

# *An Impossible Dream and Nightly Quests: The Quixotic Impulse in Kim Man-jung's Kuunmong and Nguyễn Du's Truyện Kiều (Article)*

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Quixotic impulses are by no means restricted to the western hemisphere. Two Asian masterworks, one from the beginning and the other near the end of the long eighteenth century, can serve as exemplary specimens of that truth as they focus on the difficult road to finding and fulfilling one's spiritual quest in the midst of uncongenial times. Featuring perilous journeys, harrowing escapes, conquests both martial and amorous, and the most gratifying happy endings imaginable, either of these books would have inspired Don Quixote himself with envy and admiration.

Since both have recently been retranslated and released by Penguin Classics as affordable paperbacks, this second decade of the twenty-first century provides us with a good opportunity to examine a pair of canonical classics side by side through fresh eyes as they invite us to expand the geographic boundaries of how we define eighteenth-century enlightenment. The updated editions will be especially important to readers who are interested in what these compelling narratives can reveal about contemporaneous spiritual belief and practice in the authors' respective countries. Although they are not religious texts in the generic sense, we can discover a great deal about eighteenth-century Buddhism and its uneasy relationship with its philosophical counterpart, Confucianism, through the protagonists' actions.

Like most of their contemporaries, the Korean politician and literary scholar Kim Man-jung (1637–1692) and the Vietnamese poet Nguyễn Du (1766–1820) were heavily influenced by Chinese culture. In fact, the narrators of both *Kuunmong* and *Truyện Kiều* declare at the outset that their stories are set in China, either as a nod toward literary tradition or as a means of avoiding direct—and potentially dangerous—criticism of political realities in Korea and Vietnam. Intellectuals in both countries employed a common writing system based on Chinese characters as well as a shared canon of classical genres and texts, aesthetic ideals, and a similar civil service examination inherited from imperial China, which determined one's education and career prospects. These all-important exams were grounded in ethical ideals that had been espoused by Confucius and his followers centuries before: an emphasis on moral character, impartial justice, loyalty, family responsibility, and social harmony built through acceptance of community standards and precedents that were expected to serve as invisible guard rails on individual behavior. Confucian philosophy does not concern itself with the spiritual side of religion, preferring instead to focus on the communal rituals that bring people together.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the equally ancient practice of Buddhism was observed as the state religion: a deeply spiritual tradition that lays out a path to an individual's release from ignorance and suffering through meditation and the cultivation of compassion toward all living beings. Progress toward this objective is helped or hindered by one's karma, the merits and demerits accumulated over the course of successive lifetimes as one follows the path or falls behind. The ultimate goal is liberation from earthly desires,

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1. Book 7.21 of Confucius's *Analects* famously recounts how Confucius himself never spoke of supernatural phenomena.

and eventually liberation from the cycle of birth and death when the enlightened practitioner no longer needs to experience karmically driven reincarnation in order to advance the learning process. Its emphasis on freeing oneself from earthly attachments inevitably complicates Buddhist philosophy's coexistence alongside a Confucian society, which by its nature must be built on such attachments. This tension fires the heart of Kim Man-jung's and Nguyễn Du's narratives.

### A Note about the New Translations

The Penguin translations are by Heinz Insu Fenkl and Timothy Allen under the titles *The Nine Cloud Dream* and *The Song of Kiều*, respectively. *Kuunmong* was rendered into English by the Canadian missionary James S. Gale in 1922 (a translation that was reprinted with new introductory material and notes by Japan's Kurodahan Press in 2003) and by Richard Rutt, an Anglican Bishop, in 1974. Although both men were excellent scholars with many years' experience living in Korea, one might suspect their professions could affect their interpretation. An extensive analysis of textual challenges related to Kim's book and these two versions can be found in Jinsil Choi's "Reproduction and reception of the concepts of Confucianism, Buddhism, and polygamy: *Kuunmong* in translation."<sup>2</sup> Shortly after the Penguin edition was released, a helpful comparison of Gale's translation with Fenkl's was undertaken by Katherine Beaman, who observes in her review that throughout the text "Gale's translation tends to suggest that one's destiny is controlled by external forces, choosing wording that blames material temptations for characters' sins. Meanwhile, for Fenkl it is the mind that is the source of sin," a much more Buddhist point of view. As an example, she cites a passage in which the protagonist reflects upon his distraction by sexual temptation: "In Gale's translation, Hsing-Chen describes his sin of lusting for the eight fairy maidens as 'damage of my soul,' implying permanency and condemnation. Fenkl's Hsing-Chen describes this as 'harm to my progress,' suggesting instead a mere temporary deviation from the path toward enlightenment."<sup>3</sup> And, one might add, a more self-directed path, in line with the Buddha's teaching that we are each responsible for creating our own reality.

Although there are several different versions of *Truyện Kiều* in English, the standard translation has long been Huỳnh Sanh Thông's *Tale of Kiều*, first published in 1973 by Random House and extensively revised for Yale University Press in 1983. A refugee himself, the translator included an introductory essay by Alexander Woodside, a prominent specialist in Vietnamese history who concentrated on themes of conflict and trauma and analyzed the text through the lens of the recent war. Huỳnh Sanh Thông's hundreds of explanatory endnotes are much more detailed than Timothy Allen's, which number only thirty-seven, and the translation is more literal. The Penguin edition is more interpretive, preserving the meaning and many of the poem's metaphors but cutting back on some of Nguyễn Du's subtle allusions to classical and vernacular precursors. The result is a faster pace, easier for a nonspecialist to comprehend and read through without pause. When questioned by an interviewer about this choice of style, Allen remarked: "Translators do not keep the original chained up in the basement. An interested reader can always go back to the source. For me, the only way for a translator to betray the original text is by making it seem boring."<sup>4</sup> This

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2. Jinsil Choi, "Reproduction and reception of the concepts of Confucianism, Buddhism, and polygamy: *Kuunmong* in translation," in *Key Cultural Texts in Translation*, ed. Kirsten Malmkjaer and Adriana Șerban (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2018), 203–18.

3. "Katherine Beaman reviews *The Nine Cloud Dream* by Kim Man-Jung," *Asymptote* 9, no. 2 (April 2019), <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/criticism/kim-man-jung-the-nine-cloud-dream/>.

4. David Kaye, "From Playing Around To A Penguin Classic: Tim Allen's *The Song of Kiều*," *Vietcetera* International Edition, March 27, 2019, <https://vietcetera.com/en/from-playing-around-to-a-penguin-classic-tim-allens-the-song-of-kiieu>.

edition does not include line numbers, even though the structure of the translation almost always follows the original line by line.<sup>5</sup> Allen's introductory essay, which features forty-five endnotes and a three-page bibliography, situates the text historically in both Nguyễn Du's own time and the ostensible setting of the poem in sixteenth-century China.

## Historical Context

*Kuunmong* is generally considered to have been composed around 1689, and *Truyện Kiều* sometime around 1814. The exact dates are uncertain, as were the times: the historian Kyungku Lee remarks how "[t]he frequent 'Game of Thrones' scenarios in this period reveal the precariousness of the dynastic system" in Joseon-era Korea,<sup>6</sup> a statement that can be counted as equally true of Nguyễn Du's Vietnam a hundred years later. In 1689, Kim lost his position as a trusted advisor to King Sukjong and was exiled from the court for criticizing the monarch's controversial dismissal of childless Queen Inhyeon in favor of a glamorous but ruthless concubine, Lady Jang, who had successfully presented him with a son and heir.<sup>7</sup> Nguyễn Du composed the epic story of *Kiều* in the aftermath of a series of bloody insurrections and power struggles that subjected Vietnam to three different dynastic administrations in the years between 1770 and 1802. As the son of a prime minister who had fallen from grace with the first dynasty's defeat, he experienced fifteen years as a refugee, the same amount of time his heroine *Kiều* is condemned to endure in a hell on earth that has been brought upon her through the working out of negative karma accumulated across multiple lifetimes.

Because of their precarious positions and the vicious factional politics that continually threatened to undermine them, both the Korean and the Vietnamese administrations adopted a conservative form of Confucian doctrine as a state ideology designed to strengthen their potentially unruly subjects' sense of loyalty to community and the regime through an emphasis on hierarchy, loyalty, and obedience. As a result, Buddhism's emphasis on individual agency and independence of thought was looked upon with a measure of suspicion. The useful elements of Buddhism, such as the tenet that one's place in society was predetermined by karmic carryover from earlier lives, assured its retention as the official state religion despite being downplayed in courtly circles, but direct engagement with the

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5. The notable exception to Allen's adherence to line-by-line translation is Nguyễn Du's famous introductory verse, which is more loosely rendered than the rest of the poem in order to emphasize its monitory message about the fleeting nature of good fortune.

6. Kyungku Lee, "*Bunmu Gongsin*, the Last Meritorious Officials of the Joseon Dynasty," *Likeness and Legacy in Korean Portraiture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2020), 32–39; 32. Lee further points out that Sukjong's transactional attitude toward his wives and desperation for an heir has led to frequent comparisons with Henry VIII of England. Unlike Henry, Sukjong changed his mind and reinstated Queen Inhyeon five years later, demoting Lady Jang once again to concubine status and setting her up for the assassination by poison that ended her life in 1701. In a similar reversal, officials who had supported Lady Jang were immediately deported (35). All this came too late for Kim Man-jung, however, as he died in exile in 1692.

7. The story of Queen Inhyeon's trials and eventual exoneration, paralleled with the spectacular fall and demise of Lady Jang, took on a life of its own and is still one of the most popular subjects for Korean historical dramas. Throughout the eighteenth century, a series of highly fictionalized accounts of the deposed Queen (with supernatural details about her childhood, such as "Her father once observed rainbow-like shimmers over her washbowl") circulated in novella format. Despite the authors' careful avoidance of politics, it is a highly Confucian tale, focused on feminine modesty and the lack thereof in the Queen's rival, who is portrayed as an unwomanly villain. Richard Rutt and Kim Chong-un, who translated one of these works in 1974, commented that "the exaggerated virtuousness of Queen Inhyeon re-echoes the determined propriety of some of the female protagonists of *Kuunmong*." Kim Man-jung, *Virtuous Women: Three Classic Korean Novels*, trans. Richard Rutt and Kim Chong-un (Seoul: Royal Asiatic Society/UNESCO, 1974), 182. A more recent translation, with an introduction that emphasizes the novella's influence up to the present day, was undertaken by Minsoo Kang in *Azalea: Journal of Korean Literature & Culture* 10 (2017): 275–345.

operation of the Buddhist temples was left mostly to society women in Korea, and in Vietnam to professional priests and nuns who carried out day-to-day rituals and prayers behind the scenes without direct contact from the secular world except during festivals and special occasions.<sup>8</sup> In either case, religious sites received financial support without much hands-on involvement from the government, and the Buddhist message in officially sanctioned literature was often perfunctory.

Francisca Cho has suggested that the shaky political tenor of the times led to a sense of split identity for educated men and their literary compositions. Whereas poetry in the Chinese mode and formulaic essays would serve for placement on the civil service exams that were vital for success in the public sphere, as well as maintaining one's public persona once that success had been achieved, creative fictional works in both poetry and prose were officially frowned upon as potential "instruments of social corruption" that could only be circulated safely in private among family and acquaintances who could be trusted to understand the author's purpose—a practice that became a self-fulfilling prophecy, as fictional narratives developed into notorious (if veiled) "vehicles of political complaint."<sup>9</sup>

Like most of his fellow literati who moved in Korea's courtly circles, Kim Man-jung wrote anonymously. Even the certainty of his authorship of *Kuunmong* was unknown until Kim Tae-jun traced the book's history in his 1933 *Choson soseolsa (History of Korean Fiction)*.<sup>10</sup> We are unable to ascertain whether the text was originally written in Korean or in classical Chinese; after years of extolling *Kuunmong* as the first major work in the native hangul alphabet, scholars were somewhat chagrined to discover an early eighteenth-century manuscript that suggested it might have been composed in Chinese and translated into Korean at a later date.<sup>11</sup> *Truyện Kiều* (literally, the story of Kiều, which is both the heroine's name and the Vietnamese word for a wanderer or exile<sup>12</sup>), considered dangerously subversive and near-pornographic in the early years after the successive revolutions, was circulated orally long before it was printed for publication, possibly before it was written down at all. By composing in the traditional *lục bát* or "six-eight" form of folk poetry, Nguyễn Du employed a familiar meter that was easily memorized and transmitted, and at the same time assured that he could fly under the radar of official scrutiny. Montira Rato points out that the powerful literati of Vietnam's ruling class "were mainly concerned with political stability and moral standards" in officially sanctioned literature but did not consider vernacular poetry as a

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8. Cuong Tu Nguyen and A. W. Barber, "Vietnamese Buddhism in North America" in *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley: U of California Press 1998), 129–46; 137. Nguyen and Barber explain that in Vietnamese Buddhism, both at home and abroad, most lay people feel that the primary function of monks and nuns is not to preach or explain the dharma but to serve as a conduit through which people can accumulate merit, often without direct personal contact. By taking on this retiring role in a shrine on a former lover's property, Kiều is able to avoid retribution from his jealous wife (*Truyện Kiều*, lines 1917–2028).

9. Francisca Cho, "A Literary Analysis of *Kuunmong*," in *The Cloud Dream of the Nine*, trans. James S. Gale (Kumamoto: Kurodahan Press, 2003), xii. Cho's *Embracing Illusion: Truth and Fiction in The Dream of Nine Clouds* (New York: SUNY, 1996), published under the name Francisca Cho Bantly, is the only book-length critical study on *Kuunmong* available in English.

10. Heinz Insu Fenkl, introduction to Kim Man-jung, *The Nine Cloud Dream*, trans. Heinz Insu Fenkl (New York: Penguin Books, 2019), viii.

11. Fenkl, introduction, ix. Fenkl further suggests that "*Kuunmong* needs to be considered in light of Chinese as well as Korean literature. In a Chinese context, *Kuunmong* fits into the genre of *quanqi* ("strange tales") that young Confucian scholars would sometimes write as part of their civil examinations to entertain their elder examiners (and perhaps thus earn a higher score)" (xiii).

12. The term *Việt Kiều* is used today to describe the Vietnamese diaspora, especially those who left the country as refugees at the war's end in the 1970s and are still living abroad.

genre to be classified as literature, especially the oral form practiced by the illiterate majority of the population.<sup>13</sup>

Despite their inauspicious origins, both texts are now cherished as national treasures that reflect timeless values of their people even as they explore solutions that were very specific to the authors' concerns of the moment.

### ***Kuunmong***

Stripped to the barest bones of its narrative, *Kuunmong* (*The Nine Cloud Dream* or *A Dream of Nine Clouds*) is a romantic fantasy that employs the traditional model of a frame tale, enriched with satire, literary allusions, and veiled references to late seventeenth-century Korea's troubled politics. On the surface—the narrative frame—it is the story of a promising young monk named Hsing-chen (“Original Nature”), who encounters eight fairies sitting on a stone bridge<sup>14</sup> who tempt but do not succeed in seducing him. Nevertheless he cannot resist returning to the encounter in his mind despite his best efforts, wishing against his will for a more sensuous life, and his attempt at hiding knowledge of the incident from his monastery's master is unsuccessful. As a result he is immediately cursed to rebirth on earth as Shao-yu (“Small Visitor” or “Brief Resider”), the most talented and desirable of men, a circumstance rife with temptations calculated to attach him to worldly considerations.<sup>15</sup> The fairies, too, are cursed for bringing on his spiritual crisis with their flirtatious behavior, and since they have become karmically linked with Hsing-chen, they are reborn in human form to become Shao-yu's various concubines and wives throughout his inevitably successful career. The incarnated ladies all live together in harmony, but they remain incurable pranksters; the storyline is often driven by their propensity for practical jokes and disguise, including an episode where, with the collusion of several of the others, one of the women fakes her own death and marries Shao-yu under a new identity. Another manages to convince him that she is a ghost and that his physical and spiritual health could be threatened by their association. There are scenes involving cross-dressing and elaborate deception: in the midst of Shao-yu's military campaigns against the Tibetans, a former fairy assumes male attire and joins his retinue as a squire, and another—whose life on earth has been spent acquiring the mystical skills of a trained assassin—materializes in his tent in the middle of the night and informs him that she has come with the intention of cutting off his head (but, upon recognizing their karmic bond, she switches sides, becomes his lover, and assumes the role of strategic advisor instead). At one point, Shao-yu himself assumes a disguise as a Taoist priestess in order to get a peek at, and covertly woo, a sequestered aristocratic beauty who is reputed to be a supremely gifted connoisseur of music. She is, of course, a fairy in human form.<sup>16</sup>

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13. Montira Rato, “Filial Piety and Chastity in Nguyen Du's *The Tale of Kieu*,” *MANUSYA: Journal of Humanities* 14 (2007): 66–75; 68, [http://www.manusya.journals.chula.ac.th/files/essay/Montira\\_66-75.pdf](http://www.manusya.journals.chula.ac.th/files/essay/Montira_66-75.pdf).

14. In East Asian iconography, bridges symbolize “a place between life and death, sacred and profane, or even one's inner world and the outside world.” Yifan Zou, “A Liminal Space: Bridges in Chinese Landscape Art,” Princeton University Art Museum, *Not Just a Bridge: Works from the Museum Collections*, Summer 2016, <https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/terms/2188500>.

15. Although this apparently fortunate birth is treated as a misfortune on account of the likelihood of its leading him further into temptation, when administering the curse, Hsing-chen's master makes it clear that although Hsing-chen has been duplicitous in trying to hide his inability to avoid mental distraction, his reincarnation as Shao-yu is not a punishment but an exercise that will be necessary to secure his eventual enlightenment. “I am sending you away because that is what you wish,” he explains. Kim Man-jung, *The Nine Cloud Dream*, trans. Heinz Insu Fenkl, 9.

16. In “The Structure of the *Kuun mong* [A dream of nine clouds],” Chang Sik Yun suggests that because the austere Confucian style of the literati class to which Kim belonged frowns upon overtly erotic description, his extensive use of practical jokes within the narrative could be a sublimation of sorts, a means of emphasizing the hero's sexual prowess without violating the “ambience of aestheticism and good taste”: “The various games

Yet, as this adventurous protagonist acknowledges when he finds himself approaching old age, “knowing how to be satisfied with worldly wealth and glory, should we not also know when to be dissatisfied?”<sup>17</sup> After a long life filled with excitement, every kind of sensual pleasure imaginable, and the satisfaction of raising two generations of thriving offspring from all eight of his consorts,<sup>18</sup> Shao-yu comes to the eventual realization that worldly goods and pleasures only lead to discontent and a desire for more. Once he fully comprehends that truth, his consciousness jumps back into the story’s original frame; he is transported back into Hsing-chen’s youthful body in its austere monk’s cell, and he discovers that less than a day has passed. The entire cursed lifetime was an illusion. Soon after, the eight fairies arrive at the monastery gate in their true guise, complaining that “we have no learning, and we have lusted after the world of mortals, unable to control our sinful desires.” Renouncing their position as ladies-in-waiting to the Taoist immortal Lady Wei and announcing their desire to take vows and become nuns, they are “awakened, in a flash, to the unborn and undying truth of the dharma.”<sup>19</sup> Eventually, all nine become bodhisattvas, compassionate beings who delay their rightful entry into nirvana in order to assist others in achieving enlightenment.

“There are three ways in the world,” Shao-yu remarks to his consorts shortly before his transformation back into Hsing-chen. “The way of Confucius, the way of the Buddha, and the way of the Taoists. Buddhism is the highest. Confucianism exalts achievements and concerns itself with the passing down of names to posterity. Taoism is mystical, but it is unreliable, and though it has benefited many, its truths cannot be wholly known. . . . I must cast off the cares of this earthly life and attain the way that has neither birth nor death.”<sup>20</sup>

The picaresque plotline with its many unexpected twists makes for a rollicking read, and Shao-yu’s sudden revelation may come as a surprise. Up until that point, he seemed to be enjoying himself hugely. In an influential critique of “The Structure of the *Kuun mong* [A dream of nine clouds],” Chang Sik Yun argues that the protagonist’s two lives are never sufficiently integrated and that this is a fault in the narrative; at one point he contrasts it to its detriment with the narrative structure of *Don Quixote*, which incorporates events and people in the real world into Quixote’s fantasies. Kim Man-jung, he suggests, was unable to extricate himself from the values of his past association with the highly secular literatus system that had brought about both his success and his downfall. The frame tale structure was a well-worn convention that he fell into too easily to add a didactic veneer to a story that was, at its heart, a romantic flight of fancy: “As the anti-romantic element that finally overpowers the obsolete knight [Don Quixote] is the realism of the new genre, that is, the novel, so the unmitigated vision of life’s negativity inherent in Buddhism could have shaped the *Kuun*

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devised to create opportunities for amorous adventures are, in a sense, a means of outmaneuvering the decorum that inhabits the libido.” Chang Sik Yun, “The Structure of the *Kuun mong* [A dream of nine clouds],” *Korean Studies* 5 (1981): 27–41; 34.

17. Kim, *The Nine Cloud Dream*, 204.

18. Perhaps the most romantic touch in this entire story is the passage that states, “All of the women had children, each of them bearing sons except for Ts’ai-feng and Ling-po, who each bore a daughter. They raised their children well, never having to witness any poor behavior.” Even Kim has to admit that such felicity is unrealistic. He adds, “And this was entirely unlike the common people.” Kim, *The Nine Cloud Dream*, 202.

19. Kim, *The Nine Cloud Dream*, 214. *Dharma*, a Sanskrit term, is a complex concept that is not easily translated into English. Sometimes it is rendered as “truth,” “righteousness,” “law,” or even “the way,” but in recent years standard practice has been to use the word itself rather than attempting to find a one-word substitution.

20. Kim, *The Nine Cloud Dream*, 210–11.

*mong* so as to reveal the true nature of being, the ambiguities and contingencies of life that compel man to perceive patterns of disillusionment and mutability.”<sup>21</sup>

Those who wish to uncover a deeper structure, however, can explore hints throughout the text that *Kuunmong* is more than a simple romance. The title itself preserves the text’s dual nature: “the cloud as a symbol of the insignificance of human life is to be found in the *Analects* of Confucius,” points out Richard Rutt, “and in Buddhist usage the word ‘cloud’ can mean a devotee, especially a wandering monk.”<sup>22</sup> Although it’s generally accepted that the “nine clouds” in the title refers to the eight fairies plus one—Hsing-chen or Shao-yu himself—the number eight is almost certainly no accident. As Heinz Insu Fenkl remarks in his introduction to the new edition, it is possible to argue that “Hsing-chen’s eight fairies are not a sign of sensual excess, but a necessary number for symbolic completion paralleling the Buddhist resolution at the end. The Taoist *I Ching* has eight trigrams, Buddhism has its eightfold path to enlightenment, and even Confucians call one’s fate ‘the eight characters.’”<sup>23</sup> All three modes of thought are represented, as one can see by following Fenkl’s explanatory endnotes. Only one of the three was wholly acceptable as a philosophy for a secular man in Kim Man-jung’s time: the ruling Joseon dynasty had embraced an oppressive form of Confucian ideology in order to retain state control, and Buddhism had been suppressed in the patriarchal system to such an extent that its infrastructure was mostly taken over by women—a situation, Fenkl suggests, that might have driven *Kuunmong*’s strong representation of female characters.<sup>24</sup> Taoism, with its supernatural elements and rejection of external means of maintaining order, was so inimical to the Joseon political objectives it had practically been driven underground. Yet there are Taoist notes as well in Kim’s story. When Hsing-chen first encounters the fairies he has been sent by his master on a mission to the underwater palace of their father, the Dragon King of Tung-t’ing Lake, an important figure in the Taoist pantheon. Shao-yu, too, visits the Dragon realm beneath the waves in a dream sequence—a nested frame tale within the frame tale—and through his perilous rescue and sexual union with the Dragon King’s youngest daughter, he obtains merit that assists him in an upcoming battle in the world above.<sup>25</sup>

Yang Hi Choe-Wall once observed that adherence to Confucian doctrine tends to be strengthened by success in one’s personal life. “The disappointment that accompanied failure,” she remarks, “fostered inner rebellion against Confucian orthodoxy, or prompted

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21. Yun, “The Structure of the *Kuun mong*,” 40. Fenkl does not directly address Yun’s arguments in his notes, but he clearly disagrees with Yun’s conclusion. The gradual onset of disillusionment, he suggests, is more likely than sudden crisis to turn individuals toward the shedding of worldly attachments, at least in most ordinary people: “Thus the structure of the novel is a kind of microcosmic analogy to what happens in the greater world of reality,” though “ironically, the illusory world in the novel occupies most of its narrative” as so often happens with our own individual narratives in real life. Kim, *The Nine Cloud Dream*, 224–25n10.

22. Richard Rutt, introduction to *A Nine Cloud Dream* by Kim Man-jung in *Virtuous Women: Three Classic Korean Novels*, 12.

23. Fenkl, introduction, xv. One might extend this numerological significance to the underworld, as well as the realm of the living. According to Adriana Proser in the introduction to her *Comparative Hell*, “Buddhists believe in the existence of 8 major hells,” although “as many as 272 subdivisions” are acknowledged in some traditions. *Comparative Hell: Arts of Asian Underworlds* (New York: Asia Society Museum, 2020), 16. The concept of any afterlife place devoted to horrific punishment, much less as many as 272 of them, is not a matter of concern for the characters in *Kuunmong*. For Nguyễn Du’s *Kiều*, however, the threat presented by that notion of divided and individually appropriate hells is a very real problem that must be addressed, and serves as the backbone of the *Truyện Kiều* plot.

24. Fenkl, introduction, ix.

25. Kim, *The Nine Cloud Dream*, 113–23.

[Joseon-era] writers to look to other religions such as Buddhism or Taoism.”<sup>26</sup> Our understanding of *Kuunmong*’s message is enhanced by realizing that Kim’s status as an out-of-favor former courtier made its writing a potentially hazardous act, since “to write a novel in which an elaborate Confucian pipe dream gives way to dissatisfaction that is remedied by Buddhism would also have been an overt act of resistance and criticism, especially for a writer in exile for rebuking the king.”<sup>27</sup>

### *Truyện Kiều*

The same might be said of daring to compose a poem that overturned Confucian expectations of appropriate subject matter and traditional definitions of virtue, such as the frankly critical *Truyện Kiều*. Ostensibly set in a distant past and place—Ming China’s turbulent Jiajing era, which the narrator ironically describes in the poem’s opening as an idealized period of peace and stability—the plot quickly descends into an account of violence and corruption. The brutal treatment that forces Kiều’s severance from her family markedly resembles similar abuses of power that set off a series of violent rebellions that began in the 1770s and toppled two dynasties within the space of twenty-five years, but the historical setting is sufficiently dissociated to render the story less subversive and more palatable to the reactionary new administration that ascended the throne in 1802.<sup>28</sup> The poet closes his epic with a famously cryptic couplet that seems to parallel Hsing-chen’s realization that life itself is a quest that, if undertaken thoughtfully, leads to the dawn of spiritual enlightenment: “Reader, may these plain but honest words I write / brighten the long hours of your own dark night.”<sup>29</sup> These isolated two lines give the impression of having been tacked on almost as an afterthought, perhaps to soften the dire warnings about the inevitability of fate and karmic reckoning that frame the story in its introductory and concluding passages.

Like Kim, Nguyễn Du experienced a checkered career moving in and out of power in an unstable political environment, and like Kim it is believed he was indirectly referencing himself and his own political setbacks in his work. As a privileged courtier’s son who had been firmly on the path of a successful civil service career, Nguyễn Du served the Lê dynasty from the outset of the revolution until the dynasty’s extirpation in 1787. Unlike Kim he was brought back *into* civil service by the victorious Nguyễn dynasty at the conclusion of Vietnam’s bitter civil wars rather than being expelled *out* of it.<sup>30</sup> As mentioned above, the name Kiều means a wanderer (a *truyện* is a story). Like Nguyễn Du himself, his wandering protagonist winds up in the same place where she began. For both the poet and his creation, however, the ability to return to that place and retain moral integrity required a significant

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26. Yang Hi Choe-Wall, *Vision of a Phoenix: The Poems of Hồ Nansǒrhǒn* (Ithaca: Cornell East Asia Program, 2003), 18.

27. Fenkl, introduction, xiv.

28. George Dutton’s account of *The Tây Sơn Uprising: Society and Rebellion in Eighteenth-Century Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006) is still the most comprehensive Western-language study of the political landscape in the turbulent period between the initial insurrection in 1773 and the founding of the Nguyễn dynasty in 1802. Once on the throne, the first of the Nguyễn emperors moved to unite the fragmented country by adopting numerous reactionary policies, including the reversal of recent reforms of the tax and land allocation system and the restoration of Chinese as the official language of the court. In a way, he too was making an attempt to set the clock back to a fictitious golden age.

29. Nguyễn Du, *The Song of Kiều*, trans. Timothy Allen (New York: Penguin Books, 2019), 151, lines 3254–55. Allen sets off this final couplet about the “long night” with an asterisk and a line break that sets it off from the conclusion of the story itself.

30. The poet Nguyễn Du had no relation to the Nguyễn dynasty, despite the similarity in name. In fact he had been closely aligned with the preceding Lê dynasty, even serving as an officer in the military before their defeat. Nguyễn is an extremely common surname in Vietnam, and according to some sources, 30–40 percent of Vietnamese share the name.



redefinition of traditional roles in the Confucian system. Kiều's quest throughout the narrative is fueled by an impossible desire to find her way back to where she was at the height of her happiness, a chaste young teenager enmeshed in the attachments of family ties and first love. Only after the fruitless pursuit of her past leads to a tragic death does she realize that an attempt to reverse time by ignoring the circumstances of one's present experience is an empty endeavor.

The storyline of Nguyễn Du's poem follows the plot of a Chinese historical novel that was popular at the time but has now been nearly forgotten—although there are five different variations, only six copies total survive<sup>31</sup>—but features a philosophic dimension that is unique in any of its adaptations. The *Truyện Kiều* begins with a warning that excessive beauty and talent can be a trap, attracting unwelcome attention from other people and even the jealous machinations of Heaven itself.<sup>32</sup> In the case of fifteen-year-old Kiều, the trap has been set by her own accumulation of karmic demerit over the course of previous lives: like Kim's Shao-yu, she was cursed to be born a paragon, physically stunning and naturally gifted with a genius for poetry and music.

The story itself opens with a scene where Kiều and her two siblings attend the *Qingming* tomb-sweeping festival, a Confucian celebration of ancestral veneration and community participation that brings citizens together to perform a collective act of filial piety. Kiều notices, however, that one grave is left unkempt: that of a once-famous beauty of great musical talent who died young with no descendants to carry on her memory.<sup>33</sup> In a surge of empathy, she composes a poem on the spot and scratches it onto a nearby tree, thus unwittingly setting her destiny into motion and introducing a supernatural element into what up to that point has been a description of a fairly mundane life. That night she is visited by the ghost of the young woman, who has come to warn her that they both “ride in the same boat,” destined to suffer damnation.<sup>34</sup>

Mahayana Buddhism, the variety most commonly practiced in East and Southeast Asia in Nguyễn Du's (and Kim Man-jung's) time as well as today, recognizes a system of highly compartmentalized hells where souls are tortured in inventive ways that often reflect whatever major sin they committed in their last life or an overbalance of demerit built up by making the same mistakes over the course of successive lives. Women in traditional societies are considered to be especially at risk because they have less access to formal religious education and they are frequently exposed to blood pollution, both in the kitchen when preparing meat and in the processes of menstruation and childbirth. Because of the doctrine of reincarnation and the Buddha nature within all beings, these hells are temporary destinations designed to purge the bearer of bad karma before she can proceed on the journey toward enlightenment. That said, the purging process is a long one that can continue for eons, as any girl with Kiều's attention to piety would be well aware.<sup>35</sup>

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31. Charles Benoit, *The Evolution of the Wang Cuiqiao Tale: From Historical Event in China to Literary Masterpiece in Vietnam* (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1981), 276.

32. In his translation, Timothy Allen distills this cautionary warning to a statement that “long years betray the beautiful.” Nguyễn Du, *The Song of Kiều*, 5, line 8. Allen's translation is notably succinct, foregrounding the action and allowing it to make the philosophical points on its own rather than attempting to reproduce Nguyễn Du's denser, heavily allusive style.

33. Suggestively, the grave is located “beside a little bridge” that the siblings cross over as they are heading home from the cemetery (Nguyễn Du, *The Song of Kiều*, 6; *Truyện Kiều*, line 56). As footnote 14 explains earlier in this paper, bridges are emblematic of liminal spaces.

34. Nguyễn Du, *The Song of Kiều*, 11; *Truyện Kiều*, line 202.

35. A substantial and richly illustrated study of the tradition of such multiple hells can be found in *Comparative Hell: Arts of Asian Underworlds*, ed. Adriana Proser (see note 8 in this paper). For further information on the role of gender in Buddhist underworld narratives from the long eighteenth century, see Beata

Kiêu's ghostly visitor suggests, however, that there might be a way out of what seems an inevitable path to potentially centuries-long incarceration, remarking that the spirits' overseer in the underworld, "the head of the Company of Sadness," was so impressed with Kiêu's poetic skill—and, no doubt, with her empathetic impulse, which is a Buddhist goal—he has asked her to compose ten more poems, this time on subjects he has set on her behalf.<sup>36</sup> Kiêu complies without hesitation. In reward, as we discover later, her stint in hell will be converted to an opportunity to work off her bad karma by fifteen years of suffering on earth. This plot point marks an immediate departure from Kim Man-jung's more conventional concept of the protagonist as passively reacting to circumstances beyond his control, the monk Hsing-chen in his cell dreaming about a different (albeit very active) life in which he has no actual agency. By seizing her brush and dashing off ten brilliant lyrics "in a single flow of movement and idea,"<sup>37</sup> Kiêu employs the very skill that is a part of her curse to earn a lightening of the load of that curse.

The underworld chief's diversion of her suffering from the afterlife to this one becomes evident very soon, when corrupt mandarins arrest her brother and father for a false debt. To save them from debtors' prison, Kiêu volunteers to marry an older rich man from a distant province. Too late, she discovers that her "husband" is a sexual trafficker who will use her beauty and her outstanding skill as a musician to make her the star attraction at a brothel. Each night as she prepares for work, a kind of work that will inevitably bring more demerit, she returns to thoughts of her family but knows that if she is ever to be divested of her accumulating karmic burden she cannot return to her old life:

Lonely, she looks through her curtained window,  
and watches each dusk chase its day.  
As the moon-hare leaps, as the sun-crow whirls,  
she thinks of the Company of Sadness.  
Each member is granted the beauty of a rose  
and pays for it in misery.  
They live their lives in a fierce sandstorm.  
They cannot reach their destiny  
until they drink from the cup of grief.<sup>38</sup>

The remainder of the story follows Kiêu's epic journey and her search for meaning through various episodes as a prostitute, a concubine, a lay priestess, and finally the queen of a powerful rebel captain who exacts revenge on her enemies before he, too, succumbs to his fate by falling victim to an ambush by imperial forces. Throughout it all, she is protected by supernatural elements, first in the form of the ghost of the dead woman with whom she identifies and later in the prayers of the nun Giác Duyên, whom she meets along the way. Kiêu and Giác Duyên are drawn to one another, presumably because of an unresolved attachment from an earlier life similar to the one created when Kim's monk Hsing-chen established a connection with the eight fairies that carried over into his life as Shao-yu. The

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Grant and Wilt L. Idema, *Escape from Blood Pond Hell: The Tales of Mulian and Woman Huang* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011).

36. Nguyễn Du, *The Song of Kiêu*, 12; *Truyện Kiêu*, lines 203–4. The composition of poems on set subjects was a significant element of the civil service examinations, normally an exclusively male pursuit.

37. Nguyễn Du, *The Song of Kiêu*, 12; *Truyện Kiêu*, line 206.

38. Nguyễn Du, *The Song of Kiêu*, 59–60; *Truyện Kiêu*, lines 1265–74. Kiêu does not readily accept her role as a prostitute. When she first discovers what is in store for her, she attempts suicide. While she recovers from a self-inflicted stab wound, she is visited again by the ghost, who reminds her that she has a debt to pay in order to fulfill the conditions of the underworld chief.

word *duyên* is commonly translated as “fate,” but it has further connotations of affinity and a future or past karmic bond between two people, places, or objects whose fates are intertwined.

Remarkably, the poem concludes with Kiều restored to the bosom of her family and reunited with her first love, Kim Trọng. As in the dream she cherished nightly for fifteen years as her dearest wish, she manages to come full circle and return to her original home. Rather than resuming a traditional woman’s life with all its elements of phallocentric hierarchies as mandated by a society built on Confucian values, however, she negotiates with Kim for a Platonic marriage that will preserve the uniqueness of their relationship, since her extensive experience of fifteen years of engagement in sexual relations with multiple partners has cheapened the prospect of physical intimacy.<sup>39</sup> She even convinces her family to build a temple on a hill where she can care for the shrine and rituals that form the invisible backbone of a Vietnamese community’s Buddhist life, but without the burden of monastic rigor or the ascetic life she shared with Giác Duyên, which required her to shut herself away from earthly concerns.

Kiều’s solution to the problem of satisfying both her familial and spiritual obligations—her Confucian side as well as her Buddhist side—is a demonstration of Nguyễn Du’s ability to hybridize two fixed systems notorious for their patriarchal hierarchy and fundamental incompatibility into a satisfying compromise that transcends the limitations of gender and one’s personal past history.<sup>40</sup> Unlike Kim Man-jung, he resolves the split and

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39. Jonathan Tan remarks that their unconventional marriage arrangement defies expectations that a good wife in a Confucian sense will sublimate her desires to that of her husband and satisfy the need to produce children within a system that—as we saw at the scene in the graveyard where Kiều and her siblings participate in the *Qingming* festival—foregrounds the veneration of ancestors. However, “one notes how Nguyễn Du also described the harmony (*hoà*) and mutual respect (*kính*) between Thúy Kiều and her spouse using the image of musical harmony arising from lute-playing (line 3222). This is highly significant, because lute-playing is a traditional Confucian metaphor for harmony and concord within a conjugal relationship.” Jonathan Y. Tan, “A Daughter’s Filiality, A Courtesan’s Moral Propriety and a Wife’s Conjugal Love: Rethinking Confucian Ethics for Women in the *Tale of Kiều* (*Truyện Kiều*),” in *Religion and Culture in Dialogue: East and West Perspectives*, ed. Janis Talivaldis Ozoliņš (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 129–151; 148. Ironically, however, Kiều’s outstanding skill at the lute has caused many of her troubles in the “world of dust” because of the unwelcome attention it brings to her from men who consider themselves connoisseurs of feminine accomplishment. When Kim asks her to play for him after their long-delayed wedding, she acquiesces and performs better than ever before but warns him that it is just for one time:

These fingers on these strings have caused me so much grief  
But now you’ve heard my little tune  
the way it should be played,  
I’ll put away my lute. That was my final song.  
(Nguyễn Du, *The Song of Kiều*, 149; *Truyện Kiều*, lines 3211–14)

40. K.W. Taylor describes this compromise, engineered by Kiều herself to satisfy all parties, as “an awkward moment when a so-called Confucian ending intrudes and cancels a potential Buddhist ending, bringing the plot back to where it was interrupted by the descent from good society into the underworld.” K.W. Taylor, “Translated Content and Form from Vietnamese into World Literature: The Case of *Kiều*,” in *A Companion to World Literature*, ed. Frieda Ekotto and Abigail E. Celis (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 2217–27; 2219. Yet throughout the poem, Kiều expresses longing for her family and elements of her old life, to the extent of being blinded to the danger when she advises Từ Hải, the rebel captain, to accept a false offer of truce from the emperor (lines 2480–86). Stricken with guilt at having been an accessory to Từ Hải’s death, she attempts to drown herself but is rescued by Giác Duyên. Her expressed desire to continue her ascetic life at Giác Duyên’s side seems to be grounded in penance as much as personal inclination. At the same time, spiritual existence has a definite appeal that is clearly attractive to Kiều, both in the episode with Giác Duyên immediately before her reunion with her family and an earlier period when she serves at the shrine of the bodhisattva Kuan Yin on the grounds of her former lover’s estate (see footnote 6 in this paper). Like Nguyễn Du and Kim Man-jung, Kiều sometimes seems torn between two competing selves.

merges the two competing impulses into a single narrative. His own life, too, was an illustration of such compromise, as he entered the administrative service of the upstart dynasty he had actively fought against. This betrayal of the loyalty a Confucian public servant owes to his sworn master was a difficult decision that he arrived at after years of consideration and near starvation before finally capitulating to the need to accept a salaried position for the sake of his family, bringing with it a sense of shame that he was never quite able to shake off. As Kiều explains to Kim, “life is lived and cannot be unlived.”<sup>41</sup>

Eventually the new rulers came to appreciate Nguyễn Du’s sacrifice, and his talent as well. Minh Mạng, the second of the Nguyễn emperors, acknowledged the genius of *Truyện Kiều* and, despite its subversive and often disturbing content, arranged to have it published. It became widely available in print just five years after the author’s death in 1820.

Kiều’s *truyện* concludes with advice for the reader that could, perhaps, be considered equally relevant to the message of Kim Man-jung’s description of the dream of the sensual life that the monk Hsing-chen subconsciously longed to experience and finally rejected:

Contemplate the lessons of this story:  
heaven decides everything. Our destiny is written.  
Some suffer dreadful misery;  
some live lives of luxury.  
The most talented are not always  
the ones who succeed:  
that would be too neat and is too rare.  
Looks and luck don’t always rhyme.  
Never complain about your fate:  
you have one life. Live it.  
Within yourself, you hold a precious gift,  
worth more than all the talents on this earth:  
a human heart.<sup>42</sup>

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41. Nguyễn Du, *The Song of Kiều*, 145; *Truyện Kiều*, line 3102.

42. Nguyễn Du, *The Song of Kiều*, 150–51; *Truyện Kiều*, lines 3241–52. Allen’s translation expands the eleven lines of the original into thirteen but does an excellent job of capturing the mood of the passage.