansed their hearts and souls.
2735. Surrounded by infinite space, by boundless water,  
 Their lives they lived to the rhythm of tides and clouds.  
 Kiêu was fully freed from her past calamity,  
 Now, her youth's love would'nt easily find this place.

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- As Thuy Kiêu went through her untold plight,
2740. Kim Trong's long ordeal was also worthy of pity.  
 A thousand leagues he travelled for the mourning rites,  
 Half a year he stayed in Liaoyang then returned home.  
 He hurried to their love nest to have a longing look,  
 How very changed was what lay before his eyes.
2745. Overgrown weeds competed with patches of reeds;

The cold moonlight lit the deserted windows;  
 The walls were weather-beaten, not a soul was to be seen.  
 Last year's peach flowers still opened to the east wind;  
 Swallows rustled, fluttered about in the vacant rooms;  
 2750. Grass overrun the ground, moss covered footprints;  
 Brambles grew freely at the foot of the walls.  
 Kim walked along the paths that they used to take,  
 There prevailed an infinite, absolute stillness.  
 Open his heart, confide he wished he could, now to whom?  
 2755. Some man, a neighbour, came for a visit,  
 Befriending him he enquired about their situations.  
 What of old Vuong? Old Vuong was deep in a lawsuit,  
 What of Kiêu? Kiêu sold herself to requite her father,  
 What of their family? Their family moved to a faraway place,  
 2760. What of Vuong Quan and his sister Thuy Vân?  
 They were in dire straits, in dark poverty,  
 Serving as a scribe and a needlewoman to scrape a living.  
 These tidings struck like lightning falling from the sky,  
 How horrified Kim was in hearing this news.  
 2765. He further enquired where they had migrated,  
 He got going, found his way to their home.  
 A rickety hut of mud and straw it was,  
 With reed blinds in rags, a loose bamboo wattle,  
 A dirt yard overrun with grass, flooded by rainwater.  
 2770. There stood Kim, feeling dejected and distraught,  
 From the path, he resigned himself to raise his voice.  
 Vuong Quan heard, came out in haste,  
 Claspng his friend's hands, he hurriedly invited him in.  
 From the back room, the worthy old couple rushed out,  
 2775. They wept and wailed as they told their woes:  
 "Dear Kim! Are you aware of all our wretched plight?  
 Flimsy is our poor daughter's paper-thin fate,  
 She reneged on her pledge to you to be bonded.  
 Our family's misfortune took a strange turn,  
 2780. She had to sell herself to save her father.  
 How she wavered and dithered before leaving,  
 In infinite suffering, she told us over and again:  
 To you she had sworn the sacred oath.  
 She bade her sister Vân to honour that troth,  
 2785. A way to somehow pay her obligation to you,  
 Her own relentless sorrow forever will last.  
 In the present life, fate fell short of fate,

In the realm of dark, redress will be made in the next.  
 These were the entreaties she pressed upon us,  
 2790. In her own heart she engraved them, then she left.  
 Why should fate beset you so, my little one?  
 Your Kim's home, Kiêu, where are you now?"  
 The more they spoke, the more they suffered,  
 The more he heard, the more Kim would stew in pain.  
 2795. He writhed on the floor, flailed his arms and cried,  
 His face bathed in tears, listless was his mind.  
 In agony he was, passed out now and then,  
 Came round to better sob and swoon again.  
 When Old Vuong saw him in pangs of split,  
 2800. He quelled his woes, allayed him with soothing words:  
 "Kiêu has now been bound in other's berth,  
 She'd bowed to her ill fate, be denied a shared love.  
 Too full of love and too little rewarded in return,  
 Yet why should you forgo your precious life?"  
 2805. To soothe and advise him countless ways were tried,  
 Stifled grieve's fire flared up yet fiercer flames.  
 The gold bracelets, tokens of gone oath, were shown,  
 Items of the past, and also the lute and the incense.  
 The sight of these deepened Kim's love and pity,  
 2810. Distressed his soul more, further embittered his heart.  
 "I had to leave for a long time," he cried out,  
 "I let Kiêu become a drifting flower, a cast-aside weed.  
 So many oaths we've made, as solid as stone,  
 As precious as gold, not mere empty words.  
 2815. A bed we shared not, yet man and wife we are.  
 How could I have the heart to sever this bond?  
 My wealth, my time I'm ready to forsake it all,  
 As long as I live I will not relent before I find Kiêu!"  
 He went on and on, in endless words, to tell his love,  
 2820. With silent sobs he bade goodbye and left.  
 He hurried home, altered his house and his garden,  
 Invited the noble Vuong couple to come and stay.  
 Day and night he constantly saw to their well-being,  
 Like a son, with all his heart, in the absent Kiêu's stead.  
 2825. Tears mingling with ink, letter after letter he wrote,  
 People he sent to look for Kiêu and deliver his notes.  
 Much effort he devoted, vast sums he invested,  
 He trudged a few times to far, faraway Weixian.  
 Kiêu was somewhere, Kim looked elsewhere,

2830. Boundless were the sky and the sea, where to find Kiêu?  
 Kim grew more distressed, more anxious,  
 As if his resolve was tested, his loyalty tried.  
 He withered like an overworked silkworm,  
 Dried out like a cicada oft exposed to freezing fog.
2835. Listless he was, now wide-awake, now numbed,  
 His blood tinted his tears, his soul drifted in his dreams.  
 How worried were father and mother Vuong!  
 What would happen if things came to the worst?  
 In no time they made ready, picked a date,
2840. Thuy Vân was soon joined in wedlock with Kim.  
 A graceful woman she was, he was a man of letters,  
 In the flower of youth, they matched charm with talent.  
 'Tis true, married life brought its own joy,  
 Yet could this new joy abate that old sadness?
2845. He settled in the routine of the day-to-day life,  
 As the new love took hold, the old love overflowed.  
 Whenever he thought of Kiêu's misfortune,  
 His eyes streamed with tears, his heart was torn to tatters.  
 Now and then he would go into his study,
2850. Light his incense burner, play the lute of yore.  
 The silk strings would whisper sad and solemn airs,  
 A breeze stir the fragrant smoke and flutter the blind.  
 From the roof ridge would echo Kiêu's voice,  
 The pale shadow of her gown slid through the porch.
2855. In his heart, her image was etched, like on stone or gold,  
 One slight thought of her and Kim saw Kiêu emerge.  
 He spent his days and nights steeped in sharp grief,  
 Heedless of the long flow of autumns and springs.

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- Then the Royal Civil Examination was held, (36)
2860. Vuong's and Kim's names were on the Honours Scroll.  
 The heavenly gate was wide open to their march to glory,  
 The royal garden awaited them, so did fame in their land.(37)  
 Memories of past good deeds coming back to his mind,  
 Young Vuong went to show his appreciation to Old Chung.
2865. He paid his debt of gratitude, returned the favour done,  
 Tied the knot with the old court clerk's daughter.  
 As he briskly climbed the steps to glory,  
 Kim thought of Kiêu, pitied, loved her all the more.

- With whom had he shared high hopes, worthy oaths?  
2870. With whom now was he to enjoy titles and estates?  
Deeming himself blessed with splendour, he felt for her,  
A vagrant that drifted like a weed on choppy waters.  
Kim then complied with a posting in distant Yixian,  
A remote place where his family moved in a body.
2875. Grandly settled, leisurely he spent a snug life,  
Enjoying the cries of cranes and the sounds of lute. (38)  
One spring night, in their richly curtained room,  
Vân suddenly saw her sister Kiêu in her dream.  
Upon waking, she confided in her husband,
2880. Kim was of two minds, 'tween mistrust and hope.  
Weixian, Yixian, he compared the two sounds,  
A nuance in one syllable might have led to confusion.  
The sisters, twin souls, simply sought each other,  
Or who knows, some good news was in the offing?
2885. At the seat of power he carried out an enquiry, (39)  
A certain Dô, an old clerk, reverently answered:  
"It all happened more than ten years ago,  
I clearly remember all the faces, all the names.  
First there was Tu Ba, then Ma The Scholar,
2890. The pair brought home a girl bought in Beijing.  
Thuy Kiêu she was, one of peerless talent and looks,  
Who excelled in music, shone in prose and verse.  
To defend her purity she fought tooth and nail,  
Her life she put at risk, to be duped and tricked.
2895. Of her bitter lot she drank to the last drop,  
Then she was wed to a man named Thuc.  
She fell into his first wife's cruel hands,  
Was brought to Wuxi, crushed to a pulp.  
She snatched herself from there, took flight,
2900. Bad luck had her land in a certain Bac's.  
In and out she went, bought and sold in a wink,  
A poor creature that drifted here and there.  
One day she came across a sublimely wise man,  
A man of heavenly courage, of divine might.
2905. A man that led men by the ten thousands,  
In number they came, took a citadel at Yixian.  
Kiêu neatly combed the full record of her past,  
She paid back, harm for wrong, grace for favour,  
Proving herself an upright and forgiving soul,
2910. She settled her scores, won praise from near and far.

- Unfortunately, I know not her hero's exact name,  
To clarify this, Thuc the student's your man."  
Kim heard old Do's account loud and clear,  
He at once sent an invitation card to young Thuc.
2915. On all matters he asked his guest to be specific:  
"Where is her husband, what is his identity?  
"In those troubled times of strife," was the answer,  
"At camp I asked for numbers of tiny details.  
The great lord's name was Hai, his surname Tu,
2920. He fought many a fight, defeated many a foe.  
'Tis no wonder, when they met in Taizhou,  
The beauty of the land and the lofty sire matched.  
For years and years, at will he shattered the earth,  
Shook the heaven with threatening thunders.
2925. He positioned his great army in the East,  
Since then, no trace of him is to be found."  
Kim listened till the tangled tale thinned out,  
His head was benumbed, his heart in a turmoil:  
"Poor lone leaf that is tossed by the wind!
2930. When could she finally shake off her fateful lot?  
Frail flower that drifts as flows the stream,  
O pityful bobbing life, O crushing breach!  
Our erstwhile oaths I failed again and again,  
Here still linger the incense and the lute.
2935. The lute! Have its loose strings lost their souls?  
The incense! Will its fragrant flame ever revive?  
With wandering Kiêu living far far from home,  
How could I quietly live in comfort and pomp?"  
He intended to return his seal of office, set to defy
2940. Streams wide and deep, mounts high and steep.  
He would face the fires and swords of ugly wars,  
He would risk his life, if only reunited they could be!  
Yet the space was so vast, the land was so broad,  
How to go for a bird's shadow, chase the moonbeam?
2945. As he decided to linger and wait for her news,  
Rains fell, the sun shone, in a long-lasting run.  
One day, came decrees, set on five-hue paper,  
Signed by royal hand, giving express, strict orders.  
Kim was shifted to a new position in Nanping,
2950. Vuong Quan was also sent to a city in Fuyuan.  
In haste, horses and carriages were bought,  
Both families took the same road to the new posts.



- They heard the armed rebellion had been crushed,  
 Swells stilled in Fukien, fires died out in Zhejiang.
2955. Heartened by the tidings, Kim called upon Vuong,  
 Together they should ascertain Kiêu's long path.  
 Their common route led them to Hangzhou,  
 Where they were given precise, reliable news.  
 They were told: "Not long ago, a clash occurred,
2960. Outfoxed, Tu Hai was the first to fall at the battlefield.  
 Kiêu received no reward for the part she played,  
 An order from high forced her to wed a tribal chief.  
 The stellar woman threw herself into the dark deep,  
 This Qiantang river is now the tomb of a fair lady!"
2965. Alas! Not yet united and forever they were parted.  
 Honour befell her kindred, she alone bore injustices!  
 To call up her soul, they prayed before her tablet,  
 A shrine they set by the river to clear her woes.  
 The flood tide's waves unfurled in silvery foam,
2970. From afar, was it not a shadow falling into the depths?  
 Their love was deep, lo! deeper the sea of sorrows,  
 Where then to find the Jingwei bird's grieving soul? (40)

\*

- The natural order of things held surprising turns,  
 From nowhere there appeared the abbess Giac Duyệt.
2975. On the ancestral tablet, she read the deceased's name,  
 In awe she asked: "Where do you all come from?  
 Are you by any chance Kiêu's kith and kin?  
 Why these funeral rites, why mourn one that is alive?"  
 Those queries left them dazed and thunderstruck,
2980. They bustled around her, prattling, enquiring:  
 "Here's her spouse, here her mother, her father,  
 This's her sister, this her brother and his wife.  
 Long ago we learned sure news of her baleful fate,  
 Your Venerable, what you now tell us is a wonder!"
2985. The nun said: "Destiny wanted us to meet,  
 In Yixian first, then later in the Qian-Tang river.  
 When this precious woman flung herself into the water,  
 I was there waiting, found her, brought her home.  
 We've been living inspired by the enlightened path,
2990. The thatched hut that serves as our temple's not far.  
 At Buddha's feet days slowly, quietly follow days,

Yet Kiêu is restless, constantly missing home."  
 At this news they were all smiles and grins,  
 What greater glee than theirs could there be?  
 2995. Since the leaf was snatched away from the woods,  
 They searched at random in streams and mounts.  
 The flower had fallen, the fragrance blown away,  
 They might see her in another life, in this one surely not.  
 She dwelled in dark, they abided in light, forever parted.  
 3000. And now she came back from the Kingdom of Shades!  
 All sank to their knees, bowed and thanked the abbess,  
 Then in a body, they formed a line behind her steps.  
 As they fought their way through reed and rush,  
 Their trusting hearts still harboured half of a doubt.  
 3005. They walked the winding path, along the river's curves,  
 Past the thicket, there was the Buddha's shrine.  
 Giac DUYÊN raised her voice and called her friend,  
 Treading on golden lotus flower, Kiêu swiftly walked out. (41)  
 Before her very eyes stood her full family:  
 3010. Her old father, yet hale, her old mother, handsome still,  
 Her sister and brother, grown to the age of discretion,  
 And Kim, he was the same Kim of yesteryear!  
 What was this moment, was it now or some other time?  
 Her eyes were wide open but was she living in a dream?  
 3015. Tear pearls fell drop by drop and damped her frock;  
 Joy and glee, regret and pity, the kin had so much to share.  
 Kiêu fell upon the ground and held her old mother's knees,  
 Crying, bewailing, she told her all her miseries:  
 "Mother! For fifteen years I wandered in alien land,  
 3020. A weed swept and tossed by the waves.  
 Convinced I had drowned in stream and mud,  
 Who'd have thought we would meet in this life?"  
 Her parents held her hands, looked at her face,  
 It was the same fair face she had when she left.  
 3025. With time, her grace had waned, her beauty had faded,  
 Her splendour had lost some of its shine.  
 What gauge could possibly measure their bliss?  
 So much had to be said, so many news to be shared,  
 Her younger sister and brother plied her with questions.  
 3030. Kim was there, watching, his grief gave way to glee,  
 They huddled and bowed low before the Buddha's altar,  
 Thanked The Compassionate for having revived Kiêu.  
 Decorated sedan chairs were urged to leave at once,

Old Vuong ordered they all return to the same abode.

3035. Kiêu said: "A fallen, poor stray girl I've become,  
 During half of my life, I've tasted untold bitter tastes.  
 I thought myself lost in mount fog, wasted in open seas,  
 How could I have dreamed of such a dream day?  
 I am given a second life and the chance to meet you all,

3040. My heart's longing, my nagging thirst are now quenched.  
 I have taken refuge in this secluded retreat,  
 Living among plants and trees beseems my age.  
 Salt and greens, I've grown fond of these ascetic fares,  
 The nun's monastic brown frock befits my simple taste.

3045. The flurry of life has smothered the fire of passion,  
 Why should I jostle back into the worldly dark dust?  
 Besides 'tis improper not to go the rest of the way,  
 Once a nun, stay a nun far beyond the age of wedlock.  
 For my rebirth, I owe Giac Duyễn an infinite debt,

3050. How could I have the heart to ungratefully leave her?"  
 Her father replied: "Each thing in its own time,  
 A monastic life must bend to life's turns.  
 Devoting yourself to Buddha, who'll redeem  
 Your love pledge and your daughter's duties?

3055. You owe your salvation to The Truly Omniscient,  
 We'll build a temple, the nun will be invited to stay."  
 Kiêu listened to her father and bowed to his wish,  
 They took leave of the old abbess and of the retreat.  
 At Kim's official residence they all assembled,

3060. A stately banquet was set to fete their reunion.  
 Tiddly, tipsy after a few wine cups too many,  
 Vân rose from her seat and spoke to the party:  
 "A lovers' union rests on the hand of Heaven,  
 Thus you two met and made a pledge of troth.

3065. Then, over the peaceful earth a storm swept,  
 Your bond, Kiêu, you chose to passed it on to me.  
 A pip nestles in the pulp, a needle clings to the magnet,  
 United we are, when one suffers the other agonises.  
 Day after day, Kim and I lived longing and hoping,

3070. For fifteen years, we've had so many loving thoughts.  
 At long last, the broken mirror's made whole, (42)  
 Heaven has carefully chosen a stead to put you back.  
 The work of fate still runs, luckily here you are still,  
 The attesting moon still shines, the old pledge still holds.

3075. The apricot has ripened, ready for the picking,

You're young still, the time's come for you to wed!"  
 Kiêu hastened to reject her sister's words:  
 "Why now rehash happenings of times long past?  
 'Tis true, a vow was made in olden days,  
 3080. Then, I was whipped and battered by winds and rain.  
 The mere mention of it fills me with all shades of shame,  
 Let things of yore be swept away by time's ebbing tides."  
 Kim cut in: "What a strange thing to say!  
 Thus your heart may feel, yet, what of our given word?  
 3085. Once we happened to voice a vow of strong bond,  
 Fittingly the earth's here below, Heaven reigns high.  
 Though matters may change, stars may shift their orbs,  
 In life and death, a given word should be kept!  
 Fate has not decided to hinder our love,  
 3090. Why are you so resolved to split a loving pair?"  
 Kiêu replied: "Living in peace, in perfect union,  
 Living as a cuddling couple is one's secret dream.  
 The tenet that rules a wife's conduct to her man  
 Needs the scented bud to be unspoiled, its pistil intact.  
 3095. Virginity is worth troves of treasured gold,  
 In the candle-lit nuptial night shall I blush before you?  
 Since the day the flower met with its woes,  
 It's been soiled by flitting bees and butterflies.  
 For so long lashed by wind, drenched by deluge,  
 3100. Any moon would wane, any bloom would fade.  
 What's now left of bygone days' beauty?  
 My life's reached its end, and I'd still try another plight?  
 I would strongly feel ashamed of myself  
 If I dare bring worldly dirt to play the virtuous wife.  
 3105. Though I know your heart's brimming with love,  
 In our first night's light, shame would dim my heart.  
 From this day on, I'll huddle up behind closed doors,  
 If I cannot be a nun, I'll surely live like one.  
 And if you still recall the love of long time past,  
 3110. Think of man and wife's love as love 'tween friends.  
 Why still speak about the red threads of wedlock?  
 It pains my heart and brings filth upon your life."  
 "The art of speech you master!" Kim cried out,  
 "You've stated your reasons, listen to my own.  
 3115. At all times, in the precept that rules womankind,  
 The notion of virginity is read in various ways.  
 There are times of turmoil, there are even times,

- No order forces one to a single rule of conduct.  
In your case, filial piety served in lieu of loyalty,
3120. What dust or dirt could ever soil your good self?  
For us, Heaven has preserved this moment,  
Our gate's free of fog, the sky's cleared of clouds.  
The flower withered and now regains its lustre,  
The waning moon shines brighter than at its full.
3125. Why nurture doubts for no rhyme or reason,  
Why frigidly leave poor Thiêu out in the cold?" (43)  
Kiêu listened to Kim pouring out his heart,  
Her parents leaned towards his very thoughts.  
Short of arguments she wisely stopped arguing,
3130. She hung her head still heaving heavy sighs.  
A sumptuous fete was set up for the union,  
The torch flames glowed on the red silken curtains.  
Kiêu and Kim bowed low before the elders,  
All rites observed, they formed a flawless couple.
3135. In their room, they drank from a tortoiseshell cup,  
Stunned by their new bond, in grief of their old love.  
A green lotus bud met a fresh peach flower,  
Fifteen years later, they were reunited at long last.  
That love formed, then shattered, then flourished.
3140. A grieving joy settled as darkness grew, the moon rose.  
Late at night, behind silken-fringed brocade drapes,  
The oil lamp gleam deepened her young beauty's glow.  
The lovers at long last had reunited,  
The lovers of old now shared a loyal flame.
3145. "I have made peace with my fate," Kiêu said,  
"Long resigned I'm to forgo this wasted body.  
Then I thought of your fealty to our love of yore,  
To please you I obeyed your call to be your wife.  
Deep down in my heart lies so great a shame,
3150. I feel brazen-faced and thick-skinned!  
If it's for mere facade of tenderness,  
Pretending, I could look you in the face.  
Were you to follow the common man's bad habit,  
Sift mud for scent, pluck a wilting flower,
3155. Then we'll spew stench and offer a farce.  
No love will then remain but only hatred.  
Loving me would only bring you ill repute,  
Love would be ten times worst than betrayal!  
Now, if ever you set your sights on posterity,

3160. The younger sister's ready to stand in for the elder.  
There still remains a tiny touch of purity,  
Try hard not to trample on it with a misstep.  
Chances are aplenty to pour out your tender love,  
Why then rumple the wilted flower for play?"
3165. "A vow bound us," said he, "then we were split,  
Sent apart like a fish to the sea, a bird to the sky.  
I grieved so much for you that drifted for so long,  
The stronger our oath, the acuter your pain.  
We loved each other, united facing life and death,
3170. Now back together again, that very love remains.  
Like a tender willow, you are in the bloom of youth,  
Methinks you're still in the grasp of love's hold.  
The mirror face's pristine, clear of life's dust,  
A strong stand you took, deepening my respect.
3175. For so long I probed the sea for my lost jewel,  
Urged by faithful love, not by frivolous thoughts.  
Who'd have thought we'd be under the same roof?  
We need not share a bed to feel man and wife."  
Hearing this, Kiêu tidied herself up, buckled her hairpin,
3180. Bowed low in deep gratitude for his great kindness:  
"My soiled body's cleansed of mud and made pure,  
Thanks to a noble man's past compare heart.  
Your loyal words came from a twin soul,  
A sympathy of this nature fully deserves its name.
3185. What protection and help would not you offer me?  
For aeons my dignity rests on this very night!"  
He released her hands to better clasp them again,  
Loved her for her virtues, overcome with love.  
They lit new candles, added incense to the burner,
3190. Wine they poured and drank to their bliss.  
Waves and waves of olden love kept flowing back  
Leisurely he asked about her musical skill of yore,  
"These silken strings should be blamed," she said,  
They caused my untold trials that just ended.
3195. What happened, happened, what can regret do?  
Again I shall obey, yielding to your wish, friend of old."  
Her fairy fingers slowly, softly brushed the strings,  
The lament mingled with the swirling incense smoke.  
What a tune! As warm and tender as spring time,
3200. Was it a butterfly or Master Chuang Tzu's dream? (44)  
What was that other air, as sweet and mild as spring love?

- Was it the Lord of Chu's soul or a cuckoo's shadow? (45)  
Pure notes like pearls dropped in a moonlit lake,  
Warm notes like tears of jade newly made crystal.
3205. The full range of the five tones vibrated in the air,  
None that wasn't full of gnawing sorrow, of trying tumult.  
"The same tunes and the same hands," he cried out,  
"So mournful in the past, why tonight so full of joy?  
Sadness and delight, both stem from our hearts,
3210. Have doleful days now ended and happy times dawned?"  
"Because of this trifle of a skill," Kiêu replied,  
"These tunes had me suffer so much and for so long.  
For my soulmate, one last time I've played this lute,  
Forever it will be unstrung, forever forgotten."
3215. They had not drained their heart to heart talk,  
When a cockerel crowed, heralding the break of dawn.  
Kim made clear their own thoughts to his kin,  
They all were stunned, had nothing but praise:  
Kiêu was a woman of virtue, of clear mind,
3220. Not one of those that flitted from flirt to flirt.  
With love in perfect harmony with friendship,  
They shared no bed but a taste for music and poetry.  
They'd love a cup of wine, a game of weiqi,  
Wait for the flowers to bloom, watch the moonrise.
3225. Their dearest wish was fulfilled by fate,  
Their married couple was also a pair of friends.  
As pledged, they built a shrine on a misty hill,  
A trusted man was sent to invite the old abbess.  
Upon arrival, he saw her door closed, the latch locked,
3230. A moss-filled door gap, the roof hidden by lush grass.  
He was told she'd gone afar to pick healing herbs,  
Where to find a floating cloud, an errant crane?  
As a sign of time-honoured piety, up at the temple,  
Oil lamp and incense were kept lit day and night.
3235. The family lived in both bliss and bounty,  
Step by step, Kim yearly climbed the office ladder.  
Strive Vân did to dutifully gift heirs to their forefathers:  
A yardful of tender shrubs sprouted from a fecund tree.  
In rank and in riches, who could their rivals be?
3240. Their name they left, etched on stone till the end of time.

Upon reflection, all rests on the hand of Heaven,  
Heaven wants us to be and be assigned a fate.  
If one's to suffer trials, tribulations one will face,  
Some greatness one can hold, if granted grandeur,  
3245. Towards none Heaven shows partiality,  
Talent and fate are bounties given in equal shares.  
Talent bestowed should not be boasted,  
For talent rhymes with fateful event.  
Once we've assented to take on our karma,  
3250. Let's not blame Heaven for being present or distant.  
The seed of goodness lies within our hearts,  
A pure heart's worth thrice the talent.

\*

These long-winded ancient words I scraped together  
Will hopefully amuse you during a few night watches.

Translated by N.T.Lâm  
Thao Diên, November 2020

I tried and failed

## NOTES

(1) Nanjing, in the south, Beijing, in the north. In 1403 the former was replaced by the latter as the capital.

(2) The Pipa lute is a pear-shaped wooden guitar with four strings formerly made of twisted silk threads. It used to be played at royal courts.

(3) Luo Guanzhong's Romance of the Three Kingdoms relates that Cao Cao or Ts'ao Ts'ao, emperor of Wei, is known for stealing



people's wives. He took his generals' wives, the Kiêu sisters, locked them in the Bronze Sparrow Tower and made them his concubines.

(4) In the Qi dynasty, a king so loved his queen that he had his palace floor paved with golden lotus flowers. Watching her walk he would cry out: "Under each of her steps blooms a golden flower!"

(5) According to Han history, a seaside village was famous for its pearl oysters. They disappeared when greedy mandarins forced villagers to fish them and seized their pearls. A good new mandarin was then named at the head of the village, who put an end to the forced labour and returned the stolen pearls. The pearl oysters also reappeared.

(6) A tale runs like this: in an inn, a young suitor chanced upon an old man sitting in the moonlight, holding a bag. When asked he said : "This bag holds the register of all men and women, and the threads that will bind them in wedlock."

(7) Pan Chao in the Han dynasty and Xie in the Chin dynasty were famous women who wrote beautiful poems.

(8) There was a young man, an old tale tells, who wanted to marry a beautiful young girl and have her. But he was told by her ailing old mother that he had to cure her first. He had to find a jade pestle to fit her jade mortar. To prepare the cure he had to pound miraculous leaves for a hundred days.

(9) Jung-zu-Chi was a unique connoisseur of music who enjoyed listening to the lute. Playing for him was a reward many sought. Upon his death, an artist shattered his instrument and stopped playing for the rest of his life, missing his old friend and his pleasure.

(10) In the Tang dynasty, by the Xi-xiang Temple, Cui, known for her beauty, and Jiang, a talented young man, fell in love. Though not married she gave herself to him, they then lived in disrepute and in mutual resentment.

(11) A powerful general had five beautiful daughters. He wished a handsome and rich governor to marry one of them. Not knowing which to choose, he asked them to stand behind a curtain, each holding a long silk thread. The governor was then invited to pick one

of the five threads. Fate had him choose the third, the red one held by the finest daughter.

(12) "...playing music on another man's boat": to wed a new husband.

(13) Looking for a prince worthy of his daughter, emperor Wang Yan ordered her suitors to stand under a balcony. He would throw a shuttlecock, the one that caught it would be the happy chosen.

(14) Ying sent a plea to the emperor Yongle to beg him to make her a courtesan to his mandarins, punishing her instead of her father. The emperor pardoned her and her father.

Under the Tang dynasty, to help her poor parents, Li-ji asked the people of her village to sell her to the Snake Spirit. Later on she destroyed the spirit and married a king.

(15) According to Buddhist teaching, people that have debts reincarnate, sometimes as buffaloes and horses, to serve their lenders and thus pay their debts.

(16) Bai Mei, "The White Eyebrows", was one of The Five Elders of the Shaolin Temple, masters of martial art. He was a fierce defender of his disciples and became the epitome of the protection of the destitute.

(17) A river in the Zhejiang province, south of Shanghai.

(18) Ancient periods of the day: Hour the Rat (23 PM to 1 PM), Hour of the Ox (1PM to 3 PM).....Hour of the Dog (7 PM to 9 PM)...

(19) The game invented in China in 2306 B.C., later more commonly known under its Japanese name Go.

(20) In some parts of ancient China people used to share willow branches to say goodbye.

(21) Buddhism. One of the Buddha's teachings.

(22) Kuan Yin: The Bodhisattva of Compassion.

(23) The Bodhi tree or the Tree of Awakening. The lotus is the symbol of purity and enlightenment.

(24) The five offerings: incense burning, flowers, candlelight, tea, fruits.

The Three Jewels: Refuge in the Buddha's teaching (the Dharma), Refuge in the discipline (the Vinaya), Refuge in the Buddhist community (the Sangha).

(25) The Five Precepts: Do not kill; Do not steal; Lead a decent life; Do not lie; Do not drink alcohol.

(26) According to scriptures, with a willow branch, Kuan Yin, the Buddha of Mercy, sprinkles the elixir of life to cure human sufferings.

(27) The Lantingji Xu ("Preface to the Poems Collected from the Orchid Pavilion") by Wang Xizhi (303-361 A.D.) is celebrated as the epitome of the semi-cursive Chinese calligraphy.

(28) See (5) and (10) above.

(29) Yueh Tung later called Kwangtung (Canton).

(30) During the Warring-States period, Prince Ping Yuan, a general, had many friends and followers. As he was hospitable and trusted them all, he could not pick one for good advice. The negotiations he led to break the siege of his State capital only came to a fruitful conclusion thanks to the advice of one of his little known guests.

(31) The Governor of Chin Yang, Li Yuan, saw a dragon appearing in the clouds. It was a good omen. He then conquered China, proclaimed himself Emperor and founded the great Tang Dynasty.

(32) In dire straits, young Han Xin (230-196 B.C.) met Mother Xiêu, a silk washerwoman who gave him food. Later on, when he became the Lord of Chu, he thanked her with one thousand golden taels.

(33) "Gave a push to the chariot". When sending his commanding general to war, the emperor used to give a personal symbolic push to his chariot.

(34) A salt runner turned soldier, Huang Ch'ao (835-884 A.D.) led a murderous rebellion against the Tang dynasty. His troops took over the capital, Chang'an. Looting and killing went on for days. Forcing

the emperor to flee, Huang Ch'ao established the brief Qi dynasty before being defeated and killed by his own nephew.

(35) In the Northern and Southern dynasties (420-589 A.D.), king Wu was defeated and killed. Ziao Lian, his widow, was married to another king. Still loving her former spouse, holding a broken lute on her knees, she wrote a poem that reads: "To sound my broken heart / Behold my lute's broken strings".

(36) Every three years, for civilian as opposed to military affairs, the highest of the four imperial examinations, the Palace Examination, was held for future grand mandarins.

(37) The doctorate laureates used to be honoured in the imperial gardens where their names were officially read out from a scroll, sometimes by the emperor himself.

(38) In the Song dynasty, a good mandarin had a crane and a guitar, as his sole belongings, to show his simple noble way of living and mainly his integrity.

(39) The Yamen, the mandarin's office, the seat of power.

(40) In Chinese mythology, Yandi, the Flame Emperor, had a daughter, Nuwa, who drowned in the Eastern Sea. Her soul reincarnated in the Jingwei bird. Till the end of time this bird would drop pebbles and twigs to fill up the sea to avenge the princess and to prevent future drowning.

(41) See note (4).

(42) In the Southern Dynasties (420-589 A.D.), a king of the Chen Dynasty lost his kingdom in a war. Knowing he would be separated from his wife, he broke a mirror, keeping a part, giving the other to his queen. Later, they were reunited and made the mirror, the couple, whole.

(43) An old poem tells this story: Tiêu's beautiful lover was abducted and sold to a powerful mandarin. Tiêu kept pacing in front of the man's mansion but never succeeded in seeing her again.

(44) The thinker Chuang Tzu (Zhuang Zhu) (4th century B.C.) in his book, Chuang Tzin (Zhuangzi), wrote the famous parable, "The Butterfly Dream": Is Chuang Tzu dreaming he is a fluttering butterfly or is the flitting butterfly dreaming it is Chuang Tzu? In what is called "the transformation of things", the distinction between reality and dream is thin. And then, what is reality?

"The Butterfly Dream" has been depicted by some Chinese and Japanese painters.

(45) In the Warring States period, a king lost his country, Chu, in war and died. His soul came back as a bird, a cuckoo or a long-tailed tit, that kept singing, whilst mourning the lost throne.

