



ĐẶNG TRẦN CÔN ĐOÀN THỊ ĐIỂM

LAMENT OF THE BOLDIES & WIFE

# L'ament of the Soldier's Wife

CHINH PHU NGÂM".

Translated by REWI ALLEY
(Second Impression)

THÉ GIỚI PUBLISHERS
Hanoi - 1998

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Translated from the Vietnamese original "CHINH PHU NGÂM".

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Printed in Vietnam

VN-TG 771162-1

#### PREFACE

This poem is one that has had considerable influence in Vietnam.

As it is so popular in Vietnam, most people knowing of its lines, it is good to give it to the English -speaking world, which should know more of Vietnam and her culture.

Dang Tran Con wrote it, one feels, in order that as many people as possible should see what the Vietnamese common people thought of predatory war.

He wisely puts his poem into a setting in the historical period, yet drawing lessons for all to see. There is all that futility of eternal fighting over the same old battlefields - he places his frontiers mainly in Central Asia, though because he is a Vietnamese it is clear enough that it is his own land he is thinking about.

First and foremost, it is a peace poem. The author lived in the early part of the eighteenth

century, when there was considerable civil strife in his country.

His work written in Chinese characters was translated into the vernacular by the poetess Doàn Thị Điểm, who lived during the same period. Doàn Thị Điểm's work is far more popular than the original.

The English translation has been made from both the Chinese and Vietnamese texts.

It is not possible to reproduce the musical lilt of the Vietnamese language which makes the great poem a thing of delight to the ordinary person. All one can do is to give its meaning so that its message will go on still further through the world and move the hearts of men by its passion.

REWI ALLEY

Ι

Everywhere is war: truly
a bad time for all women! even
as we do not understand the blue heavens
above, how can we know
why such things be? drums
roll incessantly along the Great Wall
making the very moonlight seem to tremble,
beacon fires<sup>(1)</sup> reflect their scarlet
against Kansu mountain snows,
the throne hands down a sword of command
to its chosen general, midnight
and his orders to march are given,
after three hundred years of peace
comes the time when the trappings of war
are worn again by courtiers, now

II

from the palace gallops a messenger speeding the Army departure, soldiers understand their orders, leaving aside all affairs of home, with bows and quivers of arrows slung from hips they say farewell as they follow their standards through the frontiers, hollowly resounds the roll of drums back into homes now left behind, surely if there be bitterness it should be shared, if there be grief it should be borne together.

My husband, twentieth of an ancient line putting aside letters to take up arms, hoping to protect the Imperial dominion and with his good sword cut down the enemies of his lord, to fight on despite distance, even if in the end he be buried wrapped in the hide of his horse, looking at even a Taishan as being as easy to ride over as a feather, taking his leave to go to war, the west wind carrying the sound of his whip as he crossed the Wei bridge, a tall bridge with clear waters below that flow by green banks, farewelling him my heart was full of sadness, and I thought

that I was not equal to his horse, on water, not equal to be the boat that carried him, clearly, so clearly the water runs, yet never can it wash away my grief, fragrant, so fragrant are the grasses, yet never can they lighten my heart, words tumbled after words as I held your hand, as you went home from me and step after step we parted, I held to your clothing, even now I am with you no matter where you are, just as the moonlight is; your spirit even as an arrow covers great distances flying over mountain ranges; putting down your cup, you dance at Lung Chuan with your great battle axe command the tiger's lair, strategy as brilliant

as the general who took Lou Lan or he who conquered the tribesmen of Man, the clothing of my lord is as bright a scarlet as the sunset while your horse is as white as the snow, I seem to hear your troop riding, bridle bells mingling with the crash of drums and tumult of men on the march, yes, there was that moment when we were face to face then suddenly we were divided.

III

They were parted by the bridge and there she stood by the roadside watching the pennants flutter into the distance, the vanguard already north of Tsi Lieu, horses at the rear, west of Chang Yang, his escort rides with him out of the frontier, poplars and willows stand silently beside her, how can they understand her sorrow? fading away are the sounds of Army music, the color of moving standards changes as they go, watching the clouds pass, he thinks of her, and staring at the mountains curling back

she thinks of him, he on his mission through all kinds of weather, she back at home stares miserably at her lonely bed, both look back but are divided, seeing naught but blue skies and hills of green, then he looked back towards her from Hsienyang, while she looks his way from Su Hsiang, how far are the fires of Su Hsiang from the trees at Hsienyang? or Hsienyang trees from Su Hsiang waters? keeping on searching in their hearts yet unable to find each other, seeing only fields of mulberry around them, mulberry everywhere just mulberries, which of their hearts is the more miserable?

IV

Since you have ridden out into the bitter wind, I wonder where you sleep under this same moonlight, I knowing well that where you are has ever been a battlefield, and that there are great distances with never a human habitation, only the incessant wind, driving against your face, and rivers so deep your horses cannot hold their footing, you sleeping by the drums on desert sands or against your saddle at Hu Lung, this night the soldiers of Han

are at Bai-tung, while tribesmen try to occupy Chinghai, Chinghai where the mountains stand out so clear and blue, tall mountains then low ones, and from them clear waters that seem to break then run together again, blue mountains capped with snows, clear streams that rise up to the thighs of your men as they cross; pity all these under the weight of their armour all of them with thoughts that return home with such longing, I wonder if the brocaded gowns of courts understand this thing, what eyes of bitterness are needed to paint it!

I think of all the places where
you have spent these years, if not
at Siaokwna, then at Han-hai!
frozen villages, halts in the rain
eating in the winds, sleeping under the dew,
snow up to waists, icicles in the beards,
I climb up and peer through the clouds
towards you, how should I not
be filled with my grieving?

V

Now since you have gone southeast how may I know where war will lead you? right up from olden times, soldiers? have considered their own lives as grass that comes and goes, always under orders warmed only by the grace of superiors, such a life is yours, ever depending on the fortune of war; what will be your end? over the Chi Lien crags the moon gleams down on ancient graves, at Fei waters a melancholy wind blows over the newly dead, howling emptily around lost spirits, the faces of soldiers lie pale against the moonlight, who could paint this picture? spirits

of the slaughtered, who is there to mourn you, pity those who pass these hills and streams, marching over old battlefields which have given men naught but bitterness and sorrow, from such places and since wars began, who has ever returned: even when Pan Chao<sup>(2)</sup> himself did come back, his hair was already white, my heart goes out to you who ride so hard on those bleak frontiers, three feet of sword and a saddled mount over the grasslands in the autumn wind through passes under the moonlight arrows whistling past your horse's head throwing yourself against enemy defences,

the call of glory ever luring you on never resting from the task that you have undertaken; but to whom can I say all this? for you are away on the edge of the world, while I remain here alone.

VI

Now is my life shut in behind doors, should it be my destiny to so spend it, how could it be yours to be so far away? who would have thought that like fish and water, we should be thus separated! it is as though the waters were denied to the clouds, how could I be a soldier's wife, and then you imitate the careless gallant, one of us ever south of the River, and the other north! leaving me sad enough in the morning, yet sadder still in the evening, there on one hand you are, a lad abroad, here on the other am I, a girl at home, pitiful are we

young people, who cannot share warmth and cold, ever separated, and I ever thinking back on other times, spring birds have not yet come to the green willow twigs, and I ask when will you return? you said that when the cuckoo sung, you would be with me again, but now the cuckoo are as old as the orioles, birds not on the willows when you went have come, I remember on that day when you rode off and we had our last talk together, how the early plumblossom had not yet gone in front of the east winds, now when shall you return? you said that when the peachblossom

was red, that you would come but the peachblossom has been taken by the Spring winds, and the fallen plumblossom petals lie over the flowers on the river bank, did you not tell me to wait for you on Lung Hsi peak? I have waited for you there when the sun was high but you did not come, now the falling leaves catch in my hairpins, and as I stood weeping alone, from over the silent village came the cry of evening birds, you said that you would meet me at Hanyang Bridge, though I have gone there morning and evening, still you have not come, the wind blowing down the valley

blows my gown, as I stand and weep, emptily weeping, then from the river arises the evening mist.

VII

Last year I wrote you
urging your return, then again
this year, begging you to come,
my letters reach you, yet you came not!
poplar buds scatter over the green
below, all around me is green,
green again, then still more green!
with each halting step, my mind
fills with a hundred thoughts,
last year your letter came to me,
asking me to await you; this year
again you wrote, saying you would come
now here before me are your letters,
not you yourself;
through the screen on my window

the setting sun gleams, it gleams each and every evening, it gleams mocking me with its gleaming, out of the ten promises you made nine have been broken! I sit and work out how long you have gone knowing that the lotus has put out its leaves three times since then, bitter I know, have been for you those years in the purple haze (3) of the border, hard for you around the Yellow Flower mountains, yet among those soldiers out in the purple haze of the frontier who has not parents awaiting him? in the ranks of those around the Yellow Flower mountain<sup>(4)</sup>

who has not a wife at home longing for him? how many old parents are still thinking of their parting with soldiers sons, and now there is your own wife, ever anxious about you, the temples of your own old folk are as white as the frost, your child still sucks at his mother's breast, while your old mother stands ever grieving by the door, your baby would have you chew his hard rice for him. your wife must be as son to your parents, as father to your child, to comfort the old and teach the young, there is none

but myself, for how long must I suffer a wounded heart? all of last year I thought of you and now last year is past, you have never left my thoughts this year and now this year will soon be over, so hatefully have you tarried these two years, three years then four years, my heartache has increased a hundred times, a thousand times, then ten thousand; could I be but with you, we could tell out all our bitterness. I have a hairpin from the Han palace, a wedding present bestowed on me, whom can I depend on to send it to you, to show how I long for you? then there is that lovely Chin mirror<sup>(5)</sup> given to mark our coming together, whom can I trust to take it to you, so you may understand my loneliness? then the silver ring on my middle finger, which I have looked at for so long, who will take this to you? and the much loved pin of jade come with me from girlhood, how can I send you this? these coming to you in distant lands will surely be precious to you!

## VIII

Last year there was news at times this year but little has come, seeing the wild geese<sup>(6)</sup>, I half expected a message of silk tied to one of them, with the coming of frosts, I have made you padded clothes, and these I have ready for you but though the cold winds begin to blow I have no way to send them to you far away, you are wretched under snow and rain; cold snows, and only a mat of tiger skin, driving storm, and a curtain of wolf tails, the colder it is the more miserable you become, so far away, how unhappy you must be! on a piece of brocade, I write a poem

fold it up, then open it once again, take money and go to the fortune teller to ask your destiny, so many times at sunset, have I stood alone on the balcony, pondering, how many times under the bright moonlight have I lain with my lonely head on the pillow little caring, and then I have awakened feeling dizzy as though drunk! not so much that I am foolish but that I am poisoned by my thoughts; arising, hair all disordered, what can I do? my skirt around my waist has become too big, and no longer holds up, I am so thin, each day drags out endlessly, and I feel like dropping as I go around my duties,

each night is dismal, the rolled up curtain unfolds and once more falls on another night, outside the dawn touches the tree tops, but the magpies do not tell me, inside the curtain at night, only the lamp knows the things that are in my heart, then I question does even the lamp know? all that is in your wife's heart is grief, sad, and sadder, the more I grieve the less I speak of it, lamplight throwing the shadow of a person is a pitiful thing, after the fifth watch the cock crows, but the shade of the ash over the courtyard makes the night last longer, my sorrow is surely as great as the sea, and each

quarter of an hour as long as a year, I burn incense, but feel with the scent of sandalwood, that my spirit is leaving me; looking into the mirror, my tears fall on the frame, I take the lute but my fingers trembled as I strike the notes and make mistakes, take another instrument but in the middle of the song feel that my grief is giving pain to the very strings, now if only the spring wind would carry this meaning to you! gladly would I pay a thousand ounces of gold to have it taken to you at Yen Shan, not easy to bring such to you, I know for you are away so high, as if on a road leading right into the sky.

IX

Not easy to get over to the edge of heaven, endlessly I think of you, grieving over your sad surroundings, heartsick; light frost is on the Autumn leaves and the sounds of the cricket come through the drizzling rain, frost like an axe chops at the poplars and willows, rain like a saw cuts leaves from the wutung tree, birds have gone over to the cedars, dews press the palm leaves lower, and cold drives the insects under the foot of the wall, from far away comes the sound of a temple bell, then the noises of insects under the moonlight,

a wind stirs the leaves of the banana tree, comes through the window screen brushing aside the bed curtains, making shadow of flowers dance against them, and in front of the flowers, moonlight shows up their colours, moonlight! flowers in front of the moonlight and a broken heart, full of tiredness. too full to have interest in work to be done, lazy working girl, not to want to weave two birds together in your brocade, clever fingers of your lazy wife not willing to embroider two butterflies flying together, too lazy to do her make up at the beginning of the day, too lazy to talk even, through waking hours: just sitting by the window, sitting

by the window, eternally at that window, with my husband away, what use for me to try to be beautiful? who could be beautiful with a heart so sad? with you away, separated by so many passes, I am just like the Weaving Girl(1) isolated in the Milky Way, or like Chang O<sup>(8)</sup> sitting alone in the palace of the moon, with sorrow for my pillow and grief for my food; I would take wine to banish my sorrow, but my misery is too great for any wine to lighten, with the beauty of flowers try to erase sad thoughts, but my grief makes even the flowers fade away, sorrows mounting on sorrows, make them more intense turning into nine streams that run rippling away. X

I try to play a flute
but no sound comes, take
a stringed instrument, but my fingers
fumble with the stops, ever
I think of you out on the frontier
in all your bitterness,
my soldier husband, deprived
of food and warmth! now the sound
of the cuckoo makes my tears fall,
the beat of the sentry's drum at night
gives me a queer feeling inside,
neither my good looks more my health
are as they were, truly at this time
do I understand the harshness
of separation, this bitter taste,

so really bitter, and all this bitterness because of you; for you my husband sear down two furrows of tears, because of you; I am alone, I cannot reach your encampment, so that my tears may not wet your scarf, only in my dreams my spirit cannot be held from you each night I search for you by river waters, or go to meet you on the road to Yang Tai, surely I shall see you again at some stopping place on the Hsiang river; but now I know that all these meetings were but a dream that came so sweetly to my pillow in the height of spring, I wished only that I were ever in dream, so that I could be always

with you at Lung Shui, or Han Kwan but as dreams faded out, and awakening came, so did I feel cut to the heart, so went back to sleep again, then with dream coming anew, I feared that naught was true, only my love remained, that still refused to leave the you of my dreams so soon; the heart that cannot leave you, eyes that cannot see you; so often have I climbed to the top of the wall to look for army carts returning, and what then have I seen? only the grasses of Yen shining brightly, the mulberries of Chin in a deep green cloud, over on the south a village with dust arising on the breeze,

sunset by the beach and a flock of wild geese there, looking for you what then have I seen? a line of horse stations out along the roads, through the clouds trees of Wu showing green; the hills of Shu gleam blue; across grain fields to the North, a half deserted city; to the house by the river comes the sound of a flute at the end of rain.

XI

Thinking of you what do I see around me? autumn leaves piled up on the scattered hills, a pair of gorgeous pheasants, dancing together on a plum tree by the river; over on the east, smoke has not yet cleared; comes the melancholy sound of birds in the autumn wind, thinking of you, what do I see? winding rivers bent like a hook, of flying geese, from far away a little boat returns, on the west are pines standing out from the tall grasses; he who has gone so far

is separated by these wide green lands, and I stare up at the ceiling of the sky then over to land's end, how many times have I come to this tower, climbed this tower! now the cold clouds cover all, weeping mistily, like the eyes of your wife, where is that old battlefield of Wu Kwan? I am sorry I am not that Chang Feng who could shorten distances, or the fairy who could throw down her scarf to let her husband cross; I fear my heart would turn to stone, though yet I can weep as I climb the tower, looking for you; down the long dyke, I stare seeing the colours of poplars and willows, regretting I had ever advised you to become

an official; I wonder now with you so far away, if your heart is as sad as mine? should it really be I would blame you not at all, my heart is like a flower, ever turning toward the sun, I only fear that yours is like a flash of light, shining once then gone; that golden flash of light resting on the flowers, growing even brighter, yellow flower on the river bank at whom do you smile? may be the flash of light will not return, but when the golden light shines no more, the yellow flower fades and falls to the bottom of the wall, up to now, how many flowers have faded and then have fallen?

XII

I pick the orchids in the courtyard, scents arise from the wild flowers by the river; I lift my gown and walk out through the front room, looking up at the skies, the Milky Way has been chased away by the brightness, the pole star lost then returned again, flecks of cloud change form across the heavens, the Pleiades appear then fade away; in from the moonlight, and to my bed, listening to the wind blowing against house walls; my face grows plainer year by year for you are still so far away, before we were as close together as picture

and shadow, now we are like the two stars
that never meet, with you, the clouds
ride by your horse, while with me
moss grows on the threshold; now
the winds of spring are ending, and I
am sorry for all the good year lost,
when thinking of the lovely peonies which fell
in love

with the east wind; that good time when the Weaving Girl<sup>(7)</sup> and the Herd Boy met together under the moonlight, a pity now that I must stay in my empty room, each year the glad times pass as we go; pass as quickly as the shuttle on my loom; youth slips past so swiftly; think over this, the springtime of life

passes, and its sorrows are not. forgotten, before Autumn comes with so great a grief think over this once more, for there have been few happy times together. more of sad separation; the grief and bitterness of Autumn are like mill stones, ever grinding: I am like a tender willow, how can all this be borne? hopelessly do I sigh, I fear that the hair of your "Wen Kuan<sup>(9)</sup>" will turn white, so all will be in vain, and so shall that of my "Fan Lang<sup>(9)</sup>, why, oh why should all this be? beauty that was as fresh as that of a little flower; but why should one weep? now nothing

can return those other days to me but yet I bewail my destiny and sorrow for my lost youth, the lovely young wife now becomes an old woman, in the spring pavilion, as I remember, we laughed together, pulling out my girdle belt freeing its fragrant scent; how can I be graceful to a heaven that does not help me, here have I met with but misery, misery, misery, and ever again, just misery, I weep for myself and then for you.

#### XIII

Have you ever seen a pair of eagles flying together out on wide open spaces? never letting themselves be separated, or the swallows in the roof of the house living with each other until heads are white? think of the story of the birds with one wing, one eye, who must ever be together to fly, and of that fabled horse that could never be parted from its mate, then of the willow and lotus, whose roots were separated, but whose leaves and flowers wedded each other; why should men and women so live apart, when other creatures will not be parted and even that tree and lotus, leaves kissing each other and branches intertwining, held

to each other,
in our after lives so would
we always be together; but surely
it is best that now we were joined
in our love: thus do I
beg you to hold to your everlasting youth
as do I; I pledged
to be your shadow, ever by your side,
wherever you go, I shall not be far distant;
come out into this brightness where I may see you
this is my only wish.

#### XIV

I would that you fight for your country with a fiery heart, protecting the people with a strength of iron, when hungry eat the heads of the Yueh-chi<sup>(10)</sup>, and when thirsty drink the blood of the Shanyu<sup>(11)</sup>; during the struggle at Chimen I prayed that heaven might protect you heroes of a hundred battles, that then the four horses of your chariot would clear the passes of the enemy, that east of the passes, north of the passes, they would fall before your arrows, that the enemy by the mountains would lay down his arms, and you would then carry back the banners

of victory from the frontiers, singing songs of triumph, soldiers farewelling frontier winds, engraving their deeds on the stones of Yen Shan, bringing back the head of the enemy king as a trophy for the Court the Emperor himself seeing it; washing the blood from their arms in the Milky Way, then poets would compose new songs of victory singing ballads that compare you with the great commanders of the past, so that your achievements would stand for ever, as is written on scrolls of honour, your child and your wife would share your glory and all your joy; now I sorrow but then should my heart be full of gladness.

XV

Never would I be like
that wife of Su, who so lightly
treated her husband, you are
a young officer of Loyang, when
you come back with the golden seal
bestowed on you, I will not imitate her
refusing to get down from the loom,
I will come to help you
to take off your marching clothes,
pouring you the wine of victory,
for you I will beautify my hair
with all my art, for you
I will make up my face, and wear
my jade ornaments, and then will I
show you my tear stained kerchiefs,

recite for you the poems of love chanting new meaning into old lyrics, talking gaily with you before we drink, and as I pour softly singing all the time; not giving you the grape wine of farewell never again singing those songs of separation, but drinking only the finest distilled spirit, until both of us sing together, and so with you renew our love of old, from now on shall we be together for as long as we live, surely, this will compensate for all the grief of parting.

## XVI

So now awaiting news of your return and for our meeting, do I send you these words, hoping that for you, my husband, things will be like this.

## **GLOSSARY**

- (1) Beacon Fires: Through the regions the poem refers to there was a defence in depth which consisted of towers beside the Great Wall, each tower with five beacons set beside it, which would be lit when the Tribesmen came on the march
- (2) Pan Chao: An ancient frontier general of the time of Han, who fought all his life and returned a grey haired old man.

Place names: These cover vast areas in a poetic way, and are not all confined to one area place. All are places well known in frontier history and the wars of the past, and in classical poetry. There are two of them that have a double meaning.

- (3) Purple Haze: there were "Purple Haze gates" along the frontier, and then the whole frontier was a "purple haze" so that soldiers could be said to have come from the "purple haze" and be "purple haze men".
- (4) Yellow Flower Mountain: a frontier mountain, but also meaning the soldiers who rotate during the ninth lunar month, the time of the "yellow flowers" or chrysanthemums. So soldiers were called the "Yellow Flower Soldiers" because they were those who went to the frontier in the ninth month.

- (5) Chin mirror: the bronze mirrors of the Chin dynasty in the third century B.C. were very famous for their beauty.
- (6) Wild Geese: There was a tradition that the wild geese flying southward from the frontier, brought messages from the men on the frontier to their homes.
- (7) Weaving Girl: the story of the Weaving girl who was exiled to the earth by the Queen of the West and coming to earth married a buffalo boy. When recalled to heaven, she threw out her skein of silk so that the husband with their two babies in his carrying pole baskets, could follow. The Queen of heaven threw a river across the heavens to separate them, which is the Milky Way.
- (8) Chang O: The goddess of the moon, exiled from the earth and her lover.
- (9) Wen Kuan and Fan Lang: names of separated lovers in classic story.
- (10) Yueh Chi: a pastoral people who lived on the frontier, who afterwards went to India and lived there.
- (11) Shanyu: First the name of a Hun frontier chieftain, but afterwards used for his tribesmen also.

# NHÀ XUẤT BẢN THẾ GIỚI

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## Chịu trách n<mark>hiệ</mark>m xuất <mark>bản</mark>

# MAI LÝ QUẢNG

Biên tập: ĐOÀN LÂM

Trình bày: MINH THANH

Sửa bản in: MAI HOA

In 1.000 bản khổ 13,5 x 19,5cm tại xưởng in Nhà xuất bản Thế Giới. Giấy chấp nhận đăng ký kế hoạch xuất bản số: 77-1162/CXB cấp ngày 19/12/1997. In xong và nộp lưu chiểu tháng 6/1998.

